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Mapping and Analysis of Systems for Assessment and Recognition of Overseas Qualifications and Experience in England

Research carried out by:

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**ADVICE
RESOURCES**

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Executive Summary

**Mapping and Analysis of
Systems for Assessment
and Recognition of
Overseas Qualifications and
Experience in England**

Mapping and Analysis of Systems for Assessment and Recognition of Overseas Qualifications and Experience in England

Executive Summary

This report is the result of research into the assessment and recognition of international qualifications and experience in the employment and education sectors.

Aims:

- To map the systems used for assessing and recognising international qualifications in England
- To investigate the extent to which the educational institutions, professional bodies and employers assess and recognise overseas experience and use the existing systems
- To examine the effectiveness of the existing systems for assessing international qualifications
- To propose recommendations for improvements to the existing systems of assessment and recognition

Broader Context

This research comes at a time when the UK is seeing a huge increase in overseas applications for both university places and jobs. In 2004 the UK was second only to the USA in the list of countries hosting overseas students with a total of 364,000 international students enrolled, 14% of the world total. The current situation is that UK universities are becoming more dependent on the income generated by the higher fees they can charge international students and that this sector is expected to grow.

The field of employment has also seen a dramatic rise in overseas applications. The effects of an increasingly globalised world, particularly the skills needs of growing economies such as China and India, are producing new patterns of migration that have seen huge numbers of people seeking work in other countries. The enlargement of the EU has also had a considerable impact on the numbers coming to work or study in the UK. Since the accession of 8 new states to the EU in 2004, 447,000 have applied to work in the UK. According to

the Audit Commission, in 2005/06, 662,000 new national insurance numbers were issues to foreign nationals, almost twice as many as in 2002/03.

Overseas qualifications in a European context

In the past two decades, Europe has intensified its efforts to find common ways of recognition of overseas qualifications. The two major development are the Lisbon Recognition Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region which aims to facilitate the recognition of qualifications granted in one Party in another Party and the second one is the Bologna Process which is another major stage in the development of a unified system of recognition. The ultimate aim of the Process is to establish a European Higher Education Area by 2010 in which academic staff and students could move with ease and have quick fair recognition of their qualifications.

The above clearly demonstrates that any policy at national level regarding assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications will be more and more influenced by the European conventions. Although the Lisbon Convention and the Bologna Process are mainly about Europe but there are recommendations for how other non-European qualifications should be assessed and recognised.

Methodology

Interviews were conducted across the UK with relevant staff in higher education, further education, private and public sector organisations, recruitment agencies and advice giving organisations. Individuals who had been through assessment processes and the organisations involved in providing assessment tools were also interviewed. We used qualitative method for this research mainly based on semi-structured face-t-face interviews.

Research Findings and Recommendations

This report is divided into the following areas and makes a number of recommendations.

Higher Education Institutions and Further education Colleges

One of the key triggers for the recent growth in the international student population has been the rise in online applications. Before the widespread use of the internet, courses were advertised and marketed in the UK and therefore attracted largely British-based applications. The exceptions were the premier

league institutions such as Imperial College whose global reputations ensured they received a constant flow of applications from around the world.

In the last ten years this has changed with most universities establishing international offices and pursuing aggressive marketing strategies in order to attract the best overseas applicants. Many have set up marketing/recruiting offices in key countries to enable them to assess applicants locally and gather important information on educational institutions and qualifications. International offices are taking an increasing role in marketing and recruitment and this is reflected in the merging of these responsibilities into single departments in some universities.

The assessment tools used in higher education can be summarised as follows:

In-House Guidelines

Many universities have developed their own guidelines which provide more detailed information and relate more closely to their own programmes. These guidelines may be based on the original NARIC or UCAS information but have been enlarged and refined by information collected through the work of international offices and other overseas contacts. Typically, these in-house guidelines will rank specific overseas universities and provide grade equivalents for their courses. This information will then be used to clarify the entry requirements for their own programmes. In-house guidelines may not have the global spread of NARIC but instead focus on providing more information from the individual university's chosen market countries.

UK-National Academic Recognition Centre (UK-NARIC)

All universities subscribe to NARIC services. NARIC provides a baseline of information which is frequently used to inform the decision making process. However, the degree to which it is used varies from institution to institution and between different subject areas. In some cases it is the sole source of reliable information while in others NARIC may not be used at all. It is widely regarded as a useful tool that provides easy access to simple and clear information. However, for many users it does not provide enough detail and there are questions about the accuracy and currency of the information provided.

How they are used

As stated above these tools can be used in a variety of ways. In the most straightforward cases where a qualification is well recognised and established the use of NARIC may be the only assessment undertaken. In the other extreme, some universities may have developed such a refined and institution-specific tool that NARIC is not referred to at all. However, in the majority of

cases those responsible for admissions will use a combination of tools to make their decision.

Further Education

In the FE sector NARIC is widely but not extensively used. In Further Education there are usually small numbers of international students and often the fact that they might have UK qualifications or be given a college assessment test (in ESOL literacy and numeracy) means NARIC is not depended upon to for recruitment to courses.

However many Further and Higher Education Colleges (FHE) are increasing their numbers of International Students especially as their fees are competitive compared to the universities and their HE courses are often university accredited. In these circumstances NARIC is used. The FHE colleges, unlike the HEI sector are unlikely to use their own in-house guidelines. Most in this sector find NARIC a satisfactory and efficient tool albeit an expensive one when it is, in some cases, seldom used and when budgets are being squeezed.

The Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning (AP(E)L)

AP(E)L is divided into two components: APL (sometimes known as APCL) concerns the recognition of formal learning and is assessed through certificates gained. APEL relates to the recognition and accreditation of informal learning gained through work experience or other non-academic situations. In this process individuals need to demonstrate their capabilities in the form of a written portfolio or another relevant assignment.

APL

The process of seeking entry onto HE programmes through APL is fairly well-established and straightforward. Applicants have to make a claim based on the qualifications they have gained previously. Certificates are presented and the applicant will be interviewed to ensure that they have covered what they claim. APL claims have to meet four key criteria, that the prior learning is sufficient, relevant, current and authentic to meet the requirements.

To enable institutions to make APL decisions on international qualifications there needs to be a detailed breakdown of the programme undertaken and the standard acquired. APL is well-suited to meet the needs of standard international students but may not be so well-attuned to the needs of other migrant communities in the UK.

APEL

APEL has not been widely promoted or used as a tool of assessment but could have wider uses beyond higher education. While APEL can have many benefits for the individual going through the process it has also raised questions in institutions regarding quality assurance and use of resources. On the plus side APEL allows for a range of experiences to be taken into consideration and focuses on the needs of the individual learner. For proponents of APEL it is often presented as a means of addressing issues of social exclusion and facilitating access into education for under-represented groups. Where APEL has been actively promoted it can become a recognised and credible tool in the assessment of students' and potential students' capabilities.

APEL could have a bigger role to play in the assessment of individuals who are living in the UK with overseas experience including migrant workers and refugees. Partnerships between HEIs and employers/professional bodies could run sector specific programmes that would include assessment of core skills, portfolio building and even assessment of UK work experience through work-based learning or placement. The emphasis on vocational skills in foundation degrees means these are another area where APEL could play a significant role.

Employers and professional bodies

As employment sectors, Finance, Education, Engineering and Medicine are all very regulated industries in the UK, via the relevant professional bodies. Professionals in Education and Medicine cannot practice without registration. As such, employers routinely refer to the relevant professional body for questions of good practice, including assessing overseas qualifications and experience of job applicants.

Only one (private sector Education employer) of the employers we interviewed consulted NARIC directly, in fact, the other employers were not familiar with this product. Many of them had wide-ranging sets of data about other countries, which complement the information from their professional bodies. Several employers mentioned that they are increasingly investing resources into contracting the task of checking qualifications out to a third party in order to be sure of staying within professional body regulations.

Both employers faced with 'unsuitable' graduate level candidates, and candidates themselves, whose University qualifications are not recognised as equivalent through employers' systems (including referring to a professional body) find themselves without a clear 'map' of how to deal with the problem of high numbers of university standard applicants and remaining vacancies to fill. We did not come across any clear 'bridging' programmes by either professional bodies, employers or other agencies.

There was little formal training in this area for recruitment staff, but much evidence of recorded information and information sharing. There was also

strong evidence of a high regard given to overseas trained professionals. Employers mentioned that their systems were not perfect – that there was room for subjectivity and informality and that they did not always have access to the information that they needed in order to make decisions about overseas qualifications, particularly from small countries, emerging economies or countries where the system is in a state of change or conflict.

Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) Providers

The only assessment tool or even source of information about overseas qualifications that the majority of advisers were aware of was NARIC. Most did not know that some higher education institutions and regulatory or professional bodies have their own systems and that their assessment of a particular qualification may be different from NARIC's.

Overall, a lack of time with clients was cited as a key issue affecting advisers' ability to provide adequate support for those seeking recognition of qualifications and experience. Consequently, for the majority of advisers, the maximum support they could give to clients was a NARIC assessment. Some were not able to do this as they did not have access to a free service so they referred clients to the NARIC website. They encouraged clients to access information from HEIs and professional bodies themselves. They also referred (if possible) to specialist agencies. They did not generally have the time to give clients the support they needed (compounded further by funding geared to pre-level 2 qualifications). Most advisers felt they were providing information, not guidance.

The main strengths and weaknesses of NARIC were:

Strengths

- Reliability
- Convenience
- Comprehensive coverage
- Ease of use (most respondents)

Weaknesses

- Cost: Many felt that the costs of subscribing to the service were prohibitive, especially in small organisations.
- Not being able to print off a copy of the assessment for the client. They felt subscription fees should cover this.

- Lack of clear information about how assessments are made.
- Low assessments of qualifications
- Varied support from NARIC: Some found support to be satisfactory while others had no reply regarding queries.
- Lack of clarity about status of information. Is the assessment a 'final answer' or was there room for further advocacy?

Migrants, oversees students and refugees

Bearing in mind the restrictions placed on many advisers to provide an adequate advice and guidance service the respondents interviewed echoed many of the concerns raised above. They can be summarised thus:

- Costs: Fees for certificate equivalents and letters deterred many users.
- Qualifications undervalued: Many thought that assessment of their qualifications was too low.
- Lack of clarity about status of information. Is the assessment a 'final answer' or was there room for further advocacy?

Recommendations

- Respondents have suggested that NARIC's Country Sections should contain a language key word glossary to assist in the interpretation of documents
- Respondents have suggested the inclusion on the NARIC website of examples in PDF form of certificates to aid verification.
- Information on the NARIC International Qualifications should be clearly dated when posted.
- NARIC should inform its subscribers of the constraints it is under as regards not being in a position to rank institutions and refer subscribers to other sources for this information.
- NARIC should explain the constraints they have, which lead to their often cautious assessments so the impression is not created that, these are authoritative and inflexible.
- NARIC should provide more detailed information about marks and grade boundaries of International.

- NARIC should review its customer response times to ensure enquiries are dealt with within a minimum time period.
- There should be greater co-operation and a mechanism to share the expertise on in-house guidelines about overseas qualifications and their assessment amongst HEIs.
- The current gap between what is acceptable to HEIs as entry to undergraduate and post-graduate programmes and NARIC's assessment of those international qualifications should be filled.
- There is a need for a more generalised policy regarding the assessment of overseas qualifications at HEI level.
- Examples or models of organisational good practice in the sector should be widely available to be used by other institutions.
- Admissions Tutors have suggested an easy to use on-line system of assessment with more detailed information about the type of qualifications from various countries.
- A sustainable dialogue between BUILA and NARIC should be established to create greater convergence of their assessments.
- The use of APL could be expanded to provide a more comprehensive service for overseas students.
- The use of APEL could provide a more flexible alternative to applicants with overseas qualifications to gain entry onto programmes, advanced standing or exemption.
- The content of NARIC's International Qualification database would be improved by the inclusion of more information about vocational and professional courses.
- Professional bodies should lead on developing new fast track professional UK requalification routes for people with overseas qualifications (medicine, finance, engineering, education) to allow overseas qualified professionals to quickly and safely register and practice in the UK.
- Sector-specific APEL programmes are recommended to run in partnership with the UK HE sector and employers/professional bodies.
- Professional bodies should continue the trend towards competency frameworks by private sector employers to enhance transparency of selection procedures and transferability of skills across the labour market.
- Professional bodies/NARIC should develop more detailed data for employers about the content, level of both academic and professional

studies at University level in other countries – particular focus on developing better information for professional studies that require registration in the UK.

- NARIC may show a UK equivalent that disqualifies the client from receiving the Next Step IAG service (focused on pre-level 2) so this can become a disincentive to using it or doing other work to establish UK equivalence. Policy makers and funders need to be aware of the pressure that this puts advisers under and the apparent contradiction between providing free access to a useful resource within a context that discourages advisers from using it.
- Giving a UK equivalent to an overseas qualification through NARIC is not adequate for a client with overseas qualification. They need guidance to interpret this, to use other methods of recognising qualifications and experience, to identify transferable skills and gaps and plan their next steps. Ideally they need to work with an adviser on a full action plan incorporating the NARIC information. Funding should reflect the need for this and NARIC should provide further information on next steps for their customers, recognising the role of the adviser.
- If the Nextstep partnerships have a NARIC licence, they need to ensure that organisations within partnerships know: a) how they can use it; and b) where they can access it.
- Advisers need a step by step approach to demonstrate how to use it most effectively for clients, making clear the limitations and the supplementary work that the adviser and client need to do. Relying on NARIC training to do this is not realistic as most organisations have neither the time nor funding to send staff.
- If advisers are not permitted to print out assessments from the NARIC site, it should be clear what they could do to give the information to the client in written form.
- It should be possible to use one NARIC licence for relatively small but dispersed organisations.
- Advisers could benefit from UCAS handbook for their outreach work.
- Advisers need clear guidelines on whether they can use NARIC services or not as NARIC services are usually applicable to those with post-level 2 qualifications.
- NARIC should identify more rigorous and fairer systems of assessing equivalences as most respondents felt that their qualifications were undervalued by NARIC.
- The respondents in the category of overseas students, migrants and refugees suggested that NARIC services should be available free of charge to them particularly for those who are unemployed.

- The flexibility of higher education institutions with respect to overseas qualifications is welcomed by individuals.
- Clients should be made aware that there is the possibility of discussing the comparability they are given with NARIC.

1

Methodology and Broader Context

1. Methodology and Broader

Context

Broader Context

This research comes at a time when the UK is seeing a huge increase in overseas applications for both university places and jobs. In 2004 the UK was second only to the USA in the list of countries hosting overseas students with a total of 364,000 international students enrolled, 14% of the world total. The government has supported this trend by calling for a further rise in international student numbers as a way of maximising income. The current situation is that UK universities are becoming more dependent on the income generated by the higher fees they can charge international students and that this sector is expected to grow. A report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) showed that the global market in overseas students had more than doubled in a decade (OECD, 2006) and there are forecast from British Council that the number of overseas students coming to the UK could triple (BBC site, 27.03.07). The top 10 countries, which send their students to the UK are China, India, Greece, Ireland, United States, Germany, France, Malaysia, Nigeria and Hong Kong.

The field of employment has also seen a dramatic rise in overseas applications. Employers contributing to this research stated that between 25% and 50% of their job applicants were from overseas. The effects of an increasingly globalized world, particularly the skills needs of growing economies such as China and India, are producing new patterns of migration that have seen huge numbers of people seeking work in other countries. The enlargement of the EU has also had a considerable impact on the numbers coming to work or study in the UK. Since the accession of 8 new states to the EU in 2004, 447,000 have applied to work in the UK. According to the Audit Commission, in 2005/06, 662,000 new national insurance numbers were issued to foreign nationals, almost twice as many as in 2002/03.

The Polish migrants are the largest group (62%). Majority of migrants are aged 18 – 34 (82%). Anglia region has the highest proportion (15%). The top ten migrant jobs are: Factory worker (37%), Warehouse (10%), Cleaner (9%), Catering (9%), Packer (9%), Farm Worker (5%), Waiter/ess (6%), Hotel maid etc (6%), Carer (5%), Sales/Retail (4%). In spite of working in lower level jobs, a considerable number of migrants are well educated. According to International Labour Migration report agreed by UNISON in 2005, guest workers bring skills, qualifications and youthful enthusiasm to an ageing working population. 21% of guest workers in the UK hold higher education qualifications, compared to 17% of UK born. Different reports suggest that it is not easy for migrant workers to get access to advice and guidance. The Audit Commission states that:

Long hours, poor English and no knowledge of where to go all limit access [to advice and guidance]. In more rural areas, transport is an additional barrier. Many areas report considerable unmet demand, with heavy use of those advice services that are offered.

In response to these rising numbers, education institutions and employers are having to develop new procedures to enable them to recruit effectively in an increasingly competitive, global marketplace. The need for assessment tools that provide, clear, credible and comprehensive information about an individual's qualifications and experience is crucial to their success in this process.

Overseas qualifications in a European context

In the past two decades, Europe has intensified its efforts to find common ways of recognition of overseas qualifications. In 1999, the Lisbon Recognition Convention was prepared and introduced the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region. Aims to facilitate the recognition of qualifications granted in one Party in another Party

The Committee of the Convention and the ENIC Network (the European Network of National Information Centres on Academic Mobility and Recognition) oversee, promote and facilitate the implementation of the Convention. The Bologna Process is another major stage in the development of a unified system of recognition. Forty-five countries have made commitments to reform their higher education systems in order to create convergence at the European level. It is the most important and wide ranging reform of higher education in Europe since the immediate aftermath of 1968. The ultimate aim of the Process is to establish a European Higher Education Area by 2010 in which academic staff and students could move with ease and have quick fair recognition of their qualifications.

The above clearly demonstrates that any policy at national level regarding assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications will be more and more influenced by the European conventions. Although the Lisbon Convention and the Bologna Process are mainly about Europe but there are recommendations for how other non-European qualifications should be assessed and recognised.

Methodology

This research project has been conducted within a broad methodological framework of qualitative research using interview schedule for face-to-face qualitative interviews as we were aiming to have less structured interviews with more emphasis on the interviewees' perspective.

The project started in September 2006 and we appointed a Research Team, which included the Research Director, Research Co-ordinator, Research Consultant and Field Experts. Throughout the research, we consulted senior research colleagues from Department of Applied Social Sciences and they

provided advice and support on various aspects of the research including ethical issues, training for interviewers, design of interview schedule and analysis of data. We spent the first three months on the following: establishing a framework for research, making decision on sampling frame, choosing the sectors to be included in the research, choosing the geographical areas to be covered and representativeness of the sample. During the first phase, we carried out desk-based reviews of the relevant literature, policies and strategies at a national level.

The fieldwork commenced in November and was completed in March 2007. It was based on face-to-face interviews with individuals and a semi-structured interview schedule was devised for this purpose. In some cases, where the face-to-face interviews were not possible, we conducted the interviews over the telephone or sent questionnaires to be completed by some respondents. We piloted the interview schedule with some respondents in order to test the appropriateness of the questions and the validity of the responses. We amended the interview schedule, changed some of the questions and incorporated the feedback after of the pilot interviews.

Geographical coverage

In order to have a representative sample in England, a decision was made to divide the country into nine areas corresponding with the geographical areas used by UCAS (the University and College Central Admissions System) and which also broadly match the areas the Home Office uses as dispersal areas for asylum seekers. The initial areas, which were identified, were:

1. London
2. The South East
3. The South West
4. The East Midlands
5. West Midlands
6. The East
7. North Central (Yorkshire and Humberside)
8. The North West
9. The North East

The time constraints led us to limit our investigation to seven regions and as a result, we did not manage to cover North Central and North East. However, it should be pointed out that this did not affect the representative nature of the sample as the patterns of responses from various regions remained constant and there were not any regional variations in terms of responses to assessment of overseas qualifications.

Research sample

We identified all major agencies, institutions, professional bodies and companies, which assess overseas qualifications as part of their recruitment and selection criteria. After a careful consideration, for our interviews with universities, employers and professional bodies, we selected four main areas/discipline: Medicine/Health, Teaching, Accountancy/Finance, Engineering representing the popular fields that attract overseas students and job applicants. We also studied our own database and the above areas were the top four professional backgrounds of our clients with overseas qualifications. Another reason for this choice was that two of these professional areas, the first two, relate to professional areas that are regulated, and the latter two to non-regulated professions so the sample is a balanced sample covering both regulated and unregulated professions.

Research Fields

We decided to cover the following fields: higher education institutions (Pre and Post-92 institutions), further education colleges, the professional bodies, migrant and refugee organisations, employers, advice and guidance agencies, NARIC and migrants and refugees themselves. In this research, special emphasis has been given to higher education institutions. According to the latest statistics, the number of overseas students studying at UK universities has risen to 330,000 – one in seven of the total (BBC, 2007).

Some universities in our sample told us that the places offered to overseas students were one-tenth of the number of applications that they received from overseas students so even with very conservative estimates, the universities assess at least 1,650,000 overseas qualifications on an annual basis (based on five times the number of offered places). The figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, for the academic year 2005-2006, show that the number of students from overseas countries is continuing to rise. The top ten countries of origin are: China, India, Greece, Ireland, United States, Germany, France, Malaysia, Nigeria and Hong Kong. There are forecasts from the British Council that the number of overseas students coming to the UK could triple (as above: BBC site).

