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AACRAO

INTERNATIONAL

Fall Symposium

# Article 26 Backpack

SEPTEMBER 19, 2017—WASHINGTON, D.C.

*Fall Symposium Executive Summary*

## Introduction

In September of 2017, AACRAO convened representatives of key global organizations who specialize in the evaluation of educational records of displaced and vulnerable persons for employment, immigration and further education. These professionals were brought together to discuss best practices in working with educational records and supporting access to higher education of vulnerable persons, as well as to introduce the U.C. Davis Article 26 Backpack (A26BP). During the one-day symposium, panelists introduced their organization's initiatives in supporting refugee access to higher education, approaches to the reconstruction of educational histories, and engaged in discussion of the viability of the concept of the A26BP.

## Summary

The U.C