Interview methods

As mentioned above, we designed various interview schedules for different groups and included open-ended and semi-structured questions to ensure that we capture the necessary data that we need for this study but to allow for more flexibility and interviewees' input. We devised one main interview schedule but customised it for various groups and used 8 different interview schedules in our face-to-face interviews. We encouraged the respondents to elaborate and go off at tangents as it often gives more insight into what the interviewee sees as crucial points. There was enough flexibility for the interviewers to ask new

follow-up questions and vary the order of questions. We have conducted this interview paying due attention to all possible ethical issues for this research. Throughout the report, we have referred to the respondents' roles in their organisations without any names and have only mentioned the type of organisation. For this research, we engaged 8 field experts/interviewers (6 women and 2 men) who had research experience and were all experienced in interview techniques. Additionally, we arranged a training session on interview techniques to insure consistency. Majority of interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. All data have been anonymised. Data have been analysed using qualitative data analysis methods.

Interviews with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

We conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-seven staff at eleven universities throughout England. We interviewed a range of staff including the staff in charge of the Admissions Offices, International Recruitment Offices and the admissions tutors from various departments.

Interviews with Colleges of Further Education (CFEs)

We conducted interviews with four colleges of further education. We interviewed a range of staff including admissions managers, staff from their International Office and IAG advisers.

Interviews with Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) providers

We have approached sixteen IAG provider and twenty-three advisers. We included a wide range of roles in our sample of respondents for this section. Our respondents were student service managers, guidance workers, advisers, centre co-ordinators, community refugee outreach adviser, outreach officers, learning and skills officers, adult guidance officers, advice shop manager, training and quality co-ordinator, employment development worker and community manager. The geographical areas covered were: London, Brighton and Hove, Hastings, Kidderminster, Malvern, Hereford, Worcester, West Midlands, Kingston and Surrey. We covered HEIs, CFEs, Careers Companies, Employment and Training Services, Community organisations and Migrant and Refugee Agencies.

Interviews with employers and professional bodies

Our sample included seven large employers and two major professional bodies covering the engineering, finance, health and education sectors. For each group, a separate interview schedule was designed. We made sure to cover both the public and private sector employers in our sample. We interviewed

Human Resource managers and senior managers. One employer was a large public sector organisation, the others were all private sector. One was a sector specific employment agency.

Interviews with assessing bodies

We interviewed the National Recognition Information Centre for the United Kingdom (UK NARIC) and UCAS (Universities Central Admissions Service). These are the two main assessing bodies used with a wide range of organisations for consultation purposes to assess overseas qualifications.

Interviews with migrants/overseas students and refugees

We interviewed 8 migrants, overseas students and refugees. For this study, we selected those who had qualifications from overseas and had sought to get some clarifications on their qualifications. We approached organisations serving migrants and arranged the interviews in those organisations to facilitate migrants' participation. We designed a separate interview schedule for clients (Please see the appendices). The interviews yielded very useful information about their experiences with professional and assessing bodies.

General considerations

This research was a qualitative research covering various regions of England and a wide range of organisations. Considering the topic under study, we believe that the methods we have used have been the appropriate and relevant ones and we have managed to gather very useful and rich data.

The timeframe imposed certain limitations. One was that it was very challenging to arrange the interviews in a short space of time and we had to make considerable effort to convince the organisations to agree to the interviews within that tight timeframe. The second major challenge was the conflict between the richness of data and short period of time available to incorporate it in the report. With more time, this can be rectified.

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2

Assessing Bodies

2.1 NARIC

2.2 UCAS

2. Assessing Bodies

2.1 UK NARIC

2.1.1 Background

The National Recognition Information Centre for the United Kingdom (UK NARIC) describes itself as ‘the only official source of information and advice on international education and training systems and overseas skills and qualifications’¹. Its main functions are:

- To provide recognition service and comparability information of all international qualifications from 183 countries worldwide with those in the UK
- To promote UK qualifications abroad through the promotion of recognition and acceptance of British awards

This report is only concerned with the first function. As part of its role as ‘the national agency responsible for information on international qualifications’² it provides information and recognition services to individual members of the public and to organisations.

UK NARIC is part of the EU network of NARICs and is the UK representative for the European Network of Information Centres (ENIC) that also includes Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA. Most of the NARICs in Europe are part of government departments and this puts them in a different position from UK NARIC. The parent body of UK NARIC, ECCTIS, has a contract from the DfES to provide services (up to 2013) but they are independent of the government as they do not receive financial support. Another difference related to this is that the UK NARIC decision is not ‘final’ in the way it is in most of the rest of Europe. UK NARIC’s role is to advise the admitting body only. If an educational institution or employer does not agree with the UK NARIC decision, they have the final authority.

UK NARIC is a commercial organisation selling a range of services and products to different users. They also develop bespoke services and are engaged in research. This report focuses on the international qualifications databases: *International Comparisons* (including information on 2,000 qualifications in 183 countries and their UK equivalents) and *Interskills* (benchmarking vocational qualifications in 47 countries). A licence for each of these costs £850 + VAT with £400 +VAT for the first additional site and £200 + VAT for any others. UK NARIC also provides training to those using the databases costing between about £200 and £500 +VAT for one day.

¹ Home Page www.naric.org.uk

² Ibid

In the UK, NARIC subscribers include all the universities in the UK and over half of the FE colleges. The Next Step partnership has purchased 441 licences from NARIC to give their advisers access to the two databases. They are also used by professional bodies and recruitment and employment services.

Another service that NARIC provides that is relevant to this report is aimed at individuals with overseas qualifications and employers or organisations who are considering employing them. They recommend this as the 'essential first step' when considering further studies or employment in the UK. Anyone applying for this recognition and evaluation service has to send relevant documents (including certified translation of certificates) to NARIC. They pay from £34 - £40 + VAT for a standard evaluation service (a letter) to £88 + VAT for a career path report (including an overview of the education system, description of the award, professional rights in the country of origin, details of further UK qualifications in the field or the relevant professional body, comparability statement giving a UK comparison and a description of the UK level). A further service that NARIC provides is telephone advice. It is important to emphasise that NARIC provides information about recognition of overseas qualification but does not look at overseas experience.

There are currently 688 member organisations and approximately 50,000 individuals who apply for written assessments of overseas qualifications per year.

2.1.2 How does NARIC recognise overseas qualifications?

NARIC inherited much of the information they use in 1997 from the British Council who used to have the contract. The information is regularly updated (a continual programme for some countries and a rolling programme for others) feeding in information from study visits (typically 15 countries in 3 months), overseas events and from their bespoke research. They also share information with EU countries through ENIC.

The approach to building up the database of international qualifications is deliberately very broad and general. To establish the UK equivalent of a particular qualification, they take an average from the whole country. They will only single out a particular educational institution as being at a higher level if this is officially recognised in the country. When looking a degree level they will take it as equivalent to a Bachelor's without specifying 'ordinary' or 'honours'. NARIC's attitude is that it is best to take a conservative view, providing some base information that allows HEIs and other admittance bodies to use their expertise to build up a picture of the individual applicant.

2.1.3 How does NARIC compare to other systems providing information about or recognising overseas qualifications?

NARIC recognises that other systems exist that allow for finer detail and can build on experience, such as those developed by individual HEIs and by professional bodies. They comment that big universities, for example, can use NARIC as a basis to establish a guide or a database for overseas qualifications and then build on that for their own admissions process. This can be more finely

tuned to the institution's needs and can go into a level of detail that NARIC cannot which will benefit the individual applicant.

2.1.4 Strengths and weaknesses

NARIC feels that the main strengths are:

- Good coverage
- On-line - easy to update
- Builds on 10 years' experience
- Crown-copyrighted (authoritative data technically owned by DfES)
- Can build in work from other projects
- Independent

The main weaknesses are:

- Self-funded – so limited in what they can do
- Assessment has to be general – cannot illustrate the differences between regions or institutions
- Do not provide advice (about how to interpret/what to do with the assessment)
- Can only recognise 'national' qualifications (this excludes ACCA for example)
- Not a legal decision (unlike in most European countries) so can be ignored

They also mentioned that there had been some initial problems when they changed the format of the database but this has now been resolved (see below).

2.1.5 Feedback

General: NARIC does surveys every one to two years and they keep a log of comments, acting on suggestions where possible. They have just completed an on-line evaluation exercise that found users were positive about the recent changes made to *International Comparisons*. They found that users were getting the information more quickly and easily.

Their *International Comparisons* database is mainly used by HEIs. They have day-to-day contact with them so they are very clear about their needs.

From advisers: NARIC commented that the two databases that Next Step advisers have free access to have not been used as well as they could have

been. NARIC suggests that a possible reason for this is that the *International Comparisons* database cannot suit all users equally. The main customers for the database are HEIs (and to a lesser extent FEIs) and it is tailored more to them. The information may be too complex and detailed for what advisers need. It may be that, with current funding restrictions that all advisers want to know is whether the person in front of them is Level 2 or not. If this is the case, the focus for them is on the end result whereas other users are primarily interested in the process, the structures or the grade.

‘What we would like to do, and this is where the funding thing comes back again, is let’s get something that is going to be used, that is going to fit the purpose for Next Step advisers, fit the purpose for employers... and so forth.’

2.1.6 Conclusion

NARIC has identified its own strengths and weaknesses (see above). Its status is difficult to explain to users as it has authority but is not *the* authority, as it is in other EU countries. NARIC decisions can be disregarded altogether by the admitting body or used as a baseline and then interpreted in the light of further evidence and more detailed knowledge and experience, if it exists. NARIC acknowledges that the broad general approach they take is only that and that advice is necessary for interpretation and follow-up.

They also acknowledge that their main customers are HEIs (and FEIs to a lesser extent). In tailoring their service to these users, they may not meet the varied and possibly contradictory needs of other customers as well through a single database. However, they are self-funding so, while they recognise needs, they may not be able to meet them due to financial constraints. On the other hand, they are the most comprehensive ‘approved’ service available; they can provide tailor-made services and they have an independence that gives them authority and credibility with their users.

2.2 UCAS – ‘International Qualifications’ booklet

2.2.1 Data Collection

UCAS puts together their ‘International Qualifications’ booklet with information from the British Council, the Ministries of Education and the awarding bodies. They use NARIC information themselves as a tool, but they try not to ‘tread on NARIC’s toes’. They see their role as giving information but not providing direct equivalents as NARIC does, partly because they don’t think that it is really possible to provide a direct equivalent in any case.

2.2.2 Strengths

Information is informed by experiences of HE itself: If there is a recommendation about what should be asked for, it comes from the HE sector as a result of their experience of students applying with specific qualifications.

Not too much detail: UCAS has found that HE does not want 'reams and reams of paper'. They need a succinct description to enable them to understand what they are dealing with and that allows them to make comparisons with UK qualifications or other overseas qualifications that they understand better through their past experience with students.

Answers needs of HE users: They do customer satisfaction surveys and most member institutions use the booklet. It gets the highest ratings of all of their publications.

2.2.3 Weaknesses

Information is quite general: In the booklet UCAS would say, for example, that a qualification is acceptable in satisfying the general entry requirements for undergraduates. This might be considered not specific enough but they are not attempting to go into further detail (see above).

2.2.4 How it is used

The publication is primarily for the use of HE staff but they do get lots of enquiries from individuals as well as e-mails and phone calls. This includes enquiries from people who do not want to pay the NARIC subscription fee and try to get information from UCAS instead for free. If people are asking about comparability of grades, they would refer them to NARIC.

At present the booklet is on the secure section of the UCAS website so it can only be accessed on-line by HE users who have identity numbers. It is also possible to buy a hard copy but this is not publicised so generally non-HE users would not know about it. It is updated annually.

2.2.5 Conclusion

This booklet is rated highly by HEIs. It does not attempt to do the same job as NARIC and does not have the same depth or coverage. However, it is short, easy to use, inexpensive (or free) and available in hard and electronic form. It would be a useful tool for Further Education advisers and for smaller voluntary organisations and outreach services who are advising on HE entry for those with overseas qualifications. Our research indicates that most people have not heard of the UCAS booklet but are interested to know more about it.

2.2.6 Recommendations

If UCAS widened the coverage of the booklet and marketed it more widely, this would be a very useful tool for a range of organisations working with clients or prospective students interested in HE entry. Some organisations would use it in addition to NARIC, but others could use it in situations where they cannot afford NARIC or where there is not access to IT or Internet.

3

Higher education

3.1 Background and Introduction

3.2 The staff and departments responsible for the assessment of overseas qualifications and experience.

3.3 The tools used for the assessment of international qualifications

3.4 Strengths and weaknesses of the tools used

3.5 Recommendations

3. Higher Education

3.1 Background and Introduction

In its report, *Patterns of Higher Education, (2004-5)* Universities UK reported that in the previous decade there had been a huge increase in the number of international students attending Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK. The report stated, 'the growth of international students has significantly outstripped the growth of home students during recent years.' Between 2001-3 OECD (Education at a glance) figures show that the UK and Germany shared, at around 250,000, approximately the same numbers of international students, however the following year the UK's figures rise significantly. The OECD figures for 2004 show that the UK, with approximately 364,000 overseas students, was in second place behind the USA.

Out of this total approximately a third were from countries in the European Union. Students from Asia represented the largest group with 52,000 students from China.

(Guardian 14.09.2006)

Since 1997 the UK government has introduced a range of initiatives to attract more overseas students: setting ambitious targets to increase market share and assisting this aim by allocating £3m of funds for scholarship schemes in 1998 and the following year boosting the funding available to market and promote the UK education system worldwide by £5 billion. (Binsardi, A and Ekwulugo, F: 2003) More recently in December 2005 the Chancellor, Gordon Brown announced a 50% increase in the funds for promoting the UK higher education sector outside the EU.

Central to the process of the recruitment of overseas students are the methods and practices employed to assess the entry qualifications and backgrounds of the candidates. A recurring theme, to which the research respondents refer, is the HEI's need to constantly respond and adapt to the increase in the volume and diversity of overseas students' applications.

This section will focus on the findings in the university sector, which we divided into its two constituent parts, the pre-1992 or 'old' universities and so called 'new' or post-1992 universities.

- Following the background and introduction, section 2 examines the staff and departments that are responsible for the assessment and recognition of overseas students' qualifications and experience. The section looks, too, at the universities' institutional responses to the increase in the numbers and variety of overseas student applications. Findings show this response has often taken the form of a tendency towards greater

administrative centralisation of the assessment and decision-making process, but finds too universities often at different stages in this process. At the same time much of the assessment and decision-making process is devolved to schools, faculties etc. The research provides examples of these different institutional arrangements.

- Section 3 examines the assessment tools most commonly used in the university sector. UK-NARIC was found to be universally used often in conjunction with the British Council, UCAS and In-House Guidelines (I-HGs) but some universities are more reliant on UK-NARIC than others. The research showed how these different information sources are commonly used in combination with each other. Many universities have or are in the process of creating their own In-House Guidelines (I-HGs), which vary in sophistication and refinement. This section will also look at the process of assessing equivalences and examine the common difficulties that are encountered.
- Section 4 looks at the way these assessment tools are applied with the NARIC website commonly used as a general baseline line because of its breadth and comprehensiveness and In-House Guidelines (I-HGs) used for the detail they can provide about the education systems in market countries).

Section 4 looks at the qualitative issues: what the respondents perceive are the main strengths and weaknesses of the methods and practices they employ in the assessment of the equivalence of international students' qualifications.

- Section 5 contains recommendations.

3.2. The staff and departments responsible for the assessment of overseas qualifications and experience.

3.2.1 Is there a policy?

One of the first questions put to respondents was:

'Does this university have a policy on the assessment of overseas qualifications'?

The most common response was generally 'yes.' There was a general policy, but one perhaps better seen as an undertaking made to all international applicants that their qualifications would be assessed in order to ascertain if they were equivalent to the entry requirements of the particular programme applied for. This answer was usually followed by an acknowledgement that there was no detailed policy or any need for one as such.

We have a policy in the admissions dept that we assess all applications if we are to make students an offer to see if they met the entry requirements of the programme. Also when admissions officers are trained into the position that they follow a clear procedure regards assessing the candidates' qualifications. So we have a strict policy on assessment drawn up by the Director of Admissions.

Deputy Admissions Manager of a Pre-1992 University

3.2.2 The institutional framework

The research questionnaire looked at the institutional framework for delivering this undertaking.

Which offices or departments are involved in the assessment and recognition of overseas students' qualifications and experience?

The responses show that there are common approaches but significant variations in the way the assessment of international qualifications and experience is organized. The process of assessment is generally the responsibility of either an admissions department, international office or more usually a combination of the two in conjunction with academic staff in faculties, schools, departments depending on the terminology used.

Admissions and the international office are part of the same department; the Department for Corporate Affairs (and the assessments) are pretty much shared out between the admissions office and the international office.

We (admissions) make the offers for all (overseas students) but the international office obviously have a vested interest in the main market countries, where the bulk of overseas applicants come... The international office provide their own assessment of their market country applications... So if you're looking at the main market countries such as India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Bangladesh, China, they will provide advice on those countries.

Admission manager Pre-1992 university

In this example the majority of assessments is handled by the International Office but many are dealt with by admissions officers and it is the Admissions Office that makes the offers to students, albeit with a close interest taken by the International Office. In this case the admissions officers and international office staff are also familiar with looking at transcripts and interpreting the information on them. The function of making the assessment of the qualification and the final decision-making process is quite centralised. International students' qualifications are seen by academics but...

In the vast majority of cases if they're unsure, they would defer to us to give an equivalence on a qualification. Or in some departments we have an arrangement where we pre-screen the applications beforehand and so we

advise them on the equivalences and then they can agree or disagree. Sometimes we have, obviously academics who are familiar with overseas institutions So sometimes academics are involved but I wouldn't say very widely.

Another pre-1992 university has a similarly quite centralised system built around the admissions office but with more involvement from academic staff who routinely examine the applicant's transcripts.

All applications are sent centrally to the Admissions Office and we assess their qualifications, then they are sent to the admissions tutors in the departments to assess the transcripts to see if the modules that have been studied are relevant for the programme applied for. If there are queries further information is requested from the International Office country manager.

The response of another pre-1992 University illustrates the main role played by the International Office in the assessment of international qualifications, but essentially their role is to advise and make recommendations to admissions officers about the equivalence of qualifications.

Staff in our office will look at (applications) before they send them to the admissions tutors out in the departments. And if there's a qualification that our staff here think their admissions tutor won't understand...or won't know a lot about, they will find some information about that qualification and print it off and put it with the application to help the admissions tutors.

Pre-1992 Admissions Officer

In many universities, both pre and post-1992 the division of responsibility for assessment of international qualifications was clear cut with Admissions Offices dealing with home and European Union (EU) applicants and the International Offices assessing the qualifications of students from the rest of the world. This distinction is slightly distorted

... because there's a lot of international students here doing A levels or Access programmes. If they're doing the UK home qualification, they could be looked at by admissions

Post-1992 Admissions Officer

Some International Offices are able to make decisions on standard under and post-graduate courses however they frequently cannot.

The decisions on individual applicants is actually devolved, it's admissions tutors and the academic staff... there is no central body (that decides) on what should be accepted...

The Schools are very independent. They seek advice (from the international office) but may have different views on what is required

3.2.3 A process of centralisation

The research has not tried to establish whether there is greater or lesser centralisation of assessment and decision-making in the pre or post-1992 university sectors, but on balance the findings based on this narrow sample suggests that the process has gone further in the post-1992 sector. Below a post-1992 university describes their position.

There's a group of 8 international admissions officers, they are receiving the applications, processing the applications, making the judgment on the English. And then one member of the team is actually making decisions on standard courses and on standard qualifications. The remainder of the staff are sending them out to faculties

I have been employed to bring much more of the decision-making into the international office. So that is where we're going. The international office is fairly new within the university, which is why we're only now working to centralise that function of decision making. We are trying to get all that info that people have locally and get it to be shared globally across the university

Some course directors will be quite happy for administrative staff to make decisions, just standard decisions. Other academic staff are very protective over their courses and they won't allow anyone else to make decisions.

Post-1992 university

Another international office officer from the post-1992 HE sector describes how institutions have adapted over recent years alluding to how his university fits into the scenario that that he lays out.

International recruitment has developed rapidly over the last ten years and with it the expertise. When institutions started, they were recruiting from overseas it was not necessarily in a professional way. Then certain staff were appointed to key posts to facilitate the process. In the origins the applications were dealt with by the departments or the faculties, then in order that the system flowed smoothly and quickly all the overseas applicants would be seen by the international office and then if a decision could be made it would be made in the international office but if it couldn't it would be sent back from the admissions to the departments because there are some courses where we cannot make a decision: art and design, architecture etc ... and so it was to make sure the process was handled and managed efficiently.

Now that we have become successful there is probably a staffing issue ...it is difficult to manage the sheer volume of international applications so for that reason over the last couple of years the Admissions office has played a bigger role in making decisions on international applications. In the academic departments there will be recruitment coordinators and international reps who

will also play a role in the decision making process.

It would appear in this university that there has been a process of greater centralization around the International Office and that due to a huge of applicants due to on-line application there has been a need to devolve responsibilities back to some extent to admissions and departments. Commenting on this shift, the respondent acknowledged that

Of course the staff never really relinquished their role but they gave up a certain amount of it.

Behind this general trend lies the fact that the International student market is highly competitive both domestically and internationally and consequently turning applications around fast is very important and speed is of the essence with regard to deciding to reject or accept and formulating the offer. Any delay in assessment and decision making by a department can led to the loss of a student to a competitor.

We have certainly tried to keep a degree of control in the IO we want to make decisions on applications very quickly.

The university quoted above also commented that the ability of its Internal Office to make decisions about both undergraduate and post-graduate courses, provided they were quite standard ones, was the envy of some other universities because the response time to applications was sped up.

In practice the institutional setting for the assessment of overseas qualifications is partly centralised and de-centralised for obvious reasons relating to the types and level of course. Undergraduate courses are by and large more standard entities than post-graduate ones and it is more straightforward to determine on them. There are, of course exceptions. Below, an interviewee responds to the observation that it is a bit of both.

Yes, it is a mixture. For courses such as architecture where you need a portfolio, it has to be ...a professional academic judgment. For courses in say the business school where it's more transparent what the student has done, if they have the done key components, then it's easier to give the decision making to somebody outside the academic school.

Post-1992 university

3.2.4 Institutional procedures for accepting new overseas qualifications and management dealing with non-standard entrants

How do new overseas qualifications, hitherto unknown to universities gain acceptance?

The manager of an International Office in a post-1992 university put it like this,

So it's not just a case of someone in a faculty thinking well, I'll accept this one, it does go through an approval process.

So things are agreed across the university in the International Student Committee so if there's a new qualification, in say Africa, that someone wants to bring to the table, it is discussed across the university in the international group. So although the actual decision-making may happen locally in terms of what can be allowed, there has been that agreement across the university.

We do get a lot of students in certain areas, particularly business, being allowed to go into year 2 or year 3. And obviously those sort of decisions are based on transcript and at that point, it is course directors and admissions tutors who need to make those decisions.

3.2.5 The role of overseas agents and offices

Another unmentioned participant in the assessment process is the overseas office or agent. Many universities engage the services of agents in market countries and / or have offices with local staff, engaged in recruitment, who will evaluate the suitability of candidates for their UK university's programmes. For example...

If a decision can be made in a country then that is where it is made, and so a student will apply and it will be decided by our China Office and it will only be forwarded to the UK if it is a non-standard application.

Pursuing the theme of competition for students in the sector, the researchers asked some respondents about its limits, and the extent to which a competitive market environment restrained cooperation between universities. There appear to be limits to the extent that universities can cooperate, and interviewees cited their marketing strategies as areas that were commercially sensitive and off-limits. But as regards student recruitment itself, the questions produced similar comments

It is competition but it's slightly different when it comes to recruiting I don't think the same levels of protection exist we are not so secretive or guarded because we appreciate that we are trying to recruit students, through individual institutions, but to the UK... At an education fair overseas someone might come up and ask if we did mechanical engineering and as we don't. I'd refer them on as it's in our interest that they come to the UK as opposed to Australia or Canada.

An interviewee, active on the committee of the British University International Liaison Association, (BUILA) expressed it similarly,

I know that we are all in competition with each other but I think people feel the competition is in fact outside the country, it's what Australia is doing, what the US is doing. How do we get a bigger share of the market.

3.3 The tools used for the assessment of international qualifications

In all the universities sampled the services of UK-NARIC (the National Recognition Information Centre for the United Kingdom) were used. UK-NARIC offers a range of services through subscription-based membership. NARIC describes its service as 'valuable to all organisations and employers who receive or advise applicants with overseas qualifications and skills.' Members of NARIC are able access a range of services including 'single and multi-site licences to the international qualifications and skills databases', training and what are described as 'enhanced services to information and guidance advisors.' (NARIC:2007)

Universities also commonly use the information services of the British Council (BC) which since 1999 has made international education promotion the main priority and has increased grants throughout its network (Binsardi, A and Ekwulugo, F: 2003).

Education institutions have differential access to the information services of the British Council depending on membership and their level of subscription to a 'Country Partnership.' The BC provided a database called GETIS until October 2006 which contained information about overseas education systems, reports and background information on key educational issues 'to help you market your goods and services more effectively abroad.' (GETIS: 2007)

GETIS has since been superceded by BC's Education Market Intelligence (EMI) which aims to:

meet education stakeholders' primary needs. We provide statistical datasets on international students studying in the UK at universities, further education institutions and independent schools and colleges. In addition we have market profiles and information on priority countries.

In addition to these University and College Admissions Service (UCAS) provides an annually updated handbook of guidelines on international qualifications. It is described as,

A working document for selectors and staff involved in admissions and associated activities in higher education institutions. It contains information relating to a wide range of international qualifications offered for undergraduate admission in the UK. It may also be of interest to guidance staff in schools, colleges and careers services who advise applicants on entry to HE. (UCAS: 2007)

Many universities have already or are in the process of creating their own In-House Guidelines (I-HGs) which seek to identify the international equivalences to the programmes they offer. These I-HGs usually take the form of handbooks and databases available to the admissions staff, international departments and academic and related staff undertaking the assessments. I-HGs vary in range

and refinement but their focus is predominantly on the universities market countries. Sometimes I-HGs are also available to prospective students to enable them to assess their own standing as regards admission.

The research showed how these different sources of information are commonly used in combination with each other, the information source will vary according to the background of the applicant . Here is a typical response that illustrates this,

I think we use everything in combination. So we wouldn't make a decision necessarily just based on one thing. We might if we thought that was feasible.this is the information at the source, I'll look at that. This is another piece of information at the source, I'll look at that. Are there any members of staff who might have been on recruitment missions who know a bit more who are maybe from that country that can tell me a bit more. And then we'll put that all together and then make a judgment based on lots of things rather than just one.

3.3.1 Training

From the research sample it was found that the importance placed on training for the activity of international qualifications' assessment varied considerably across universities. In some universities there is a fairly regular cycle of in-service training and in others there is none. Some universities reported that staff are sent on training provided by UK-NARIC and UCOSA and in others not at all. In some universities the importance of staff training is acknowledged with plans are afoot to deliver it, while in others that is not the case. Below are some indicative comments in response to the question below. The answers range across a spectrum, indicating training is sometimes central, sometimes peripheral and sometimes non-existent. Two post-1992 universities reported, as in Example 4, that a favoured staff development practice was setting staff assessment exercises based on the same cases to identify whether they were establishing the same equivalences.

Are staff given training on how to assess overseas qualifications?

Example 1

By NARIC, yes. We are planning some (NARIC training) either this cycle or the beginning of the next cycle for NARIC to come to do an update training session for all of our (admissions) staff. They do these... around the country, it's often more economical for us to do that... And that will just typically involve several different examples of types of transcripts, the most common types and looking at GPAs, individual marks, recognised universities, modes of instruction, that sort of thing. And yes, the international office will do pretty much the same thing but not in that detail. When I say 'training' it's probably... more of an update on something they may have changed on their own advice to bear in mind looking out for... And they'll say we've got this update, that update from the British Council we're now considering.

(Assessment of qualifications is) certainly something to do with staff development... recruitment is a regular feature of some departmental strategy meetings throughout the year. But they are not.. necessarily about overseas qualifications, although recently we had a focus on science qualifications in one of our discussions.

Example 2

Any new tutor that comes in who has been presented (with applications) for the first time they'd get peer support in how to respond to those as well. So when we induct a new member of staff, I or another member of staff will talk them through how to respond to applications.

Pre -1992 University Admissions Tutor

Example 3

Again that is something we're working towards. I think a lot of it is picked up, staff are sent on UCOSA training courses and the NARIC training courses

Post-1992 University, Admissions Manager

Example 4

There will be. Well what we'll probably do is we have staff development sessions, it will involve looking at applications forms and using the blue book and seeing how a person has reached a decision and if staff have reached the same decision.

Post-1992 University, International Office Manager

Example 5

There is no training but it has been mooted. I think it needs to be 1-1. People can't be taught in large groups.

Post-1992 University, International Office Manager

3.3.2 The process of assessing equivalence

The research questionnaire asked respondents to describe the standard process they applied when examining an application form and assessing an overseas candidate's qualification and experience. Reproduced below is a quite typical response albeit fuller in detail than some.

Ok, I've got an application form from a country. So, what do I do? I go through the steps, I'm looking for consistency all the way through in terms of are the dates given consistent, the date of birth, does it match what's given on the application form, does it match what's given on the attachment. I'd look at the institution the student has studied at, and whether it's a recognised institution.

I'd look at NARIC for this.

Then I'd look to see if this student is going to meet the entry requirements using (Here the interviewee would use the university's IHG if the candidate was from a market country or NARIC if this was not the case)

Then I'd look at the level of English, if it's IELTS and they've got the qualification we can verify that on-line. And check the statement which can be taken off the website. You have to look at the standard of English in terms of the way the student presents on an application form. So quite often basic words like 'business' are mis-spelt. You may let it go once but if there's lots of mistakes you might think about reassessing their English level. And then you look through all the boxes to see if they have they ticked and check for special needs etc. Some students have hardly filled in most of the form you're going to take that into consideration. So you deliberately look at it in its totality. You look at the references, but most references from China, for example, will say this is the most intelligent student I have ever taught and you think, well, they can't all be. And you see some outrageously sexist comments, She's a very pretty girl. And then you would make an offer: conditional or unconditional depending on what documents or information was missing which you will note and request to see later or you might reject

3.3.3 Common difficulties encountered in the assessment of international qualifications

The research questionnaire tried to ascertain the common difficulties encountered in the assessment of International qualifications. The difficulties can be categorised as follows and illustrative comments will follow to elucidate the points more fully

- a) The assessment of international qualifications is by nature an exercise of great enormity and complexity
 - b) It is an inexact science from which subjectivity cannot be excluded.
 - c) Assessments are often based on inadequate or inaccurate information
 - d) Dealing with candidates who are borderline cases.
 - e) Forged documentation and fraudulent cases are on the increase
- a) The assessment of international qualifications is by nature an exercise of great enormity and complexity**

The difficulty is...just trying to build up the information and the knowledge and the education systems.

I think another difficulty is changing education systems.....and trying to work out which system a particular applicant has been through. Especially if they don't change the names greatly of the qualifications.

One problem I have is sometimes even just identifying the qualification, people call it one thing on their UCAS application and trying to find the match in the UCAS guide or NARIC sometimes can be difficult.

Pre-1992 University, admissions manager

b) It is an inexact science from which subjectivity cannot be excluded.

Example 1

In the UK you would be using primary material via examination papers, marking records, qualifications etc, but with overseas qualifications you would be using information based on sources that that are second hand. You're reliant upon information from many different countries where the systems of education and the methods in different countries to collecting information are varied. It is not an exact science, the information is not as robust as one would like it to be, but globally you couldn't resolve that.

You are not comparing like with like; courses are organised and delivered in completely different ways, you can't really make direct comparisons where you've got educational systems and where teaching and learning is quite fundamentally different from the UK's teaching and learning.

Pre-1992 University, admissions manager

Example 2

It is difficult sometimes.....nothing's written in stone is it and everybody has different opinion of what means what. And so, I think everything that you do is very much commonsense so you take NARIC's opinion and British Council's opinion and your own information that you've got here in the office. And you have to just work with the information you've got and form a commonsense opinion. So it's all very subjective I guess isn't it. Because it's not, this is equivalent to this. You do have your own opinions within the university what might be equivalent, there's no agreed standard is there? It would be useful if there was, at least then everybody would be working from the same place.

Post-1992 University, International Admissions Manager

**c) Assessments are often based on inadequate or inaccurate information
This could include information that is out of date, false equivalences
contrived by applicants, problems of translation**

Example 1

(The information used) quickly becomes out of date without even knowing it.....so that's a slight concern.

Yes, I mean basically I think the main problem that I have encountered is when the students translate the qualification themselves.

The lack of information available in terms of what the applicants themselves are providing. They're offering insufficient information on their qualifications and this, I think, is true at undergraduate level as well. What we find on the UCAS applications are that they simply do not say what they got, or they try to write an equivalent in English.

Pre-1992 university

Example 2

If we've looked at NARIC and we've looked at the UCAS booklet and we really can't get anywhere, and sometimes that happens, qualifications change their name and change their title. And you think well actually that title's not on NARIC. That title is not in the UCAS booklet and then you try and do, you can Google anything, sometimes that comes up trumps.

Certainly where we experience information differences, somebody comes with a certificate and presents something, we just can't say oh - there's nothing anywhere that looks like this. ... Differences in the information and translation are probably the two biggest problems that we experience.... I think a lot of people, can maybe get away with a smattering of French or a smattering of Spanish..... But when you think about translation and you're looking at Latvia and Lithuania and Poland and you think well I just can't do it, don't have a translation budget. It becomes difficult. University Admissions Officer,

Post-1992 university, admissions tutor

d) Dealing with candidates who are borderline cases can involve contacting the candidate, thoroughly reviewing the application and consultation with academic staff.

We don't generally interview the candidate, at postgraduate level. (However) If there was somebody that really we couldn't make up our minds about from the information we had, we would then interview them. And quite a lot apply through agents so we might go back to the agent and ask some specific questions for example E-mailing them and say we need to know this and this. Or we would e-mail the applicant and say we're unclear about this and this, please can you provide some information

If it was a borderline case, slightly under, if we were asking for say 75% and they had 72% or 73% or something, (the international office) would pass it (the application) to the (faculty admissions tutor) she would then perhaps take into consideration any work experience, relevant information in statements, references etc

But mainly it's those ones that fall 5 or so per cent below, and we don't just want to say no, that's an exact number. Because I know from experience I can't be accurate within 1%. So we then just look at the whole application and I like to consult the course directors as well depending on the case and see if they thought that this person would fit in the course...if you like.

Pre-1992 University, Admissions Manager

e) Forged documentation and fraudulent cases are on the increase

Applications using false identities and using forged documents have become an increasing problem that was widely commented on. Later sections of this report will return to this subject

An admissions tutor comments on the repercussions of this for one applicant

We had a student from Togo who I'm sure was a brilliant student, fluent French, German and English and no university in France or the UK or Germany would accept him because the bachelareat in Togo can be bought and there was no way he could prove he hadn't bought his, he'd actually done it.

Some HEIs believe that their own internal systems are more adequate than NARIC.

.... we go through such a vigorous process of ensuring that the information is absolutely right and that the quality is there. And in terms of the fact sheets, I don't claim that they're the best in the world but I think they're better than the information we get from NARIC and they've proven to be quite useful to us in how we use them in our admissions processes.

Admissions Officer, Post-92

3.4 Strengths and weaknesses of the tools used

In section 3 an HEI respondent is reported as saying,

I think we use everything in combination. So we wouldn't make a decision necessarily just based on one thing. We might if we thought that was feasible.

The respondent is alluding to the fact that the university she speaks for is using several sources of information at the same time. The research found that universities are increasingly developing and refining their own I-HGs and becoming less reliant on UK-NARIC, the standard industry assessment tool.

But despite the increasing use of assessment tools, compiled by the universities themselves, NARIC remains universally used. No university was found to be without NARIC's International Qualifications database and services. So what prevails is an assessment methodology that stands for the most part on two legs, but which nevertheless, relies on other limbs too, in the form of the BC or UCAS. The latter are important sources of information but seemingly not used

to the extent of NARIC. The relationship is articulated by another respondent,

I think its very much in conjunction though, you end up using both, I don't think you would use one without the other.

The universities own I-HGs appear from the sample to tend to be the instrument of first choice if the candidate hails from one of the university's market countries; they often embody a considerable wealth of detail and information regards the rankings of institutions and the gradings of courses. This is tailored to correspond to their programmes, an act that NARIC can seldom match.

On the other hand NARIC is often the first choice when the applicant comes from outside the market countries the universities customarily recruit from. Many respondents see NARIC as a useful, indeed often indispensable instrument for assessment, albeit a rather a blunt one.

3.4.1 Perceived strengths of the Universities' In-Houses Guidelines (I-HGs)

As seen in Section 3 many universities have already or are in the process of creating their own In-House Guidelines (I-HGs) which seek to identify the international equivalences to the programmes they offer. The statement below from one of the pre-1992, Russell group universities encapsulates the main reason for universities devising their own assessment tools and cogently highlights their specific merits.

The international Office has drawn up an internal database; there is NARIC and other sources of information, but we feel they are not always as up to date as we would like, and of course, they are very general and not specific to this university and so we have developed a very detailed database which admissions staff and admissions tutors can access. And we have on that the key countries and list of institutions, and we refer to rankings and we give an indication of the percentage that we are looking for if that is a high school certificate and we will give an equivalence at postgraduate level and say whether the person needs a Masters degree to enter a Phd programme or just a degree and the right sort of experience. So we do not just give a general equivalence of the qualification but have an idea of what the marking schemes are.

International office Pre-92 university

The value the respondent sees in her university's I-HG is that it equates directly with its programmes by dint of the fact that it can rank institutions, shows the grade ranges of qualifications and provide substantive detail about course content.

3.4.2 Ranking overseas educational institutions

An International Office Manager from a pre-1992 University signals the importance of this characteristic of his university's I-HG.

If there is a large number of Universities, or it is a country we do not know we, we look at the ranking of the University and see what the equivalent would be in the UK.

Here is a similar example,

Well (China) ranks them (its universities) now, it's different. I don't think NARIC necessarily ranks them, I think it just says - recognised. Whereas we actually use the university rankings now as for your example of China. And we'll say we can consider students in the top 250 for such and such course. Anything outside that should be viewed with caution and you ask for higher marks. So there are specific guidelines.

I mean we use (our guidelines) as the prime source of information when assessing qualifications. We use it mainly to assess the ranking of an institution

Admissions Manager Pre-1992 University

He continues,

We use it mainly to assess the ranking of an institution. And we then consider the grades range as well, not just the qualification. If they need to have 60-80 we can consider them for an undergraduate degree. If they've got say 40-50 that would be, for a foundation course

3.4.3 Delineating grade boundaries

From ranking to the next feature that makes the university's I-HGs often a more refined tool than NARIC, by offering the means to establish not simply a general equivalence for a course but specific grade boundaries.

Another respondent in the same sector referring to post-graduate applications describes how the detailed information contained in the university's I-HG facilitates placing the student on the right course.

So the country ... is referenced in terms of what our basic requirements are and the subject they're studying. Because for different subjects we have different levels of requirement. It might be that we're looking for a 2:2 equivalent in some subjects, maybe 2:1 in others, or for some even a 1st.

3.4.4 Course content and English

This respondent continues directing his remarks to the importance of having a

sound knowledge of the content of course previously studied by the post-graduate applicant.

When we're making an offer on behalf of departments they're very specifically looking at content. Say for instance we make offers for business or economics, then they'll tell us which sort of modules that the student should be taking in their degree. So they'll say we want at least three macro-economics, three related to business and such and such.

And sometimes it works the other way, where the student may have a 2:2 and the requirement is a 2:1 they'll say but this student's taking a hell of a lot of this module which is very important and got very good grades in these modules which are not.

So the alone standing of the course will not be sufficient to assess the applicants suitability to study a programme, sometimes it is necessary to identify if components, inessential to course s/he wants to pursue are showing the applicant showing in an unfavourable light when s/he is indeed well equipped to take on the course.

In addition to holding detailed academic course content information, IHG's will also hold essential information about the English language level in given countries. This would typically include details of English language examinations and equivalences and information about the mode of instruction, whether a national language or English, in schools/HE institutions

3.4.5 Speed of response

The fact that I-HGs are specifically geared to each university's courses and programmes means that these tools can be quick and efficient to use enabling applications to be dealt with swiftly,

Our internal guidelines are quick and flexible. They are updated as often as possible and when necessary, for example when Chinese Universities have merged, we include both their old and new names.

A strength is the speed of response. Staff can talk things through with me. You can't phone NARIC to do that.

International Office, Pre-92 University

3.4.6 IHGs' updating, monitoring and feedback mechanisms

Once an I-HG is established it has to be constantly updated, and as we saw in 2.4, new international qualifications are usually ratified by committee and the qualification then incorporated on the I-HG

Each year we tend to get (people from) new places applying. Ones that we

haven't seen before, so we'll go through a process of actually agreeing what we think we should accept. And then basically we will use that as our judgment

With staff constantly working on assessments of international qualifications the resources accumulate as seen below.

If somebody finds something out about a particular qualification, that may have taken a little bit of doing and finding, whether it's through the international office or on NARIC or something, they will copy it and put it in, we've got folders for different countries, put it in there and date it so that we know how recent it is. And so if someone's struggling with something, they can look within our office, look on there to see if somebody has recently had a similar issue.

University Admissions Officer

With information about students contained inside one institution, Universities are in an ideal position to monitor the accuracy of their international data and adjust it if it is found wanting.

we're in the process of developing a system as part of our registration system that we actually use for admissions now as well. To actually track what qualifications international students have and hopefully we'll be able to track right through to whether they pass or not. So eventually we will have after a few years quite a comprehensive view of what people have come into the university with and what they have exited with. So we can actually then start to monitor if the equivalences we're using perhaps need amending.

International Admissions Manager

This mechanism was found to be well known but only a minority of respondents were yet fully implementing it.

3.4.7 The Universities' In-Houses Guidelines' (I-HGs') Weaknesses

Across the HE sector institutions have developed their own international guidelines, which vary considerably in scope and sophistication. The research discovered a range of I-HGs. Some HE institutions are in the process of developing their own assessment tools while others are some years ahead.

3.4.7.1 The unevenness of I-HGs across the sector

Below are three examples that illustrate the unevenness of I-HGs across the sector:

Example 1 is a university is considering establishing an IHG and contemplating the benefits it could bring. They can see what is required but have a considerable amount of work to do.

Example 2 is developing an I-HG for its postgraduate courses but has not yet embarked on one for its undergraduate courses. It is clearly a slow, time-consuming process of some enormity that requires close attention to detail. The respondent is aware that s/he is untrained and ill-equipped for the task.

Example 3 is a university that is ahead of the game. It already has IH-Gs for both undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

The examples show that IHGs are a big undertakings, sometimes assumed by staff who often are ill-trained for the purpose and not availing themselves and benefiting from the experience and expertise of others in the sector. One consequence of institutionally based IHGs is that there seems to be much wastage in terms of labour and unnecessary duplication of resources.

Example 1

It would be nice to have something a bit more formal if you like to draw on the experience of the members of staff in the institution who have been to different countries and have forged relationships with institutions abroad and learnt about educational systems.....I don't think there's anything sort of formal written down yet, but then you appreciate that that is actually quite a big job.....we rely quite a lot on the staff who are here and if that isn't, if their knowledge isn't documented and they leave, then it's lost unfortunately.

Admissions Officer Post-92 university

....it will only be quite a generic look because obviously there are different levels of institutions within countries and that sort of thing. So there will always be additional information that people need as well, so they will only ever act as guidelines basically that people can work to. I'm not sure, it will be something I would imagine that will be on our staff intranet, whether it's actually something that is published for the students or not is a different matter.

Example 2

In terms of what I'm currently working on, actually the equivalents guide for the whole university. Sowe have priority markets that we've identified that we want to work in. And I'm working on the equivalences for those particular countries at this time so I'm actually doing it by course, by country. So we've got, or we will have quite a comprehensive guide by course and that will be by level as well, I'm doing postgraduate at the moment but I will be working back to undergraduate as well. And they will be rolled out and agreed with the schools at some point

...The idea was that a lot (i.e undergraduate) would be added to this but it has had to be postgraduate first we concentrate on... But obviously this database is taking a long time,

I am not a professional in the field. I have learnt on the job but are not trained to do this...it's a huge thing to do, but it has certainly progressed.

But the maintenance of that would be a concern for me in that, not just setting it up, (someone's) got to maintain that, to check things are up to date. So it's a huge, I think it's a huge undertaking.

University Admissions Officer, Pre 1992 University

Example 3

We have a detailed document called PG (Post-Graduate) Offers which is compiled and updated by academic department and they are happy for us to make a decision on their admissions criteria. And (we have) G(Graduate) offers too; they all evolved about at the same time so we could do our job more efficiently.

International office post-92 University

So at this end of the spectrum the IHG covers most standard undergraduate and post-graduate courses and also enables non-academic staff to make many of the recruitment decisions.

While most universities reported they used their own I-HGs in conjunction with NARIC several respondents including this International Foundation Programme tutor from the same university report they seldom or no longer resort to it as their IHG will meet most of their assessment needs.

I never use NARIC, I quite often talk to someone in the international office if they've built up expertise, because they've visited or they are a native of that country or built up a knowledge over the years. We had an African expert, he would know if the person had been to college and got a qualification whether that was worth the paper it was written on.

HE tutor post-92 University

One further step some universities have taken is moving from hardcopy and intranet access for admissions staff to public access, in order that prospective students can assess the suitability of their own entry qualifications thus reducing the demands on university staff.

3.4.7.2 Differential access to data collection, waste and duplication

The IHGs in the HE sector are often described by respondents as having evolved.

I think it's historic ... using what's been built up, starting with NARIC incorporating British Council guidelines, working in the country, learning from other colleagues in other institutions. So it's a sort of evolutionary process that may change over time.

We also use many overseas agents and they help us keep in touch with new developments but if we are made aware of something new we always investigate it and substantiate it.

IHG's are essentially customised superstructures that have been built upon bases differentially composed of elements from NARIC, the BC, UCAS and other sources. Information gleaned over time has created this superstructure. It has been collected from a variety of sources: from the universities admissions and international departments, from academic staff and their overseas contacts, from agents and staff in overseas offices etc, so IHG's are characteristically different creatures that have evolved in an ad hoc manner. Their individuality can be conceptualised, as sometimes both a strength and a weakness, some have evolved into efficient forms others are struggling to develop and some have not yet emerged from the water.

Universities are unlikely to all have the same degree of access to global information or the same need for it. The personnel in some universities might be better connected than others and access to the some information services is differential, as in the case of the British Council, where membership entitlements are graduated according to subscription level.

One respondent summarises the strengths and weaknesses as follows,

Well the strengths are that we've got more than one source of information now, so we'll be able to compare both. The weaknesses are that there's not one definitive guide, we're probably looking at bits and pieces and some of the international office is probably taken a bit from NARIC and a bit from the British Council and a bit from here. So it's not definitive, it's just our own advice. So it can probably be called into question by students who are saying over here they've said this and they've assessed it this way.. And it may be hard to defend.

So there is the broad 'one-size fits all' approach in the form of NARIC. In the HEI sector NARIC seems to be both used at one level and supplanted, at another, by the tailored approaches of the I-HG's. One observation that could be made is that with any tailored garment it is not cheap and comes at a price.

In an interview with an active member of BUILA (the British Universities International Liaison Association) this issue of cost arose. The BUILA website describes it as 'a member based organisation for HE staff involved in international student recruitment.'

BUILA provides a means by which the HEIs can lobby, network and share information.

To some degree this occurs,

A lot of its role is to share ideas, suggestions, good practice, concerns, issues. And we have a very active BUILA mailbase which is generally firing off most days on something to gain people's experience on what they know about such and such. Or to put out bits of information to them that we all should know.

BUILA also has a website that contains information and an on-line chat room that is described as less successful than the mailbase. Information exchange does regularly take place across the membership, but from some comments it appeared there was a willingness to access information and perhaps a little reluctance to pass it on.

The BUILA respondent noted,

So in a way, each university is doing a lot of its own qualifications, which I think is - can be a bit of a waste - it's a duplication of resources really because many universities are doing much the same thing, compiling the same sort of database.

It would appear that although BUILA provides a facility for information exchange, it is not as widely and fully used as it could be. It appears that the competitive nature of overseas student recruitment, despite the efforts to operate a collaborative association, engenders in the HE sector a guarded attitude and a degree of protectionism to their IHGs stemming from their ownership. This sense of ownership is understandable given the scale of the undertaking to compile them and the importance each IHG has for the HEI's international recruitment, but this protectionism is also a barrier to creating a unitary, national international qualifications database that would be specific to higher education.

3.4.8 Perceived strengths of UK-NARIC

Some of the observations in the previous section inform this one, firstly it should be noted again that the IHGs in the HEI sector are largely built upon a foundation of information provided by UK-NARIC. UK-NARIC is usually treated as a baseline or starting point to which further data concerning the ranking of institutions, grading boundaries and course content etc, is added by the HEI's own guidelines.

As the BUILA respondent stated,

So all of us will use NARIC as a general level and then superimpose our own qualifications on top.

Not only does UK-NARIC assist the HEIs construct their I-HGs in this way, it also operates in tandem with the universities IHGs which are more detailed but more narrowly focussed on the principal market countries. When an application from a new source surfaces, NARIC usually possesses the global breadth and sufficient detail on which to base an assessment.

In general what strikes someone first looking at NARIC is the scope, apparent comprehensiveness and relative ease of use of the NARIC website. The responses from the FE (Further Education) sector are particularly along these lines but it seems that users more accustomed to it, and this is the case in Higher Education, are more likely to see its limitations.

Below a pre-1992, admissions officer is at pains to conceive how any more possible detail could be accommodated and handled.

I think there's so much information there already on NARIC to think that it might break down even further, just makes me think it would be really unwieldy

There is a suggestion from the responses that where the HEI seemingly has a relatively undeveloped IHG, it will rely heavily on NARIC. Conversely where the IH-G is well developed, there will be little or no reliance on NARIC. So some comments state that NARIC will always be the first port of call and others that it will be the last. These comments are likely to reflect the stage of development of the HEI's In-house guidelines and the national background of applications being dealt with.

The comments below from other respondents provide further detailed points on what they consider to be the particular strengths of NARIC.

NARIC provides useful lists of recognised institutions around the world.

A comment consistently heard was that NARIC was valuable in providing lists of recognised institutions around the world.

Example 1

If I didn't know the institution I would actually look at NARIC, that's when I would look at NARIC. Well we use NARIC, I mentioned NARIC. I think we use NARIC mostly to check that the institution the students come from is a bona fide institution.

Example 2

Where NARIC comes into its own, is things like lists of recognised institutions that are updated by them because they've got people in the field. A list of recognised institutions is not something that one would endeavour to take on. In China institutions appear almost on a weekly basis, there is a new institution, or one changing its name.

NARIC provides useful graphic information on national education systems

Another valued attribute of NARIC are the inclusion of 'maps' of national education systems.

But it's (NARIC) quite useful at looking at educational structures because sometimes another problem is the length of study, because sometimes it's not quite clear how long (the student has studied) And it's often the length of study (that)is key to the actual award, to do a certain award you might need to study so long, sometimes it's not quite clear if they've got the Bachelor equivalent or the Masters equivalent.

The same respondent makes a similar point referring to grading systems.

I think the guides are pretty good on grading systems and things and I think you can usually follow those quite well.

NARIC provides a useful back-up service

Generally the limitations of NARIC seem to be recognised especially a certain lack of detail, as shown in the previous section, but this can usually be remedied, one respondent thinks, due to the back-up service that you can access as a subscriber.

As a basis it is very useful but it lacks detail sometimes, however in those circumstances you can contact NARIC and they will look into that for you, and if it is not on the site they might give you an answer, which is very useful.

I've never encountered a problem having an unsatisfactory response from NARIC

Admissions Tutor

3.4.9 Perceived weaknesses of UK-NARIC

As stated above NARIC is generally well used in HE but familiarity and awareness of its shortcomings for HE has engendered the development of the universities own IHG's which seek to overcome these perceived limitations. These are due to its breadth which can be seen as both a strength and a weakness, depending on one's vantage point.

The BUILA respondent recognises this, to a certain extent as inevitable. This characteristic is due to the fact NARIC is serving several different masters. BUILA however, is, at the same time, engaged in dialogue with NARIC to align it and make it more responsive to its HEI subscribers.

It's a lot broader. And also bearing in mind that NARIC's clients are not just universities, they're also companies, all kinds of people...use NARIC as a general indication of level. So that's why it's a lot broader, because they tend to equate levels within countries... And they're also equating vocational qualifications across the board relating to qualifications within countries. So it has a much broader reach and, it's doing a slightly different job.

NARIC then, was never designed purposefully for education and although educationalists do recognise and make allowances for this, have some pertinent comments about its perceived weaknesses which set out below:

But first two general points; the following comment states unequivocally that the imprecision of the equivalences established by NARIC was resulting in this university losing out in international recruitment.

We found that we were rejecting students that other universities were accepting of equal or higher standing so obviously they were doing better with regards to their assessments. Which is why we've moved NARIC as our secondary choice

of assessing qualifications now.

Yes, there's a lot of work involved in putting these equivalencies together and if they did a better job of doing that then we wouldn't need to. I don't know what other universities are saying but we definitely find that they're very narrow in some of their assessments

Admissions Manager, Pre1992 University

Second, one quite widespread perception from some post-1992 university respondents, that should be mentioned at this point, is the impression that NARIC generally is more oriented and attuned to the needs of the universities of higher standing.

I think it's at the wrong level, I think they're probably pitching it at a level of institutions that have asked for 3 As. So it's not always at the right level. You have to make a judgment in terms of we don't ask for 3 'A' s.

The perceived weaknesses of NARIC can be summarised as follows:

- It provides rather cautious or conservative equivalences based on a qualification
- It lists but makes no distinctions between institutions
- It is often imprecise as regards qualifications; they are rarely broken down as regards marks, grade boundaries.
- The course content leading to the qualification is not often revealed in sufficient detail.
- Information, as regards courses and their providers, is sometimes inaccurate out of date.
- It is weak in professional and vocational areas

These points will be addressed by comments produced from the interviews.

3.4.9.1 Cautious or conservative equivalences based on the whole qualification

A common view and one accepted by NARIC itself is that its equivalences are quite cautious. It seems to frequently undervalue international qualifications and this creates strong reactions.

NARIC is too rigid and too conservative.... An ordinary degree. That is rubbish! What is a honours degree. Doing a dissertation is used as a definition but in Taiwan for example they don't do a dissertation, but they may study a subject to a very high level. International Office

Here is a further example from another university:

I'll give you a similar example to the one that you just talked about. We work with City Council who have a scheme which is trying to encourage ethnic minorities into teaching and teacher training. And that again, there are a number of refugees and mainly from places like Somalia and Sudan. Also there is a large local community of Jamaican and Caribbean and a lot of them have teaching qualifications from their own country. But when they present them to NARIC they're told no, they're not equivalent or you're not honours degree equivalent.

Admissions Officer, Post-92

Some respondents think the attraction of NARIC to some users is it provides an easy answer and authoritative answer but not necessarily the best one.

They need to be flexible. And a bit more discursive. Other people wouldn't like this though as they want an easy answer.

International Office, Pre-1992 University

3.4.9.2 It lists but makes no distinctions between institutions

One reason as was shown in the previous section that HEIs have developed their own guidelines is the lack of ranking of overseas education institutions.

NARIC as helpful as they are,.....there are still cases where an institution even though it's listed might not actually be a good institution. Obviously some countries, the Government is corrupt, as other parts of the country. So that's one thing I guess that does concern us because there's the universities that are listed on NARIC are only the ones that are provided by the Government in each country.And there isn't that breakdown of what is a good university and what isn't a good university. So if we're in markets that we understand very well, there might be four or five very very good universities that we would ask slightly less from because we know the universities. Either we know them through reputation or we've got partnerships with them, that sort of thing. And then we might ask for a slightly lower grade from them. I guess that that sort of information is very, subjective to us and will be different for every university and is not something that we would get from NARIC or anything like that. It's useful information

International Admissions Manager

3.4.9.3 Imprecision: A lack of break-down as regards marks and grade Boundaries.

A detailed understanding of the equivalence of grade boundaries is essential for

appropriately placing a student..

I want to know what's the pass mark, what's the fail mark, what are the different levels that they can achieve and what are the required scores they have to achieve those. So that's what I would like, and (NARIC) does that for a few countries.

So there is the recognition that this is sometimes but not always the practice.

You also find that they don't seem to commit themselves they don't give enough boundaries. I always have to ask rather than being able to find any equivalencies, for example, what's a 2:1 from Taiwan?

Sometimes they do a little table but that's about it, they might say the pass/fail mark but they don't say what's a 2:1 or 2:2

3.4.9.4 Course content not be revealed in sufficient detail

A clear outline of course content, as the previous section showed, is necessary for example when an international candidate's grade has been boosted by a course component that is not essential to the course that is going to be pursued.

We need to know what has been learned, how they are taught, how they are assessed

International Office, Post-1992 University

3.4.9.5 Information about courses and providers sometimes inaccurate or out of date.

It does not seem to be clear when entries were updated. The dates of updates should be explicit.

We were told actually by the international office that it's not always up to date. And the problem is we don't know when it is and when it isn't.

It looks all different and you get the feeling that there's been a lot of updating done, but I don't remember seeing anything. It's not to say there isn't - to say last updated for each country.

In the past NARIC said you (Indian students) would have to do a bridging year. Now all universities take year twelve Indian students straight on to a degree because and they're fine, the standard is really good in India. And NARIC doesn't seem to move on.

3.4.9.6 Weak in professional and vocational areas

But the general view is that there isn't as much information out there about vocational qualifications as opposed to the traditional academic qualifications.

Admissions Manager, Pre-1992 university

Some vocational /professional courses, as in this case, from an EU country and academic in nature, are well documented by NARIC...

For example we have a number of Spanish students who come on the midwifery programme and we need to check their nursing qualifications...And the website is always fine for that because these are academic qualifications that are gained through university accredited colleges in Spain.

However, for courses more distinctly vocational and non-European a weakness is evident.

For some other countries' qualifications I feel as though when it's something like nursing then they're more acting on guesswork than on anything more.

Admissions tutor, Post-1992 University

3.5. Recommendations

Section 2

HEIs should reflect on whether a policy regards the assessment of overseas qualifications is required. Most respondents were 'getting on with the job' and had no real a notion of what a policy in this area would entail or indeed if one would be helpful. The many difficulties that arise assessing qualifications could be helped by giving applicants precise guidelines about the documentation they should provide, and how they can and cannot assist the HEI assess their entry qualifications.

The organisational context around the assessment of international qualifications is moving generally towards greater centralisation, but HEIs are at different stages of development in this process and there is enormous institutional variation. Examples or models of organisational good practice in the sector could give a lead to some institutions.

Section 3

From the sample there appears to be some variation across the sector in the provision of training. HEIs should assess whether there is sufficient training for staff and if there should be a training cycle and /or delivery of training on an ad

hoc 'needs must basis'. It could be explored whether there is a mechanism for sharing training techniques, practices and materials across the sector

Applicants, in an effort to assist the qualifications assessment process, are often providing their own unhelpful assessments. HEIs should review whether they are giving applicants sufficient and clear enough guidance on the how to present their qualifications.

Respondents have suggested that NARIC's Country Sections could contain a language key word glossary to assist in the interpretation of documents

Respondents have suggested the inclusion on the NARIC website of examples in PDF form of certificates to aid verification.

Section 4

Information on the NARIC International Qualifications should be clearly dated when posted.

NARIC could inform its subscribers of the constraints it is under as regards not being in a position to rank institutions and refer subscribers to other sources for this information.

NARIC should provide more detailed information about marks and grade boundaries of International qualifications or refer subscribers to other sources such as the providers' websites.

NARIC should provide more detailed information about course content or refer subscribers to other sources such as the providers' websites.

NARIC should review its customer response times to ensure enquires are dealt with within a minimum time period.

The variations in the quality and scope of I-H-Gs needs to be addressed. Some seem limited others very developed. Due to them being developed in institutional isolation, it would seem expertise has not been shared as it could across the sector. It would have to be assessed to what extent the competing interests of HEIs in the sector would allow the sharing of knowledge of overseas markets and expertise in setting up and refining I-H-Gs. Greater cooperation across the sector would clearly minimise cost, duplication and the waste of resources.

It should be reviewed why the gap is so great between what is acceptable to HEIs as entry to undergraduate and post-graduate programmes and NARICs assessment of those international qualifications. It should be examined as to whether dialogue between BUILA and NARIC create greater convergence of their assessments.

NARIC review whether it should explain more fully to subscribers the constraints which produce its often cautious assessments so the impression is not created that these are authoritative and inflexible.

The content of NARIC's International Qualification database would be improved by the inclusion of more information about vocational and professional courses.

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4

Further and Higher Education Colleges

- 4.1 Background and Introduction**
- 4.2. The staff and departments responsible for the assessment of overseas qualifications and experience.**
- 4.3 Is there a policy?**
- 4.4 The institutional framework**
- 4.5 The tools used for the assessment of international qualifications**
- 4.6 Training**
- 4.7 Common difficulties encountered in the assessment of international qualifications**
- 4.8. Strengths and weaknesses of the tools used**
- 4.9 Perceived weaknesses of UK-NARIC**
- 4.10 Recommendations**

4. Further and Higher Education Colleges

4.1 Background and Introduction

In the Further Education sector the number of international students is relatively few 77,000 (UKCOSA 2004-5) as compared to 364,000 or 13% of the HE sector. The FE sector which caters for students 14-19 plus, with large numbers of adult returners, generally caters for residents in their local catchment areas and does not, like the HE sector, vigorously pursue an international marketing strategy. The research therefore found that the FE sector used and was familiar with UK-NARIC but did not have a need for the In-House Guidelines (I-HGs) that were common in the HE sector.

However, in the Further and Higher Education (F&HE) Colleges international students are far more prevalent as the colleges offer level 4 diploma and degree courses that appeal to international students by offering with fees set at more competitive levels than the universities. F&HE colleges consequently are likely to have staff with a responsibility for international students.

4.2 The staff and departments responsible for the assessment of overseas qualifications and experience.

In the discreet FE sector the research found Admissions Staff and college advisors undertaking the assessment of international qualifications. The Admissions Staff were found to be using NARIC for both Home and International Students to assist placing them on a range of courses including A levels and Access courses but the use of NARIC was usually secondary to the colleges own procedures for selection and recruitment as the students were normally available to take internal assessment tests and be interviewed by tutors and were unlikely to be making applications from overseas.

The Admissions Manager of this Inner City FE College explained that,

As a college we do not openly promote the college to overseas students and some colleges doso we don't get a large number and it's problematic if we did. Because we're not really geared to the overseas market, and also our targets are fairly tight and we need to get our LSC funded students first.

There are international students in this college but it is the exception rather than the rule. when students present themselves at the college with international qualifications they are dealt with by the college admissions.

Well (assessment) 's done at admissions, so our team would be always involved in the, either the investigation of their qualification using NARIC, or we

would then do the pre enrolment assessment of the student, using our literacy, numeracy skills

4.3 Is there a policy?

As in the HE sector there were found to be no formal policies, as such, relating to the assessment of overseas qualifications but general procedures in place and staff with the responsibility of overseeing them if an overseas application was made.

I would call it a procedure rather than a policy. What happens is that any international student who applies for a course will be referred to me. And I'll check the application form, the qualifications with NARIC, and then I'll make a recommendation. So I'll analyse the results, and ...I'd make a recommendation to the tutor. The tutor would be the person who would make the decision about whether that person was eligible or not.

FHE International Office

4.4 The institutional framework

Generally in FE colleges the Admissions Department undertook these assessments and also sometimes careers and student advisors.

In FHE colleges, where there were more international students studying on diploma and degree programmes, International Offices along the lines of those in the universities were involved in international recruitment and the assessment of international qualifications. Some were found to be using the services of overseas agents who were using their local knowledge to assess the suitability of the candidates they referred.

4.5 The tools used for the assessment of international qualifications

The FE and FHE colleges in the sample were found to be using NARIC and in one instance the UCAS International Qualifications was also used

4.6 Training

With very few staff involved in the assessment process, there was little evidence of systematic training. NARIC was used and mainly learnt 'on the job'

with staff sometimes attending NARIC training, although cost and limited budgets was cited as a factor that limited participation.

Example 1

I mean we help each other but we haven't any sort of training...It's more ongoing really because you know the NARIC website, we use that and obviously staff use it for assessing qualifications so we have shown staff the site and shown how to find my way around it.

FHE Admissions Office Manager

4.7 Common difficulties encountered in the assessment of international qualifications

Generally research found a high level of satisfaction with NARIC. The most frequent observation was the difficulty of finding a correspondence between the qualification described by the applicant and the International Qualifications database. So the problem for the assessor was seen to lie with the applicant.

Well it can be complicated, because you always find that the one student who comes to you from Germany says they've got some sort of qualification that doesn't actually match. If they've written it in - you often can't find the qualification.

FHE International Office manager

Very often a lack of familiarity with the language used is a major problem

So the biggest problem is where you've got qualifications where they're from say Eastern Europe or anywhere, where it's obviously their qualifications are presented in a language which isn't English. And where you're trying to equate what they've written on their piece of paper with the whole list of possibilities that are on NARIC.

FHE International Office manager

4.8 Strengths and weaknesses of the tools used

As already mentioned NARIC is generally seen as a comprehensive and helpful assessment tool

NARIC is very good...But recently it's been very good and it's very precise and it covers so many countries as well.NARIC, it's been sufficient.

International Office

They're constantly upgrading it, which is good. It's reassuring to know that they're obviously looking at what they're doing and we get updates and so on, to say we're concentrating on this area. I'm quite confident with the information that I've got on there.

When problems are encountered the support service was considered to be of great assistance

And I'm quite used to phoning up (NARIC) advice lines, that's been really useful for me not knowing all that much about the job.

Sometimes (grading) that doesn't tally, so where the information you've got doesn't necessarily tally, I have in the past phoned NARIC and they've been very helpful on their helpline

FE Admissions Office.

The diagrams of education systems are seen as very useful

And the chart as well, it's another really good source (of information) which you can give to them and say OK show me where you are, show me which route you progressed through.

FHE International Office

4.9 Perceived weaknesses of UK-NARIC

Clearly impressions vary of NARIC and for every positive remark a negative can often be found one. So comments that praise NARIC for its comprehensiveness are often countered by opposite experiences

And I think at least once I was querying a country that wasn't even on there, somewhere. And I didn't get much help.

FE Admissions

but from such a small sample this signifies little other than opinions differ.

Some respondents did state that in general they felt that NARIC was broadly of more relevance to HE subscribers than FE because of the variety of course in FE and the fact that many are so vocational.

Yes, and I think that, in HE you really are trying to make a decision about whether somebody is or is not able to deal with a degree level course. At FE we've probably got more variety at different levels, we do everything from elementary to level 3-4

FE Admissions

Examples of documents

Some weaknesses were identified by FE and FHE respondents but they were considered very minor. An area of improvement suggested was the inclusion on the NARIC database of examples of documents to make verification a simpler process.

It might be useful just to, if you had a picture of what documents and certificates looked like, to make it a bit easier.

International Office

Some real examples that you can just look at and print off and that would be explained would be useful. Because I mean if somebody's claiming they got a high school certificate in Germany or whatever, what you want is, what should they be showing you.

FE Admissions Manager

A glossary of terms

Aiding verification was carried further by the suggestion of a glossary of terms in the country areas to mitigate the problem of translation.

So basically in their description of the school system, so it might say that in Poland everybody in the equivalent of year 10 has to do a core curriculum which is Polish Language, Polish History, a Science, English or a foreign language, whatever. In which case it might be useful just to give you a glossary of what the key words are and what their English equivalent is.

FE Admissions Manager

Cost

Amongst the less frequent users, namely the FE colleges, an important concern was the cost of subscription and of training when budgets were tight.

I'm coming to question whether actually we need NARIC to that extent. Well, we don't use it that much and it costs about £700

FE Admissions Manager

4.5. Recommendations

- FHE should review the guidance given to applicants on how to present their international qualifications to avoid being furnished with unhelpful and misleading information.
- FE institutions could review the UCAS International Qualifications handbook to see if it represented a less costly alternative to the NARIC service.

- NARIC's should assess whether Country Sections should contain a key word glossary to assist in the interpretation of documents
- NARIC should assess whether its website should contain examples in PDF form of certificates to aid verification.
- Information on the NARIC International Qualifications should be clearly dated when posted.

5

Assessment of Experience and AP(E)L

5.1 Personal Statements

5.2 The importance of relevant experience

5.3 AP(E)L – Context

5.4 AP(E)L in practice

5.5 Key points

5. Assessment of Experience and AP(E)L

This section will look at the process of assessing an applicant's experience in general and the use of more formal APEL assessment processes in particular. A number of respondents spoke about the way they assess an applicant's experience and interviews were also conducted with two APEL specialists with experience of developing APEL policies and procedures in HE institutions.

1. Assessing experience – the personal statement
2. Assessing experience – the importance of experience
3. AP(E)L – Definition and context
4. AP(E)L – benefits and drawbacks in practice
5. Key points

After establishing that a candidate has a recognised qualification and the necessary English language skills to study at their chosen level the next key question will be “Do they have other life experiences that will support their application and improve their chances of success?”

5.1 Personal Statements

Evidence of previous experience will first be identified in an applicant's personal statement and for an overseas applicant this can often present difficulties. Depending on their country of origin they may well be writing from within a very different cultural context and without the guidance and support that a sixth-form student from the UK might receive. Instead of describing their own individual achievements and highlighting relevant skills they may focus more on family and community or make a plea based on their own personal circumstances. They also may not appreciate the importance of this statement or its role in the university's decision-making process.

The personal statement on an application form is always important and a lot of applicants don't recognise that - So if somebody had written a personal statement and it was evident from that that they had experience that could be counted, they would be called to interview and then the interview process would establish whether they would be accepted on to the programme.

IFP Tutor, Post 92 university

5.2 The importance of relevant experience

Respondents saw the interview as the best instrument for assessing an applicant's suitability for a programme of study and probing further into their background and capabilities. Whether in face-to-face or phone interview or through the personal statement it was also stressed that factors other than a relevant qualification were extremely important in the decision-making process.

Yes, qualifications are important but we also try and appreciate that an applicant might be bringing something else that might be just as valuable. We look at the applicant's history and the applicant's work history, if they've got anything relevant there. So we try and look at the bigger picture as well as the qualifications on offer.

University Admissions Officer, Post 92 university

Making a decision, it's not just that they've got a qualification but their motivation, employment background, maturity, relevant outside interests, linked with experience is also important.

International Office Manager, Pre 92 university

If they had the work experience, say coming to engineering they've shown that they've worked in an engineering industry or environment for a couple of years, then we are more inclined to take them in. If not then what they will do is put them in the foundation year to bring them up to scratch and get them into the system.

Admissions Tutor, Post 92 university

This is particularly relevant on postgraduate courses and in some areas where prior practical experience is a key indicator of the applicants understanding of and commitment to the subject.

For ITE (Initial Teacher Education) programmes a lot of it's based upon a realistic appreciation of what teaching involves, often demonstrated through observation or experience of working with young people before they come to the interview. So we can talk to them about their experiences, the strengths of their subject knowledge, sometimes illustrated through the quality and content of their degree, or through the work that they've done previously.

Admissions Tutor, Pre 92 university

Because our courses are management related, quite a few of our applicants have finished their undergraduate degree, they may have done a year or two's work experience somewhere and they've decided to use this to focus in on the specific subject areas.

Admissions Tutor, Pre 92 university

In this respect there is more flexibility in the UK system than in most other countries and this can open up new routes into education for overseas students.

Admissions can be made at the discretion of course leaders and other admissions staff if they think the candidate has the potential to succeed.

There's two things, there's the paper qualification and then there's the actual potential of the person, it may have nothing to do with their qualification. Supposing a student in their 30s turned up and said I want to do a degree in business studies, I've never been to university before, I've worked in a business, run my own business for ten years. Then the lecturer would interview them and if they felt the person was capable then they would be perfectly free to accept them on their programme. I've taken a Brazilian this year, she'd worked in the family business for 2-3 years and eventually saved up enough money to come to university. She couldn't go to university in Brazil because she didn't have the qualifications, hadn't finished high school.

IFP Tutor, Post 92 university

5.3 AP(E)L – Context

If an applicant wants to go further and use their past experiences or qualifications to gain entry onto a programme, exemption for modules or levels or obtain advanced standing then they need to claim credit through an AP(E)L process. The process for matching previous qualifications to UK modules is fairly straightforward and is generally known as Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). In this instance the applicant makes a case based on their existing qualifications and needs to present the relevant certificates or transcripts. These are then assessed against the entry criteria or modules that the applicant is claiming credit for and have to meet four key criteria: that the prior learning is sufficient, authentic, current and relevant. When dealing with an applicant's experience the process is called Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning or APEL and this has to meet the same criteria but is a more lengthy process.

In this instance, the individual has to produce a written portfolio (usually) that describes their relevant experience and identifies learning outcomes that match the learning outcomes of the programme they are claiming credit for. Most APEL assessments are made on the basis of a written assignment though other methods can be considered.

Mostly (assessment is by) portfolios or essays. There's the occasional online if that's appropriate. I know that one of the coordinators last year was going to try and do it all through interview, but it became too difficult to decide who needed to be there and who would ask what questions. And in the end they asked the student to write something, it was just logistically a nightmare.

APEL co-ordinator, Post 92 university

In the institution I was at previously on a postgraduate award to do with information systems design, because for a particular module the assessment was to design something, that's what they used to assess experiential learning

against that module. - The assumption is that inevitably (assessment) will need a portfolio.

WBL co-ordinator, Pre 92 university

The potential for using APEL as part of a more flexible approach to assessing individual capabilities has not yet been fully explored and its profile in universities across the UK remains low. Garnett et al have examined good practice in UK universities and highlighted the potential benefits of APEL while also identifying the reasons why its use in UK universities is not more widespread. Regarding the first point, it can be:

- *A flexible response to recognise the learning achievements and future aspirations of an individual*
- *A contribution to widening participation*
- *Supportive of students leading to enhanced confidence*
- *Embedded in an institution's assessment and quality assurance procedures*
- *Rigorous as part of a transparent assessment process*

However it falls short of its potential because:

- *Information about the possibility of APEL is not always widely available or clearly written.*
- *The APEL process can be overly bureaucratic and resource intensive*
- *APEL is perceived as difficult and overly time consuming by students*
- *APEL lacks credibility with some staff and students*

Garnett, Portwood & Costley (2004)

5.4 AP(E)L in practice

I think students who undertake APEL successfully are quite unique, quite confident and quite assertive. On the PDP³ there's a section for APEL. I didn't realise it was there, but it's not enough just to say do you have experience? well if somebody puts 'yes' then where is that picked up?

APEL Co-ordinator, Post 92 university

³ Personal Development Portfolio – a first semester exercise for students planning their course and stating their learning objectives

As is evident from the comments earlier, even those coming to the APEL process as UK nationals with English as their first language may find the process of APEL problematic. Where do they find the information, what does the process entail and who is responsible for supporting them are key questions they face. For overseas students the difficulties will be compounded by language issues and unfamiliarity with this approach to teaching and learning.

There is an issue about English language. It's difficult to convey your experience anyway but when you're doing it in a second language...I know some tutors who say well I've taken someone on the basis of experience and I've given them APEL credit. Then we've moved them on and they haven't been able to cope.

APEL co-ordinator, Post 92 university

The reluctance of many institutions and individual members of staff to engage with APEL processes remains the biggest obstacle to its adoption in higher education. As stated earlier the process can be quite time consuming and it's often unclear to relevant staff what it entails.

I was very proud of the University's AP(E)L website as prior to it we had nothing, until one departmental APEL co-ordinator told me it was completely impenetrable and useless to him.

APEL co-ordinator, Post 92 university

I think first of all before the workshops, people weren't exactly clear how to approach the assessment of prior experiential learning. And in my experience more generally, often the assessment of prior experiential rather than the recognition of prior qualifications is seen to be quite resource intensive.

WBL Co-ordinator, Pre 92 University

Questions are also raised about quality assurance ie. is the resulting evidence valid, sufficient and relevant?

Probably the most significant factor is that APEL isn't part of the mainstream curriculum. I think if it were, then a lot of things that are barriers wouldn't be. You need to have flexibility of learning outcomes, you need to have very local guidance and advice. You need to have people working at the course and modular level. But because on the majority of courses it's outside the mainstream that means that people don't know about it, they don't understand it. Also we live in such an audit culture, there's a concern that somebody might look over your shoulder and say you shouldn't have done that, that's not right.

APEL co-ordinator, Post 92 university

Despite the problems associated with embedding APEL processes, where it is supported with a university-wide policy, integrated into university systems and clear guidelines are provided it can offer an alternative access point to students who may not have previous academic qualifications or who would like to gain academic recognition for their professional experience. For a consistent

approach to be developed the benefits of APEL have to be clearly communicated to and accepted by the executive board and quality assurance staff. APEL would have to be acknowledged as a valid and credible instrument of assessment. In practical terms policy and procedures would then be developed and each department or faculty would then appoint an APEL co-ordinator who has overall responsibility for APEL matters within their area. This already happens at some universities.

Because they're so centralised, it's not that difficult in terms of systems because each department has an undergraduate or postgraduate office. So if you've got representatives from there (on the APEL committee), we're all using the same system. Each department should have at least one APEL coordinator. The planning document, of what the student will do will often be negotiated by the tutor, module leader or a course leader. It should be countersigned by the APEL coordinator so they know what's going on and they can run an eye over it and say yes that's appropriate.

APEL co-ordinator , Post 92 university

One area where the potential of APEL could be explored further is on foundation degrees. As initially envisaged these were meant to have a more vocation-based approach to the curriculum and reflection on work practices through APEL could be seen as particularly relevant to students on these programmes.

I do not understand why APEL can't be part of foundation degrees. I think it's because they are not necessarily delivered in the form that were intended and a lot of them are rebadged HNDs and they're taking people who are not necessarily in work. I think that there is the fact that the experience of the individual isn't really part of something that's seen as authentic curriculum development,. We assume the individual knows nothing, therefore they need an introductory module.

APEL Co-ordinator. Post 92 university

In some areas the use of APEL or portfolio based assessment is already established as a means of assessing a student's capabilities.

In nursing, and the other associated professions, experiential learning is more widely recognised and on Healthcare Sciences (at my previous university) there was a committee specifically for dealing with both APEL and APL claims, and they did use portfolios.

WBL co-ordinator, Pre-92 university

We have a lot of art and design courses that have portfolios when not really, anything but a specialist can have an opinion. And in those cases their application would tend to be judged on that basis anyway, not necessarily on the qualification that they hold but on their capabilities to live as an artist.

International Admissions Manager, Post 92 university

If APEL was promoted more widely and supported by educational institutions it could be particularly useful for migrant workers and refugees to gain recognition for prior experience and open up possible routes to further training and higher education. A report into the uses of APEL as a means of social inclusion concluded that:

In general, information about APEL and its potential benefits to learners needs to be disseminated more widely than it is at present and incorporated into wider policies and strategies of social inclusion and social justice. The potential of APEL to act as a transformative mechanism, both socially and personally, means that it is particularly suited to meet the needs of traditionally excluded groups from education and the labour market.

Creating Opportunities for APEL, 2002

This focus was also supported by NIACE in their response to the 2002 Asylum and Immigration white Paper, *Secure Borders, Safe Haven*, with a call for a national strategy:

It is time now for a system to be introduced which will allow overseas qualifications to be assessed and validated and for more bridging courses to be established to allow qualified migrants to convert their qualifications for use in the UK.

NIACE, 2002

5.5 Key Points

- Personal statements from overseas students can be misleading due to cross-cultural misunderstandings about their purpose and role in decision-making.
- Relevant experience is an important factor in deciding on the suitability of a candidate at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.
- After establishing qualification requirements, interviews are the most effective way of assessing an applicant's experience and suitability for a programme of study.
- The use of APL could be expanded to provide a more comprehensive service for overseas students.
- The use of APEL is currently not widely understood or accepted but could provide a more flexible alternative to applicants with overseas qualifications to gain entry onto programmes, advanced standing or exemption.
- Bridging courses containing elements of both APL and APEL could be established to allow migrant workers to convert their qualifications.

References

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6

Employers & Professional Bodies

6.1 Background

6.2 Staff and departments responsible for the assessment of international qualifications

6.3 Tools used for the Assessment of international qualifications

6.4 Strengths and weaknesses of tools used

6.5 Recommendations

6. Employers & Professional Bodies

6.1 Background

Our sample included six large employers and two major professional bodies covering the engineering, finance, health and education sectors. One employer was a large public sector organisation, the others were all private sector. One was a sector specific employment agency.

Key points that were raised by these employers concerning the context within which they have developed systems to assess overseas qualifications and experience were:

- Recent growth of (mostly on-line) applications from overseas qualified candidates.
- These employers mostly already work internationally and are engaged in a 'war for talent' to fill vacancies with both UK qualified candidates (of which there is a shortage) and from this international labour market, including selecting target countries and universities.
- Employers and professional bodies in these sectors work in a highly regulated environment. The required qualifications are all regulated/validated via the relevant UK professional bodies.
- Range of attitudes and approaches to assessing overseas experience

6.1.1 Growth of (mostly on-line) applications from overseas

All employers reported that the vast majority of all applications, from both UK and overseas applicants, are received over the internet. For example,

“ Generally most people that apply to us will apply directly via the website”.

HR Officer, Finance Company

All employers reported that between 25 and 50% of all applicants were from overseas.

One employer commented

“Overseas applicants are about 40% of the applications we receive as a company and last year we got a shade under 95,000 applications. So you’re looking at about 40,000 applications from overseas candidates.”

HR Officer, Finance company

“I’d say probably we would receive probably between 7,000-8,000 applications a year from people overseas. “

HR Officer, Finance company

Another

“ around 25% (ie around 150 applications) of all engineering candidates have overseas qualifications.”

HR Officer, Public Sector employer

Another

“ 25-50% of the applicants , across the board are from overseas . We’re an international civil engineering contractor. We get a lot of engineers, European and African and Middle Eastern that do apply for engineering roles and come to the UK and they get the roles on their merit.”

HR Officer, Engineering company

Medical professional applications for registration in 2006 were reported at “ European route was 3,227 for full registration , and for international medical graduates just over 7,000 for limited registration. “

Senior manager, Professional body

Employers had actively used their websites to encourage job applications. For example, one employer commented

“I think we’ve so much gone towards on line recruitment in the last couple of years like a lot of organisations. It’s meant that the accessibility of candidates to our vacancies, UK vacancies, is a lot easier than it used to be. We used to advertise in the national newspaper; we’d put an e-mail address and only people that were able to access a British newspaper could apply. So typically we got UK applications . When you put it on the internet it immediately goes global so we

would get a far greater number of overseas applications.

HR Officer, Engineering company

However, it became clear that many of those overseas applicants are screened out of the process at very early stages. One employer said:

“ Many of them seem to be bulk sending CV’s and don’t meet the basic qualifications, skills and experience criteria so are screened out at the first stage”

HR Officer, Engineering company

6.1.2. War for talent’

Employers generally commented on the ‘war for talent’

“We are targeting engineering jobs for overseas candidates because we can’t get the expertise in the country.”

HR Officer, Public Sector employer

Businesses are looking to maintain and increase their market shares/capabilities to deliver. In the private sector, the recognised qualifications and experience of their staff is reflected in the fees charged to customers.

“The reason we put a lot of merit into staff selection is that our customers are very discerning; if we say the engineer is a chartered engineer as opposed to just a normal engineer, we charge more for the services. So it’s of benefit to us to actually find out what are the recognised qualifications in that industry or country.”

HR Officer, Engineering Company

With the exception of the UK based, public sector employer, the large employers operate internationally and target certain countries and certain universities and/or employers in particular to recruit from.

“ We have a relatively accurate database of equivalent qualifications for probably 20-25 countries around the world where we recruit from on a very regular basis.”

HR Officer, Engineering Company

Another stated:

“ We’re knowledgeable on pretty much all European stuff, we’ve genned up on Romania for example at the beginning of this year because of entrance into the EU. Poland too. Australia, USA, the Commonwealth countries plus English language speaking countries as well, we’re pretty knowledgeable on that, including India. But we’ve now sort of started looking further afield at Chinese qualifications and things like that.....We have a toolkit for each country so, the Australia one for example, in addition to qualifications it goes into current recruitment trends in that country, salary guides and things like that as well. So we keep a library of each time we look at recruiting from a country, and we look to update that so that we’ve got as much up to date information about where we should be advertising and what we expect from the respondees.”

HR Officer, Engineering Company

A teaching agency was targeting Canada, S Africa, Australia, N Zealand, EU and new accession countries

All commented on the difficulties in assessing equivalencies of overseas qualifications from smaller, less familiar countries, and from large countries with emerging economies and many institutions such as India and China. One employer commented:

“Take India for an example. There’s 200,000 universities or something incredible and trying to establish the credentials of a degree of a qualification when someone presents it to us, especially when it’s not on our database. There’s a recognised number of universities that we do a lot of work with in India, and we recruit graduates from them to work in our India offices. So we’ve felt that by narrowing it down to about 12 different universities around India we’re comfortable with those- there’s a far greater level of trust there.”

HR Officer, Engineering Company

Another commented

“China and India are classic examples of emerging systems - the level of qualifications and academic teaching there has greatly improved over the last sort of 15-20 years.”

HR Officer, Engineering Company

6.1.3 Employers in these sectors work in a highly regulated environment and need to maintain high quality standards.

All the private sector employers commented on their wish to fill vacancies with skilled people from either UK or overseas, while ensuring that they maintained their reputation for quality in a highly regulated environment. Finance, Education, Engineering and Medicine are all very regulated in the UK. Professionals in Education and Medicine cannot practice without registration.

The emphasis was on value for money and minimising risk to the company.

For example

‘I’m sure you can understand the impact if we get this wrong and someone’s on an audit and it all goes a bit pear shaped and we end up in the press and it’s quite devastating. So we do need to be quite rigorous.’

HR Officer, Finance company

Employers were keenly aware of the need to work within strict regulations – reflected in their recruitment procedures. Qualifications are regulated via the UK professional bodies.

“I think the biggest thing that we’re finding now is that, and again in a highly regulated environment and with all the fraudulent activity and terrorism, the whole bit. I think pre employment checks are becoming a very very big thing so I would really recommend that any employer does these checks, probably a lot more rigorous than what we’ve done in the past. So I think these third parties that I was talking about previously, they’re becoming more and more commonplace and it’s often a good idea to maybe think about using them

Another engineering employer commented on the high cost to employers of procuring visas for overseas candidates and the requirement from Government to prove that the company had sought to employ UK staff

“ You’ve got to balance..we get a lot of overseas students applying..but where’s the priority?? Construction is very short within the UK..a question is your priority placing UK construction students..or take someone from abroad?? It’s a thin line, a balancing act. ...we do try a balance that act for example we are currently applying for work permits for a lot of overseas students...you can’t discriminate..but the government holds you back so much ...the cost of the visa, the amount of advertising

you have to do..to prove you’ve looked in the UK..I have to do this on a monthly basis. So we can say “we advertised but we didn’t get anyone”

HR Officer, Engineering Company

6.1.4 Range of attitudes and approaches to assessing overseas experience

All employers, in the highly regulated environment, rely on their professional bodies to assess qualifications/equivalence of qualifications. This is seen as cost efficient and safe.

Qualifications are seen as the main benchmark for deciding on an applicant with overseas qualifications’ suitability to pass the first stage of selection. Applicants whose overseas qualifications do not match the criteria are usually, though not always, screened out at the early stages. eg

“ to a certain extent their postgraduate or prior experience wouldn’t really come into it because if they can pass the (UK professional body requalification exam) then we’re satisfied that they’re able to work as a registered doctor”

Senior manager, Professional body

However, strong candidates, whose application addresses the required skills and experiences, but whose equivalence of their qualification may be unclear, may sometimes (though not in medicine or teaching) go further, either via the professional body or internally: eg

“If we didn’t know what a qualification was like but we liked the look of their

experience on their CV for example we probably would still get them in.”

HR Officer, Finance employer

“ Employers come to us sometimes...I’m an engineering employer, I’ve had this CV in, we quite like the look of this person, we are thinking of giving them a job, but would you just verify that this information is correct“ Now on occasions they’ll go further than that, they’ll give the individual a job or a three month contract and await my coming back.”

Senior manager, Professional body

“I’ve got one on my desk now from Malaysia who’s now based in Harrow I think and just wants me to confirm , actually he’s got a very complicated CV because he’s got his degree in Japan. He’s a Malaysian, got a degree from Japan and he’s working in Harrow.”

HR Officer, Engineering Company

“ If we’re not sure, they’ll do a technical assessment, if they failed the technical assessment we would think well Ok we’ve learnt from that.

HR Officer, Engineering Company

One employer mentioned:

“We ask managers – do you really need a degree holder or is it just certain capabilities, including experience – then we can train them up”.

HR Officer, Public Sector

Another:

“Last week we were assessing mechanical engineers who had some experience within the aerospace industry. So there were some specific questions there on bending moments and of different forces which they will have learnt at Bachelor’s degree level and that may have been 4-5 years ago. And if they’ve forgotten that or if they never learnt it or they can’t apply it, then there a problem. If they’ve forgotten the basics, can’t understand how physics works, it’s a bit of a tough one when we’re going to help them design an aeroplane or an airbus or something like that”

HR Officer, Engineering Company

6.2 Departments and roles within employers and professional bodies dealing with assessment of overseas qualifications

- Finance, Education, Engineering and Medicine are all very regulated industries in the UK, via the professional bodies. Professionals in Education and Medicine cannot practice without registration.

- As such, all the employers routinely refer to the relevant professional body for questions of good practice, including assessing overseas qualifications and experience.
- None of the employers we interviewed consulted NARIC directly, in fact, they were not familiar with this product.
- Many of them had a wide-ranging sets of data about other countries, which complement the information from their professional bodies.

Comments included:

“We go out to the professional bodies for advice”

HR Officer, Public sector employer

“In the UK, engineers need to have certain accreditations eg Institute of Chartered Engineers. – not all degrees are recognised worldwide. There is a framework there”

HR Officer, Engineering company

“UK chartered bodies, engineering bodies. For example the Institute of Civil Engineers. They talk to us if we ask what are the requirements for an Ethiopian qualification to be recognised in the UK. They’ve already done that legwork and can say yes, we recognise it from this university or from that university if they’ve got this qualification.”

HR Officer, Engineering company

“Either they’ll equate to a UK accountancy qualification or they won’t basically. All the people that we take have to be qualified so for instance maybe of the ICAW and ACCA, overseas equivalents will be pretty much be either the chartered accountancy body of that country or they’ll be a certified public accountant which a lot of people from America will have. And they’ll equate to an ACCA or a UK ACCA or ICAS qualification.”

HR Officer, Finance company

Within employers, either HR or a specialist section such as ‘Exam Training’ are the point of reference internally for managers recruiting new staff who have questions about overseas qualifications and experience. These teams work closely with the relevant professional bodies.

“ We assess internally really. That’s set out by our exam training department and then we basically follow what they tell us.”

HR Officer, Finance company

Within professional bodies, there are also teams dedicated to this role:

“You’re probably talking about 60 people directly assessing overseas

applications – about half of the total team.”

Senior Manager, Professional Body

In turn, the professional bodies consult with other agencies:

“ We tend to go quite significantly by the World Health Organisation list, However, we also have an international liaison centre which we set up specially and they deal with embassies, they’ll deal with governments, will go to the British Council, the World Health Organisation local offices. We’ve got a variety of ways we can attack the problem and we experience some ways are better for some countries, some ways are not so good for some countries and it comes with experience I suppose. “

Senior manager, Professional body

6.3 Tools used by employers and professional bodies and methods of use

Employers:

As well as using the professional bodies, employers have teams, record systems, and in-house international networks to inform their decision making process.

“We have what we call our exam training department so they’re a body of people who are experts in professional qualifications. And they assess people’s qualifications in terms of whether they’re equivalent to the UK or not.”

HR Officer, Finance company

“really every time we look at another country in terms of doing research into whether we should be advertising in that country to try and attract candidates from those particular countries to come and work with us. We always do some research into the equivalencies between a UK qualification and the local equivalent....

...We have a toolkit for each country so, I’m looking at the Australia one for example, and in addition to qualifications, membership towards engineering chartered bodies, it goes into current recruitment trends in that country, salary guides and things like that as well. We keep a library of each time we look at recruiting from a country we look to update that so that we’ve got as much up to date information about where we should be advertising and what we expect from the respondees.”

Several employers mentioned that they are increasingly contracting the task of checking qualifications out to a third party:

“ We’re in the middle of rolling out some pre employment checking which has been done by actually like a third party, it’s those people who will, particularly

for graduates when they say I've got 'x' degree. They'll check the degrees and the references etc. We're about to roll this out now for experienced higher people and so we'll be using the same team who will, they will ask for proof of their qualifications and I think, I'm not sure, I think in the UK it won't be implemented until June but I've been on the initial project team and I think they will actually go as far as to contact the institute to get proven membership. Overseas people that could be a little bit more difficult but I think they'll probably just in the first instance ask for proof of qualifications. So we will be using eventually a third party who will actually do all of our pre employment checks and clearing qualifications"

HR Officer, Finance company

The reason for this is, as mentioned, to protect the company from expensive recruitment mistakes in a very regulated environment:

It's just in a very highly regulated environment with all sorts of fraudulent activity happening, etc.....these companies are now going to merge where their extra offering is that they will take away this whole thing of referencing, checking, all that off us and basically put candidates through this process.

HR Officer, Finance company

One professional body had also started to provide this type of service - validating CV's for employers:

" for this very new service..about 18 months old..we're probably only getting 300 /400 - probably about ten enquiries a week. But it is beginning to go up and obviously I'm promoting it as hard as I can... basically if an engineering employer has a CV which they don't quite understand all the information on it, or it looks a bit dodgy, they can come to us, pay a small fee and we'll validate the CV for them. For twenty pounds we'll just say this is equivalent to xyz. For fifty pounds we'll say this is equivalent to xyz and the candidate actually has it. And then we'll go even further and if necessary we'll call the individual in and bring in a panel of professional experts who actually test the candidate's competence. And that's £350."

All the panel provide this service on a voluntary basis.

- Professional bodies have teams, record systems, and international networks to provide information on their view of the equivalence of overseas qualifications.
- One professional body has 36 sub-organisations, each of which has a website containing information specific to its area of work. There is usually some limited information on each one about overseas qualifications:

“It is a bit difficult but they’ve all got websites and our website will guide employers in the right direction and they can phone us up and we’ll point them in the right direction.”

Senior manager, Professional body

The accumulated knowledge in the professional bodies is kept on database/s and ‘in people’s heads’. In one professional body, it appeared to be mainly the registrar and one other person who managed this database.

“massive database we’ve been setting up over 30 years just to check out the forms as they come in for the register. The registrar is the man responsible for the database. They keep that entirely under his control actually. He’s the only one that has full access to it. “

Within employers, only a specialist employment agency used NARIC. The other employers all referred to their professional body. The agency was very satisfied with NARIC:

“ NARIC is extremely useful – also provides good training.”

HR officer, Employment Agency

6.4 Strengths and weaknesses of these tools and systems

Strengths

The interviews referred to above showed extensive accumulated knowledge, formed from individuals and from networks; a shared knowledge.

There was little formal training, but much evidence of recorded information and information sharing. For example,

“ So in terms of my staff and myself, we have things like lunch and learns and our training team they’ll come and give us talks about the institute and about qualifications and how they work”

HR Officer, Finance company

There was also strong evidence of a high regard given to overseas trained professionals

“I think they are employed on the basis of what they can deliver on the job. We look after our employees – make sure they are working on the right projects. We are an equal opportunities employer. If you’re working for us, regardless of your qualifications, it’s what you can deliver...there’s no stopping overseas qualified candidates from working for us so long as they’ve got the experience. If someone is a civil engineer from Africa –or Iran, for example... and their degree is recognised in the UK and they can do the job and in the UK then we

should move them forward...I measure if they can do the job by interviewing on: suitability and motivation, professional motivation, teamwork and leadership, organisation and initiative, interpersonal skills and character and intellectual ability.

HR Officer, Engineering company

Weaknesses

Employers mentioned that their systems were not perfect – that there was room for subjectivity and informality and that they did not always have access to the information that they needed in order to make decisions about overseas qualifications, particularly from small countries, emerging economies or countries where the system is a state of change/war.

“it will be then a question of well who do we know in our Addis Ababa office for example. It’s just a quick e-mail to say look, someone’s applied with this qualification from this university, so there is a bit of subjectivity that goes into that. Have you heard of this university? And they’ll say well it’s the Ethiopian equivalent of Oxford or Cambridge or the Ethiopian equivalent of - I’m trying not to be rude about a particular university, but of a lesser university.”

HR Officer, Engineering company

Both employers faced with ‘unsuitable’ candidates, and candidates themselves, whose qualifications are not recognised as equivalent through employers’ systems (including referring to a professional body) find themselves without a clear ‘map’ of how to deal with the problem. We did not come across any clear ‘bridging’ programmes.

“ Polish graduates are very good and very hard to get...we should be taking them on...CITB as of yet cannot say whether their degree is from a recognised and highly regarded university or from ,as one them said, below the bakers!

HR Officer, Engineering company

“There are some accountancy qualifications like for instance certified financial analyst or something like that which won’t equate to UK ACA or ACCA so we would generally reject those people or deselect them is probably a better word.”

HR Officer, Finance company

Employers also mentioned the problem of how to benchmark relevant qualifications for particular posts – how to say exactly which jobs requires which qualifications/equivalent qualifications.

“ In fairness, you can’t measure them unless you’ve got a benchmark and it’s a lot of money you’ve got spend to get that information and it’s a lot of time taken”

HR Officer, Engineering company

“It can be very difficult to know whether the qualifications they are offering is equivalent to what we’re looking for. We’ve been developing the capabilities of our engineers as a result of some audit recommendations - – we need to make sure that there isn’t one rule for one person and one rule for someone else.”

HR Officer, Engineering company

Several employers also mentioned the issue of cost, for example regarding visas:

“.you’ve got to balance..we get a lot of overseas students applying..but where’s the priority?? Construction is very short within the UK..a question is your priority placing UK construction students..or take someone from abroad?? A thin line, a balancing act. ...we do try a balance that act for example we are currently applying for work permits for a lot of overseas students...you can’t discriminate..but the government holds you back so much that you can’t go out to Malaysia....the cost of the visa, the amount of advertising you have to do..to prove you’ve looked in the UK..I have to do this on a monthly basis. So we can say “we advertised but we didn’t get anyone”

HR Officer, Engineering company

Only one employer (an agency) used, or was familiar with NARIC. Apparently because they tended to refer queries to the relevant professional body and because the NARIC database does not have the level of detail about professional qualifications that our sample employers need.

6.5 Recommendations

- Professional bodies to lead on developing new fast track professional UK requalification routes for people with overseas qualifications (medicine, finance, engineering, education) to allow overseas qualified professionals to quickly and safely register and practice in the UK.
- To develop ways of assessing experiential knowledge better in an increasingly global workplace. Eg
 - Industry Core Skills assessments programmes lead by Professional Bodies/Sector Skill Councils for graduate candidates with overseas qualifications not seen as equivalent to UK qualifications. Possibly including assessed UK work experience/portfolio building
 - Sector-specific APEL programmes, run in partnership with the UK HE sector and employers/professional bodies.

- Continue the trend towards competency frameworks by private sector employers to enhance transparency of selection procedures and transferability of skills across the labour market.
- Professional bodies / NARIC develop more detailed data for employers about the content, level of both academic and professional studies at University level in other countries – particular focus on developing better information for professional studies that require registration in the UK.

7

Advisers

7.1 Background

7.2 Assessment Tools and how they are used

7.3 Common difficulties with assessment

7.4 Strengths of NARIC

7.9 Weaknesses of NARIC

7. Advisers

7.1 Background

There were 23 respondents from around the UK. All were advising adults and most were part of Next Steps partnerships. All saw clients with overseas qualifications. With the exception of 2 advisers working exclusively with refugees, they saw a mixture of migrants, refugees and overseas students. The breakdown of advisers consulted was as follows:

- Further education Institutions: 3
- Refugee agencies: 2
- Higher education institutions: 3
- Careers companies: 10
- Education, training and employment projects: 5

All were aware of the importance of recognising qualifications, skills and experience that their clients had gained outside the UK. The majority expressed an interest in knowing more about ways they could support their clients in doing this. When asked about advocacy on behalf of clients to assist with gaining recognition for prior experience, most advisers said that they only did this in a very limited way, if at all, due to time restrictions.

The majority of those interviewed had Next Step contracts for advice work. Some emphasised that the time they could spend with clients was very limited so they would usually have to signpost (either to websites or specialist organisations) and would usually not be able to follow it up themselves. Most underlined the need for a system that is easy to use and is comprehensive enough to give the clients 'an answer' at the first or second visit, although about 10 advisers reported that they had the facility to see clients 3 times or more, making proper support and follow up much easier.

In the words of two advisers, referring to being restricted to one 30-45 minute session per client:

'what we do is not guidance – it is not support – it is an absurdity'

Careers Company Adviser, West Midlands

'this is the GP model of advice – in-out'

Guidance Officer/Skills Coach, London

This was a comment we came across in many forms; advisers would like to do more to support their clients in gaining recognition for overseas qualifications and experience but they know that:

- a) it is time consuming and they will not be able to see it through
- b) it often requires up-to-date specialist knowledge so, given the time restrictions, it is better to signpost

Another important background issue that was raised was the variation in flexibility to see those with overseas qualifications and ESOL needs within the funding for 'pre-level 2' clients between different organisations. Some advisers said that they were not able to record overseas qualifications and experience as, if they did so, they would not be able to see these clients as they would be considered level 2 or above. In this case, they would simply check equivalence quickly or show the client the NARIC website with contact details and leave it to them to follow it up. Others reported that this was not a problem as the clients did not have UK qualifications and, in any case, have ESOL needs so could be considered 'pre-level 2'. Those who were able to see clients twice or more reported that they did the NARIC equivalence check on the second visit once they had made the client aware of the service and asked them to bring their certificates.

7.2 Assessment tools and sources of information

NARIC: All of the respondents were familiar with NARIC although a few had only looked at the website and had not used it. Some had used it in the past but did not currently because their site did not have a licence. Some were not aware that they had free access to NARIC through the arrangements with their Next Step partnership. Some advisers were still using the old NARIC book, especially for outreach work.

UCAS: Only a few were aware of the information about international qualifications that UCAS provides. Those who had the booklet found it useful and most said they would be interested in looking at it. We explained that it was geared to HE entry requirements and did not have the breadth or depth of NARIC, but nevertheless, advisers felt that it would be a useful and inexpensive resource and that UCAS should publicise it.

Professional bodies: Most advisers questioned had looked at information about recognition of overseas qualifications from professional bodies and may have even contacted the professional body on behalf of the client. The ones most often mentioned were the GMC (for doctors), the TDA (for teachers) and the Engineering Council. However, due to time restrictions, they usually just gave the clients the contact details and encouraged them to make contact themselves. The exception to this was the specialist organizations; they generally had more time and incentives to develop their expertise in this area.

Further and higher educational institutions: Not all advisers covered education advice but some of those who dealt with higher or further education reported that they would check recognition of overseas qualifications with the institution that the client was interested in and would also advocate for recognition of experience, if appropriate. Most advisers, however, did not do this; they used NARIC and assumed that the university or college assessment would be similar.

APEL (Assessment of Prior and Experiential Learning): Several advisers mentioned APEL as an assessment tool. They reported that they would recommend that their clients who have qualifications and experience look at universities that will consider APEL. A few mentioned APEL programmes such as the one at London Metropolitan University. A university adviser at another university reported that her institution uses APEL actively for admission with advanced standing to specific vocational courses.

However, the only assessment tool or even source of information about overseas qualifications that the majority of advisers were aware of was NARIC. Most did not know that some higher education institutions and regulatory or professional bodies have their own systems and that their assessment of a particular qualification may be different from NARIC's.

Following from this, there was also some uncertainty about how authoritative the NARIC statements of equivalence were. Some saw this just as a guide or a 'first step' and explained this to their clients, encouraging them to inform themselves, provide further evidence and advocate with education institutions or professional bodies. Others saw NARIC as 'the answer', seeing this as authoritative and final.

How they are used

The majority of the advisers used NARIC to check equivalence and gave the information to the client. If the qualification they were looking for was not there, a few said they would just give up (due to time) but most said they would phone NARIC to check with them. A minority did not use the NARIC service because they were not subscribers or they worked from another site or did outreach work. In this case, they would give the client information about NARIC, including the website details, and suggest that they contact them directly. Several said they would use the old NARIC book to give the client an idea of equivalence, explaining that it was out of date.

The majority of respondents relied mainly on NARIC and would then refer to specialist organisations if needed. Some would contact a college, university or professional or vocational body directly if the client was very focused on a particular route. Most felt that referral to specialist organisations (for migrants or refugees, for example) was the best way to deal with the complex issues that assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications involved. They were more likely to be in regular contact with the professional bodies and higher education institutions to obtain information about recognition of overseas

qualifications and experience and to advocate on behalf of clients. A few services used the UCAS 'International Qualifications' booklet as well as NARIC, finding it particularly useful for checking higher education entry requirements.

However, even specialist services commented that the time available for advice and guidance is becoming so limited that they often have to refer the client to the professional body or educational institution to follow it up themselves. If a client has access to the Internet, they would give website details; otherwise they would refer to libraries (if possible to specialist libraries). On the positive side, both specialist and mainstream services argued that this can be good for the client to do and can help to build confidence.

7.3 Common difficulties with assessment

Obstacles in supporting the client to obtain an accurate assessment of overseas qualifications and experience

The main obstacles cited by advisers in obtaining an accurate assessment of a client's overseas qualifications and experience were lack of:

- Time – it is a complex process and there is not the time to do it properly or for an adviser to follow up – the information cannot mean much to a client unless the adviser guides them through it and suggests next steps. This does not happen in the short one-off advice sessions available from most IAG services
- Reliable referral information for clients (such as details of specialist organisations and regulatory/professional bodies and information about and assistance with the APEL process)
- Access to NARIC – due to small organisations not being able to pay for the subscription, having only one licence but multiple sites or doing lots of outreach work without access to IT or with IT but no subscription on site
- Clarity about how advisers can use the NARIC equivalency information – some understand they should not print it off for the client, others do not; how to use it (or *if* to use it) on CVs or on application forms; how to present it (or *if* to present it) to employers
- Background information about NARIC – how the assessments are reached, what authority they have, what the client can do to provide further evidence, how to advocate for a more favourable assessment
- Confidence about navigating the site and then making sense of the information and the next steps for the client

- Knowledge about any other resources that could be used (other than NARIC) for background information and for a more focused response to the individual's qualifications and experience
- Understanding about how other assessments (by professional bodies or universities, for example) relate to NARIC

There were differing responses about how easy NARIC is to use. Some advisers felt that it was not user-friendly and could be a lot more straightforward. The majority felt it was fine, given that the information had to be complex to be accurate.

Other points made were that clients sometimes feel that, once they have looked at the NARIC database with the adviser and been told what the equivalent of their qualification is, they have been 'assessed' and that it is 'official'. Other clients will go to unnecessary expense to have their documents translated and then will also pay for the equivalence certificate from NARIC, even if they do not need it. This means that the adviser's role is crucial in explaining how to use NARIC, interpreting the information with the client and making it clear what evidence they need to back up their claim. There is not usually the time or the expertise to allow advisers to do this. In this respect, the minority who had been on NARIC training courses felt more confident in dealing with these issues.

A general point that was made by several respondents was that the whole system for gaining recognition of overseas qualifications is much too difficult, both for advisers and clients:

'...make it more practical....otherwise there is no point in people bringing qualifications with them to the UK. It is hard to get a straight answer. No one is really willing to take this on.'

Employment Development Worker, London

What does the client do with the assessment?

In many cases, once the client has an assessment of overseas qualifications, it is unclear what to do next, *'the answer (may be) yes and no or recognised but not recognised'*. If a qualification is partly recognised, how does the client make up the difference? How can the gaps be identified? If they can be and the client takes further courses, how can these be linked to previous qualifications to make up one that is recognised in the UK? Currently this kind of identification of gaps and suggestions about what is needed to make them up is only done in a limited way by some regulatory or professional or bodies or for vocational qualifications.

Currently it is often easier for clients with higher education or professional qualifications from overseas that are not fully recognised to either start again or sometimes (ironically) to go straight into a postgraduate degree that may not be appropriate or necessary.

Respondents generally felt that there should be more flexible and practical ways of testing knowledge and experience.

7.4 Strengths of NARIC

The strengths most frequently cited by advisers using NARIC were the comprehensive coverage, convenience, reliability, authority and, in most cases, the ease of use (provided they were subscribers and had access to IT). They liked having a system that would provide an answer to the client's query and that they could use easily and with confidence. Several also commented on the usefulness of the telephone advice from NARIC. Examples of comments from a range of advisers were:

'..the most important thing for me is the immediacy of having NARIC in front of me on the screen to be able to check all the countries listed at the touch of a mouse'

'...website less established (when I used it) but used to phone and pass on the information.

'(it is) a lifeline for us'

'(clients like it) they have never given adverse feedback in the last 20 years'

Another aspect of the site commented on by most of the advisers who used NARIC regularly was the information about qualifications in the UK, compared to those in the country of origin. They found that *'extremely useful, very helpful'*. They felt this gave the adviser a useful context and was also good for the client to understand how the two compared as it made them better able to advocate for themselves.

A comment that could be a strength or weakness is the status of NARIC and lack of clarity about this. Some advisers said that it benefits the client that the NARIC assessment is not the final answer because there is room for advocacy and looking at other evidence. On the other hand, this depends on the adviser knowing that NARIC is not 'official'. Several advisers made the point that employers generally do not know about NARIC, and even if they do, they are unclear about what authority it has.

7.5 Weaknesses of NARIC

Cost: The cost to the individual client and also to the advice service was the most frequently cited weakness, *'costs are prohibitive'*. Small organisations were not able to afford NARIC. Several advisers commented that they had to pay for everything with NARIC. Some would have been interested in NARIC training but again this was costly for their organisations.

Multi-site services also objected to having to pay for licences for each site instead of being able to use just one as one-site services, including some big colleges and universities can do. Some advisers reported that their organisation had paid for several licences previously, but it was too expensive and now they just had one (paid for by Next Step) so some sites did not have access to it. Others said there was currently discussion about whether or not they would pay for the additional licences in future. They are checking numbers of clients needing the service before deciding whether to renew the licence.

Some advisers felt that NARIC had too much of a monopoly in the area of assessing overseas qualifications and that this had given them an authority and power that it was difficult to contest, as well as a corresponding ability to set high costs for all services. There was interest from several advisers in using the vocational database from NARIC but they said could not afford the extra cost. In fact, through the Next Steps partnership, they have provided licences for this database but no one seemed to be aware of this.

Accessibility: This was particularly a problem when advisers were doing a lot of outreach where they did not have access to IT. One career company mentioned that they are going to be doing a lot more outreach in future so NARIC will be difficult to use.

Not being able to print off a copy of the assessment for the client: Several advisers objected to not being able to print off a copy of the assessment from the NARIC site (if they knew about this – if they did not and printed it off, they regarded this as a strength, *'clients like to have something to take away'*). They felt that they had already paid the subscription cost and so they should be able to do this. Many clients cannot afford to pay for a certificate or letter from NARIC. Advisers also comment that some regulatory bodies provide assessment for free and they don't understand why they cannot print off the page from NARIC.

'I begrudge the fact that I cannot print off the information – they did not tell us anything at the training.'

Adviser, Higher Education Institution, London branch

Advisers have come up with some creative ways of providing their own letters or certificates for clients, acknowledging the NARIC assessment. In some cases their letters provide more comprehensive information about the client's background, including the components he/she had studied as part of the qualification. This relies on the adviser seeing the original documents and doing the background work themselves. Usually there is not time for this.

The lack of clear information: For adviser, client, prospective employer and admissions officer about how the assessments are made, how it should be used and the level of authority it has. About half of the advisers felt that it was too general. It was considered *'vague and a bit confusing'*, *'a blunt tool'* *'(they) don't get to the point'*. Several advisers were not aware that they were not supposed to print off a copy of the assessment from the NARIC site and thought this should be clearer. One had only discovered this when he went to a training.

NARIC does not acknowledge the role of the adviser enough: Several advisers felt that ‘*NARIC..... will (not) accept the role of the adviser*’. They suggested that the NARIC database is difficult to use without support in understanding the information and putting it in context. Only experienced advisers can do this.

Low assessments in some cases: Clients are often disappointed by the assessment as they feel it does not correctly reflect or acknowledge their qualifications. One adviser felt that the qualifications in African countries were systematically undervalued.

Unable to find the qualification title: Several advisers reported that they had not been able to find the title on a client’s transcript or certificate. One adviser said that this was because the client had provided a translation that was probably not accurate and suggested that clients should always bring in the original. Others commented that the information was not there.

Varied experience of support from NARIC: Reports about what support they had from NARIC in these circumstances varied. One adviser reported that she had never had a situation where she had not been able to give the client an answer. Another said that NARIC had not got back to them about a new qualification query and when they looked several months later, the qualification was still not there. Another adviser sent some documents from an institution that could not be found on NARIC’s list and they had still not had a reply 2 months later. There was no acknowledgement of receipt of the documents either.

‘Can be a bit final’: this comment summed up what many advisers reported. They felt that the client would just be left with this answer – if the assessment was what they needed, that was fine, but if not, they needed a ‘*more personal tailored*’ service and support from advisers to identify gaps, upgrade skills, learn self-advocacy skills and gain UK work experience. This level of support is not usually available. Lacking this, the client can feel dejected and lose confidence

Accessibility of information: Most respondents found it easy to use but a minority did not, ‘*difficult to hone in (on the right information)*’ Several found it less accessible for professional and specifically vocational qualifications. In this case they telephoned NARIC. They reported that this has been coming up a lot recently with those with vocational qualifications from the new EU accession countries. Several advisers felt that the new database for international comparisons was not as clear as the previous one.

Conclusion

There is a tension between what advisers would like to do (to have a client-centred approach) and what they can do due to time allocation and funding restrictions. This has implications for how and even *if* they use NARIC and other information and systems developed to recognise overseas qualifications and experience. For some services, acknowledging overseas qualifications and supporting the client to get recognition may mean that the adviser is no longer

funded to see the client, so advisers may decide not to record or spend time on this.

Even if eligibility is not a problem, everything usually has to be done in the short time allocated to see the client as work done outside this time cannot be funded. This means that there is minimal time for contacting HEIs or professional bodies or for any advocacy work. Most advisers are looking for a quick and easy answer to the client's query about recognition of overseas qualifications and/or some clear referral guidelines. For those services that have licences for NARIC and for those advisers who are used to the NARIC database, this is a good solution that satisfies the client, especially if they are given a written confirmation to take away. However, this is not possible for all advice services as they may not have access to IT or NARIC. In this case, they would welcome a book with the basic information they need (such as the old NARIC book or the UCAS booklet which can be used for HE entry) and also some referral information that they could give to clients.

Generally advisers felt that NARIC services and products were expensive for both advice services and for the clients. Only those advisers working in higher education were aware of the UCAS information about overseas qualifications but most were interested in finding out more about this as they felt it could be useful for advising on HE and advanced FE entry.

Advisers generally felt that it would be good to give follow-up advice and put the NARIC or other assessments in context for the client, indicating what the client could do next (including looking at the APEL process) and how they could advocate for themselves. They felt that the role of the adviser was crucial at this stage, but many could not do justice to this (although they had done more in the past) due to time and funding restrictions.

7.6 Recommendations

1) If a Next Steps partnership has a NARIC licence, they need to ensure that organisations within the partnership know:

- How they can use it
- Where they can access it

2) NARIC needs to make the approach it takes and the status it has clearer to users. Advisers need a step by step approach to demonstrate how to use it most effectively for clients, making clear the limitations and the supplementary work that the adviser and client need to do. Relying on NARIC training to do this is not realistic as most organisations have neither the time nor funding to send staff.

3) If advisers are not permitted to print out assessments from the NARIC site, it should be clear what they can do to give the information to the client in written form.

4) It should be possible to use one NARIC licence for relatively small but dispersed organisations

8

Clients

8.1 Using NARIC

8.2 Common difficulties

8.3 Key points

8. Clients

The clients interviewed all held qualifications from overseas, in a variety of disciplines. All had made an attempt to ascertain how their qualifications were seen in the UK with respect to a comparison to UK qualifications. The overwhelming feeling was that it was crucial to establish this comparison in order to progress in finding employment in the UK.

8.1 Using NARIC

The majority of clients had heard of NARIC but not all had accessed the service in order to gain a comparison of their overseas qualifications with those in the UK. The clients interviewed were divided between those who had used NARIC and those who had gained an assessment of their overseas qualifications from a professional body.

For some of the clients, those with professional backgrounds in medicine for example, the NARIC system was not helpful for them in the process of registering in their profession in the UK.

Of the clients that had received an assessment of their qualifications from NARIC the majority had used the service independently, contacting them and providing the documentation required themselves, though most had been referred to the NARIC website by an advice-giving agency. In these cases the clients paid the charges made by NARIC for a 'statement of comparability', though many were unemployed at the time and in receipt of benefits.

One client had accessed NARIC for free, through the Refugee Council. This individual was very happy with the response that he had from NARIC and found the process simple and straightforward.

They (Refugee Council) looked on the internet and found the equivalent to a UK MA Mechanical Engineering. They printed the certificate for me and told me to show any organisation.

Refugee Client

Professional bodies

The clients who had contacted their professional body about an assessment of their overseas qualifications had different experiences. For some it was a straightforward process and for others a much more drawn-out and complicated procedure.

I sent my degree to them (the professional body) and they accepted it. I got the... Qualified Teacher Status.

Migrant client

I asked the General Social Care Council about my qualifications. I had to describe all my duties for my previous employment in detail. It was exhausting. I had seven pages!..... I am now recognised as a Social Worker but my specialism is not recognised here.

Migrant client

8.2 Common difficulties

Documentation required

One barrier to clients using NARIC is the requirements to send copies of documents to the organisation. This seemed to deter some from using the service. This deterrent included the requirement to send an official translation of certificates, which some clients were unaware of how to obtain.

Someone recommended NARIC to me. I tried to use the service but you need to send the papers and I didn't finish it.

Migrant client

For people with professional qualifications, such as Engineering and Medicine, their qualifications need to be recognised by UK Professional bodies in order for employers to accept them in the current highly regulated environment. In this situation, NARIC does not prove useful because it makes no link with any professional body requirements.

For example, a refugee medical doctor whose Degree is seen as equivalent to a UK degree - as any Degree would be seen by NARIC from that country cannot, in fact practice as a Doctor in the UK. They need to requalify. This is not indicated by NARIC. One client did not even look at NARIC because she knew that it would not give her the information she needed:

"NARIC, I did not contact NARIC because medical specialists have to go to the professional body"

Refugee Medical Doctor"

However, the information she was given by the professional body was unclear and ambiguous.

"They looked at my medical qualifications; it was advanced because I graduated from medical school. He told me this is recognised as medical doctor in UK but with a specialism, I have to be involved with specialist college and they will do all the evaluation.

Refugee Medical Doctor”

In fact her qualification did not mean that she could practice and when she and her adviser approached the professional body, the information was again unclear:

“they want portfolio..with signatures of supervisors of my recent two years experience. It’s not possible, absolutely.”

Refugee Medical Doctor”

For people with non-HE professional qualifications, by Microsoft, for example, neither NARIC nor the professional body are useful: they will not give opinions of equivalences of Microsoft qualifications. One client had approached both of the above and the Open University for an equivalence in order to study for a Degree in IT –all of whom had declined to give him an equivalence for his previous studies. He had the additional problem of not having his transcripts.

Financial costs

Another barrier to clients using NARIC was the issue of cost of the service, including any translation costs. Although one client had gained a NARIC assessment of his overseas qualification through an advice agency for no charge, others were unaware that the service could be accessed free of charge from particular organisations. It was highlighted that this could be a particular problem for refugees with overseas qualifications, who are often unemployed and in receipt of benefits. NARIC offer free advice on the comparability of overseas qualifications over the telephone but none of the clients interviewed were aware of this.

The financial side of it is very difficult for most refugees because they may be unemployed.

Refugee Client

Feeling qualification undervalued

Several of the clients interviewed that had used the NARIC service to ascertain the level of their qualifications in the UK were disappointed with the response they received. The general feeling was that NARIC had undervalued their overseas qualification. This left the clients feeling depressed and had a negative impact on their self-esteem and confidence.

They sent me a certificate to say that my degree was below British standard. That it was between A-level and ordinary degree.

Refugee Client

I didn't approach NARIC because by looking at the conversion table, the conversion equivalency would have assessed and made my degree equivalent to HND or... second year undergraduate.

Refugee Client

NARIC assessment methods

The clients that felt that their overseas qualification had been undervalued by NARIC could not understand how NARIC made the assessment and questioned the process used. It was felt that the system was unfair.

They are comparing country to country and not looking at individuals. The facilities are different in the UK, but my talent and effort are the same.

Refugee Client

Everyone is concerned about the equivalences made by NARIC because after 4-5 years of study for your undergraduate degree, taking all the examinations, conducting project work, and doing a dissertation, the equivalency makes you go back to undergraduate study. This is unfair.

Refugee Client

Different responses from elsewhere

The dissatisfaction of some clients with the NARIC assessment of their overseas qualifications was compounded by the differing responses by other organisations to the same qualification. It was felt that universities were much more willing to accept a degree from overseas as sufficient to start a UK Masters programme. The process of applying to a university with overseas qualifications appeared to be a much more satisfying experience for clients.

When I applied to university they asked for transcripts of my first degree. I sent them on and there were no questions asked. I had a very different reaction from NARIC. One (organisation) accepted and the other (NARIC), which is supposed to have the knowledge, refused.

Refugee Client

One client had even gone so far as to apply to universities that specified that they accepted overseas qualifications and did not mention NARIC, due to a fear that his qualification would have been downgraded.

So I decided not to go to NARIC, then I approached a few universities and was offered a place for my Masters degree, so I am happy with the way that the universities assessed.

Refugee Client

Advocating with NARIC

Only one client interviewed had attempted to advocate for himself with NARIC about the assessment of his qualification and had not received a positive response. Other clients that were unhappy with the comparability of their qualification had not tried to discuss this with NARIC, but had not thought that this was an option.

I phoned them (NARIC)..... but I got no response. No feedback. They didn't want to discuss it with me. I felt extremely angry about it.

Refugee Client

Suggestions from clients for improving on NARIC assessments

The clients that were unhappy with the assessment of their overseas qualification offered by NARIC, gave some suggestions for ways to improve the system. One client suggested that NARIC visit universities overseas and see how the education systems are managed to gain a greater understanding of the qualifications offered by such institutions. It was also felt that NARIC should take into account the circumstance of the education system that the individual came from in order to fully understand their qualifications.

It was also suggested that the performance of students from each country could be monitored in UK universities. The achievements of these students could then be compared with the equivalency of their qualification to assess whether the equivalency was appropriate, or needed adjustment.

In Ethiopia very few people pass the final school exams, It is very difficult to graduate from university. It is very hard work and many fail the exams. The stress is very high..... There was only one university at the time (of my graduation) and so very competitive to get into. NARIC should take this into account.

Refugee Client

8.3 Key points

- The NARIC service is not relevant to all individuals with overseas applications, dependent on their professional background
- The cost of NARIC services is a deterrent to its use by individuals, particularly by those who are unemployed
- Clients are often very dissatisfied with the NARIC assessment of their overseas qualifications and a lack of awareness of how the assessment is made compounds this further
- The flexibility of higher education institutions with respect to overseas qualifications is welcomed by individuals

- Clients are unaware of the possibility of discussing the comparability they are given with NARIC
- Individuals felt that NARIC could do more to research overseas education systems and monitor the progress of students studying in the UK in order to improve on the assessments made

9

Summary of recommendations

9.1 Higher Education Institutions and Further Education Colleges

9.2 Professional bodies and employers

9.3 Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) Providers

9.4 Overseas students and employees

9.5 APEL

9. Summary of recommendations

9.1 Higher Education Institutions and Further Education Colleges

- HEIs should reflect on whether a policy regarding the assessment of overseas qualifications is required. Most respondents were ‘getting on with the job’ and had no real a notion of what a policy in this area would entail or indeed if one would be helpful. The many difficulties that arise assessing qualifications could be helped by a policy describing the process of assessment and giving applicants precise guidelines about the documentation they should provide and how they can and cannot assist the HEI assess their entry qualifications.
- The organisational context around the assessment of international qualifications is moving generally towards greater centralisation, but HEIs are at different stages of development in this process and there is enormous institutional variation. Examples or models of organisational good practice in the sector could give a lead to some institutions.
- From the sample there appears to be some variation across the sector in the provision of training on assessment of overseas qualifications. HEIs should assess whether there is sufficient training for staff and if there should be a training cycle and /or delivery of training on an ad hoc ‘needs must’ basis. It could be explored whether there is a mechanism for sharing training techniques, practices and materials across the sector.
- Admissions Tutors have suggested an easy to use on-line system of assessment with more detailed information about the type of qualifications from various countries.
- Applicants, in an effort to assist the qualifications assessment process, are often providing their own unhelpful assessments. HEIs should review whether they are giving applicants sufficient and clear enough guidance on how to present their qualifications.
- With greater budgetary constraints and when infrequently used Further education colleges find the NARIC service expensive.
- Respondents have suggested that NARIC’s Country Sections could contain a language key word glossary to assist in the interpretation of documents
- Respondents have suggested the inclusion on the NARIC website of examples in PDF form of certificates to aid verification.

- Information on the NARIC International Qualifications should be clearly dated when posted.
- NARIC could inform its subscribers of the constraints it is under as regards not being in a position to rank institutions and refer subscribers to other sources for this information.
- NARIC should provide more detailed information about marks and grade boundaries of International qualifications or refer subscribers to other sources such as the providers' websites.
- NARIC should provide more detailed information about course content or refer subscribers to other sources such as the providers' websites.
- NARIC should review its customer response times to ensure enquires are dealt with within a minimum time period.
- The variations in the quality and scope of IH-Gs needs to be addressed. Some seem limited others very developed. Due to them being developed in institutional isolation, it would seem expertise has not been shared as it could across the sector. It would have to be assessed to what extent the competing interests of HEIs in the sector would allow the sharing of knowledge of overseas markets and expertise in setting up and refining I-HGs. Greater cooperation across the sector would clearly minimise cost, duplication and the waste of resources.
- It should be reviewed why the gap is so great between what is acceptable to HEIs as entry to undergraduate and post-graduate programmes and NARIC's assessment of those international qualifications. It should be examined as to whether dialogue between BUILA and NARIC create greater convergence of their assessments.
- NARIC to review whether it should explain more fully to subscribers the constraints, which produce its often cautious assessments so the impression is not created that, these are authoritative and inflexible.
- The content of NARIC's International Qualification database would be improved by the inclusion of more information about vocational and professional courses.

9.2 Professional bodies and employers

- NARIC may show a UK equivalent that disqualifies the client from receiving the Next Step IAG service (focused on pre-level 2) so this can become a disincentive to using it or doing other work to establish UK equivalence. Policy makers and funders need to be aware of the pressure that this puts advisers under and the apparent contradiction between providing free access to a useful resource within a context that discourages advisers from using it.

- Giving a UK equivalent to an overseas qualification through NARIC is not adequate for a client with overseas qualification. They need guidance to interpret this, to use other methods of recognising qualifications and experience, to identify transferable skills and gaps and plan their next steps. Ideally they need to work with an adviser on a full action plan incorporating the NARIC information. Funding should reflect the need for this and NARIC should provide further information on next steps for their customers, recognising the role of the adviser.
- Professional bodies to lead on developing new fast track professional UK requalification routes for people with overseas qualifications (medicine, finance, engineering, education) to allow overseas qualified professionals to quickly and safely register and practice in the UK.
- To develop ways of assessing experiential knowledge better in an increasingly global workplace. For example:
- Industry Core Skills assessments programmes lead by Professional Bodies/Sector Skill Councils for graduate candidates with overseas qualifications not seen as equivalent to UK qualifications. Possibly including assessed UK work experience/portfolio building
- Sector-specific APEL programmes, run in partnership with the UK HE sector and employers/professional bodies.
- Continue the trend towards competency frameworks by private sector employers to enhance transparency of selection procedures and transferability of skills across the labour market.
- Professional bodies/NARIC should develop more detailed data for employers about the content, level of both academic and professional studies at University level in other countries – particular focus on developing better information for professional studies that require registration in the UK.

9.3 Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) Providers

- If a Next Steps partnership has a NARIC licence, they need to ensure that organisations within the partnership know how they can use it and where they can access it.
- NARIC needs to make the approach it takes and the status it has clearer to users. Advisers need a step by step approach to demonstrate how to use it most effectively for clients, making clear the limitations and the supplementary work that the adviser and client need to do. Relying on NARIC training to do this is not realistic, as most organisations have neither the time nor funding to send staff.

- If advisers are not permitted to print out assessments from the NARIC site, it should be clear what they can do to give the information to the client in written form.
- It should be possible to use one NARIC licence for relatively small but dispersed organisations
- There should be a simplified hard copy guide to recognition of overseas qualifications, updated annually – this is essential for outreach work and for small organisations
- Advisers should have objective information about the recognition of overseas qualifications and experience (NARIC, professional bodies, HEIs, APEL process) and how to use this information with easy links to electronic and hard copy information
- A system using APEL and assessing core competencies should complement the formal assessment of qualifications. There is a need to do more work on APEL portfolio-building. This is especially important for those without certificates but also useful in recognising experience and building confidence and self-advocacy skills for the individual. In conjunction with this, there needs to be lobbying to make educational institutions, professional and vocational bodies and employers more aware of how to use APEL. Assessing core competencies is also important and the work already done in vocational assessments should be mirrored in academic and professional areas. This would be a time-consuming but fairer and more accurate system.

9.4 Overseas students and employees

- The NARIC service is not relevant to all individuals with overseas applications, dependent on their professional background
- The cost of NARIC services is a deterrent to its use by individuals, particularly by those who are unemployed
- Clients are often very dissatisfied with the NARIC assessment of their overseas qualifications and a lack of awareness of how the assessment is made compounds this further
- The flexibility of higher education institutions with respect to overseas qualifications is welcomed by individuals
- Clients are unaware of the possibility of discussing the comparability they are given with NARIC

- Individuals felt that NARIC could do more to research overseas education systems and monitor the progress of students studying in the UK in order to improve on the assessments made

9.5 APEL

- The use of APL could be expanded to provide a more comprehensive service for overseas students.
- The use of APEL is currently not widely understood or accepted but could provide a more flexible alternative to applicants with overseas qualifications to gain entry onto programmes, advanced standing or exemption.

Appendix:

Questionnaires (1 – 7)

Questionnaire 1 – HEIs and FECs

- UFI Research Questionnaire

Date of interview	Place of interview
Name of interviewer	
Nos of tapes	

Respondent Details

1. Name	
2. Name of your organisation	
3. Address of your organisation	
4. Telephone number	
5. Email	
6. Fax	
7. Website address	
8. What is your job title?	
9. What is your role in the college / university organisation?	

HE/FE Questions (for Admissions Officers & Tutors)

1. How many overseas applications did this university / college receive in the current academic year?
undergraduate
post-graduate

Stress this info is confidential as there may be sensitivities re: commercial competition.

6. What are the key posts responsible for these assessment and recognition procedures in this university / college?

7. Do different departments have the same practices regarding assessing overseas qualifications or different ones?

8. Does this university / college use different methods for assessing academic and vocational qualifications?
9. Are staff given training on how to assess overseas qualifications?
- a) If YES, What does it comprise of?
 - b) Which staff is the training directed at?
 - c) How often does it occur?
10. Are there factors that affect the standardisation of assessments in your organisation?
- (eg internal factors – e.g training, common guidelines, different levels of EO & diversity awareness amongst staff, staff turnover, direct and indirect discrimination)*

11. To what extent is this area of work part of performance management?

12. Is it monitored and reviewed across the organisation? And how ?

13. Are there occasions when admissions officers pass on the assessment of overseas qualifications to admissions tutors?

(perhaps for an academic reason- try to get an example)

b) If so why / when does this happen?

14. How do you assess overseas qualifications? Could you please talk me through the steps you take.

(Elicit the different factors taken into consideration when assessing overseas qualifications).

15. How significant is the assessment of overseas qualifications in making decisions to offer a place?

16. Do you take into consideration other factors when making decisions to offer a place?

20. [If NARIC is cited, please ask]:

Do you think the assessment given by NARIC satisfactory?

a) If 'NO' please give you reasons.

(Try to extract as much concrete detail as possible)

21. If the NARIC is NOT cited please ask]:

Are you familiar with NARIC?

22. Do you use your own guidelines and/or sources of information
for assessing overseas qualifications?

b) If yes, how do you use it?

23. If you DO use your own guidelines / sources of information for assessing overseas qualifications, how is it compiled and on what is it based?

24. What *additional* information is contained in your own guidelines and/or source of information?

25. ***[If NARIC is NOT USED or USED in combination with a home-grown assessment tool]***

What practical advantages are there to using your own guidelines and sources of information to other, externally provided ones?

26. Do your guidelines provide help with authenticating the veracity of documents?

27. If you had the choice, what else would you *ideally* include in these external systems to make the assessment more useful to you?

[if they cannot come up with immediate response, use prompts e.g. a detailed breakdown of qualifications with subjects or modules covered]

28. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of your approach?

29. What form do your guidelines take? e.g. paper based or website? ASK
if you can have a specimen (*stress confidentiality*)

30. Do you use a professional body's guidelines for the assessment of
overseas qualifications? [i.e medical, engineering, accounting etc if
appropriate]

31. Do you know how many students you have who are refugees/ asylum
seekers?

Further Questions for Universities

32. Do you belong to BUILA (the British University International Liaison
Association?)

33. How does membership assist the assessment/ recognition process

If BUILA provides extra detailed info, what sort?

34. Do you ever make recommendations through BUILA to assist the assessment/ recognition process? *(Please specify)*

35. Are there any other points you would like to add before we finish?

Questionnaire 2: Employers

UFI Research Questionnaire

Respondent Details

1. Name of interviewee	
2. Name of employer / organisation	
3. Address	
4. Telephone number	
5. Email	

1. How many applications do you usually get per year from candidates with overseas qualifications?
2. What kinds of posts do these candidates apply for?
3. Are there designated posts in your organisation for assessing candidates' overseas qualifications?
 - b) If YES, can you explain how their roles relate to the assessment of overseas qualifications?
4. Do you use the same or different approaches for assessing academic and professional / vocational qualifications? Please explain.
5. Do you have particular set of procedures for assessing the suitability of the candidates' qualifications for the post you want to fill?

- b. Can you outline this procedure?

- 6. Do you encounter any problems in assessing or recognising candidates' overseas qualifications?
 - b. Can you describe these?

- 7. Do you also assess prior experience and if so how?

- 8. Are staff given training on how to assess overseas qualifications?
 - b. If YES, What does it comprise of?
 - c. Staff in what posts attend?
 - d. How is the training delivered ?

- 9. Do different departments in your organisation have the same practices regarding assessing overseas qualifications or different ones?

- 10. Do you seek the guidance or support of a professional body/bodies for assessing candidates with overseas qualifications?
 - b. What is/are the body/bodies?
 - c. What support is provided?

11. Do you collaborate with other employers or organisations on issues relating to the assessment and equivalence of overseas qualifications?

Please specify

12. How important is the assessment of overseas qualifications in making decisions about offering employment?

13. In considering a candidate, how do you balance their qualifications and prior experience?

b. What other factors do you take into consideration?

13. Do you think staff educated and trained overseas, are employed at a level commensurate with their qualifications? Please explain

14. Do you use any external agencies/services for assessing overseas qualifications?

b) Please name them.

[If NARIC is cited, please ask]:

15. Did you find the Service offered by NARIC was useful for assessing the equivalence of candidates' qualifications?

Could you outline its

a) strengths

b) weaknesses

c) How could it be improved?

[If the NARIC is NOT cited please ask]:

16. Are you familiar with NARIC, is there any reason you do not use it in your field?

17. Do you use your own guidelines and/or sources of information for assessing overseas qualifications?

b) If yes, how do you use it?

18. If you DO use your own guidelines / source of information for assessing overseas qualifications, how is it compiled and on what is it based?

19. What particular information is contained in your own guidelines and/or source of information?

20. Do you have any suggestions for other employers?

21. Do you know if any of your job applicants / candidates were refugees or asylum seekers?

22. Are there any other points that you want to make before we conclude the interview?

Questionnaire 3: Professional Bodies

UFI Research Questionnaire

Respondent Details

1. Name of interviewee	
2. Name of employer / organisation	
3. Address	
4. Telephone number	
5. Email	

23. How many applications for registration do you usually get per year from candidates with overseas qualifications?

24. What kind of registration do these candidates apply for?

25. Which offices or departments are involved in the assessment of overseas qualifications and experience?

26. Is the activity centralised?

27. What are the key posts responsible for this assessment in this professional body?

28. Does this professional body use the same or different approaches for assessing different qualifications? Please explain.

29. Do you encounter any problems in assessing or recognising candidates' overseas qualifications?

b. Can you describe these?

30. Do you also assess prior experience and if so how?

31. Are staff given training on how to assess overseas qualifications?

b. If YES, What does it comprise of?

c. Staff in what posts attend?

d. How is the training delivered?

32. Are there any factors that affect the assessment in your organisation?

(e.g. Internal factors – training, staff turnover, different levels of awareness amongst staff of different applicant groups; external factors like government policies)

33. To what extent is this area of work part of the performance management?

34. Is it monitored and reviewed across the organisation? And how?

35. Do employers seek your guidance for assessing overseas qualification?

b. What guidance is provided?

c. How do they obtain this guidance?

How do you assess overseas qualifications? Could you please talk me through the steps you take

(Elicit the different factors taken into consideration when assessing overseas qualifications)

36. Do you collaborate with employers or other organisations on issues relating to the assessment and equivalence of overseas qualifications?

Please specify

37. How important is the assessment of overseas qualifications for registration?

38. Do you use any external agencies/services for assessing overseas qualifications?

b) Please name them.

[If NARIC is cited, please ask]:

39. Did you find the Service offered by NARIC was useful for assessing the equivalence of candidates' qualifications?

Could you outline its

a) strengths

b) weaknesses

c) How could it be improved?

[If the NARIC is NOT cited please ask]:

13. Are you familiar with NARIC, is there any reason you do not use it in your field?

40. Do you use any other sources of information for assessing overseas qualifications?

b) If yes, which one

c) how do you use it?

41. If you DO use another framework or your own guidelines for assessing overseas qualifications, how is it compiled and on what is it based?

42. What particular information is contained in your own guidelines and/or source of information?

43. Do you know if any applicants are refugees or asylum seekers?

44. Are there any other points that you want to make before we conclude the interview?

Questionnaire 4: Clients (Overseas students and employees)

UFI Research Questionnaire

Respondent Details

10. Name	
11. Address	
12. DOB	
13. Telephone number	
14. Email	

1. What qualifications did you gain in your home country, above school leaving qualifications?
2. Were any qualifications left unfinished when you left your country?
3. How much had you completed?
4. Do you have certificate/s and transcripts in the UK?
5. Are they in English or have they been translated?
6. How do you explain their equivalence to:
 - a. Education institutions
 - b. employers
 - c. other agencies (please name)

7. Have you received any information and advice about how to use your overseas qualifications in the UK from official agencies or websites? Where from?
8. What was that advice?
9. Do you know about NARIC?
10. Have you used the NARIC service?
11. Did you pay for that service?
12. Do you think you received value for money?
please explain
13. What was NARIC's view of the equivalence of your qualifications?
14. What is your view of that opinion?
15. Do you understand the criteria that NARIC uses when providing equivalences?
16. What criteria do you think are most suitable to use?
17. Do think there are the problems with obtaining an assessment of overseas qualifications?
18. Do you have any suggestions for NARIC?
19. Have you approached any professional bodies about how to establish the equivalence of your qualifications in the UK?
20. If so, what was the response?
21. Do you have any suggestions for the professional bodies?

22. Have you approached any Employers about how to establish the equivalence of your qualifications in the UK?
23. Do you have any suggestions for employers?
24. Have you approached any educational institutions about how to establish the equivalence of your qualifications in the UK?
25. Do you have any suggestions for educational institutions?
26. Is there anything you would like to add?

Questionnaire 5: Advisers

Respondent Details

UFI Research Questionnaire

Date of interview	Place of interview
Name of interviewer	
Nos of tapes	

Respondent Details

15. Name	
16. Name of your organisation	
17. Address of your organisation	
18. Telephone number	
19. Email	
20. Fax	
21. Website address	
22. What is your job title?	
23. What is your role in the organisation?	

1) How many clients do you see p.a. who have overseas qualifications?

- a) Approximately what percentage are vocational?
- b) Approximately what percentage are academic?
- c) Approximately what percentage are uncompleted?
- d) Approximately what percentage do not have the documents to prove the qualifications?
- e) Approximately what percentage are refugees or asylum seekers/migrants/overseas students?

2) How do you assist your clients in finding out how their overseas qualifications will be assessed in the UK?

3) If you use any external agencies/services for assessing or providing information about overseas qualifications:

a) Please name them.

b) How do you use them?

4) Are you familiar with NARIC? If so, how do you find it as a system for assessing overseas qualifications?

5) Are you familiar with the UCAS information about overseas qualifications? If so, how do you find it?

6) Do you use your any other guidelines and/or sources of information

for assessing and providing information on overseas qualifications for your clients?

a) If so, what is it and how do you use it?

7) Do you use a professional body's guidelines for the assessment of overseas qualifications? [i.e medical, engineering, accounting etc if appropriate]

8) Have you attended any training in using tools to assess overseas qualifications?

If so, please give details

a) Was this useful?

9) How accessible have you found the various systems of assessing or providing information about the overseas qualifications for your clients?

(in terms of cost, visibility, usability etc)

10) What difficulties (if any) have you encountered when assisting your clients in gaining recognition for their overseas qualifications? Do you have any recommendations?

11) Do you record details of clients' professional experience?

12) Do you have any ways of supporting clients to gain recognition for this overseas experience (particularly for those without documents)?

If so, please give details

13) What is your experience (if any) in advocating for clients to try to get recognition for overseas qualifications and/or experience?

Have you advocated to have an assessment re-assessed?

If so, what was the result?

14) Have you had any feedback/discussions with employers/professional bodies/educational institutions/funders on the assessment/evaluation of overseas qualifications or experience?

15) If you had the choice, what else would you ideally include in a method of assessing/evaluating overseas qualifications to make it more useful to you as an adviser and to the client?

16) Are there any other points you would like to add before we finish?

Questionnaire 6: NARIC

UFI Research Questionnaire

Date of interview	Place of interview
Name of interviewer	
Nos of tapes	

Respondent Details

24. Name	
25. Name of your organisation	
26. Address of your organisation	
27. Telephone number	
28. Email	
29. Fax	
30. Website address	
31. What is your job title?	
32. What is your role in NARIC?	

NARIC Questions

1) How many individuals with overseas qualifications use your services

p.a.?

2) How many organisations currently subscribe to your services?

a) What kinds of organisations are they? (a) types – educational, employers, professional bodies industrial b) sectors

3) How is the information for NARIC assessments gathered?

a) Who does it? What are the roles?

b) How often is it updated?

c) What are the practical difficulties gathering and updating it?

4) What would you say are the strengths and weaknesses of the NARIC system?

5) How do you think it compares to other systems? (UCAS/systems devised by professional bodies/HEIs/employers/transnational systems/other systems outside the UK)

6) How accessible do you think NARIC is for users?
(cost, visibility, ease of access, format)

a) What is the take up on NARIC training courses?

b) What is the feedback?

7) How do you work out your costing structure for individuals/different types of organisations etc? Do you give concessionary rates to any users?

8) How do you get customers to evaluate your product?

a) How often?

b) What is feedback?

c) How do you respond to it?

9) We know that NARIC is described as a 'guide', a 'bench mark' a 'tool' or a 'first step'.
What would the 'next step' be?

a) What other aids/resources could be used to assess overseas qualifications?

b) How could you assist with this?

10) Does an individual have the right of appeal to have their qualification re-assessed if they feel that the NARIC assessment is not accurate?

11) We are interested in looking at ways of recognising experience as well as qualifications. Have you tried to assess experience? If so, how?

12) What do you think are the challenges for NARIC in the future with increasing globalisation?

a) How could you address any weaknesses you have identified in the NARIC system?

b) What would you need to do this?

Thank you

Questionnaire 7: UCAS

UFI Research Questionnaire

Date of interview	Place of interview
Name of interviewer	
Nos of tapes	

Respondent Details

33. Name	
34. Name of your organisation	
35. Address of your organisation	
36. Telephone number	
37. Email	
38. Fax	
39. Website address	
40. What is your job title?	
41. What is your role in UCAS?	

UCAS Questions

1) Do you know how many individuals with overseas qualifications use your international qualifications information p.a.?

2) Do you have any way of measuring how many HEIs and other organisations currently use your international qualifications information?

a) Do you have any information about what kinds of organisations they are? (a) types – educational, careers services, employers, professional bodies industrial

b) sectors

3) How is the information for UCAS assessments gathered?

a) Who does it? What are the roles?

b) How often is it updated?

c) What are the practical difficulties gathering and updating it?

4) What would you say are the strengths and weaknesses of the UCAS guidelines?

5) How do you think it compares to other systems/guidelines?

(NARIC/systems devised by professional bodies/HEIs/employers/transnational systems/other systems outside the UK)

6) How accessible do you think UCAS is for users?
(cost, visibility, ease of access, format)

7) How do you get customers to evaluate your product?

a) How often?

b) What is feedback?

c) How do you respond to it?

8) We know that this is a guide intended primarily for HEIs and is only the first step. Do you have any suggestions about what the next step(s) would be?

a) What other aids/resources could be used to assess overseas qualifications?

b) Could you assist with this?

9) We are interested in looking at ways of recognising experience as well as qualifications. Have you worked on ways of assessing experience? If so, please give details.

10) Are you anticipating doing any further work in developing systems to assist the process of assessing and recognising overseas qualifications (and experience) in view of increasing globalisation? If so, please give details.

Interview Schedule for BUILA

BUILA is a member-based org. for HE staff who are involved in International student recruitment

About the Market:

- 1) The UK had a large market share second with Germany after the US but dropped from 16%-12% between 1998-2002. What is the situation now? Is it increasing or going down?
- 2) Is this why the Govt' back BUILA?

About BUILA's aims

Am I right in thinking these are BUILAs priorities?

- a) Increasing knowledge of OSQs for members
- b) lobbying British Council NARIC, UCAS
- c) internal communication via your mailbase

3) Can you tell me more about these areas of work?

About a) Increasing knowledge of OSQs for members

- 4) Why do HEIs need their own systems and not just use ones like NARIC?
- 5) All Unis subscribe to NARIC why do they still need it if they have their own systems?

About b) lobbying (British Council NARIC, UCAS etc)

6) Why does BUILA lobby when HEIs have their own assessment tools

Membership and involvement

7) BUILA has 125 members. What % of Unis is this?

8) I have found most HEIs know of BUILA but some want to belong to BUILA to enhance and share their knowledge and others that don't, and prefer to gather their own info.

Which is the biggest group? The networkers or go-it-aloners?

9) Given that this is a huge and growing market is there an inevitable tension between cooperation and competition?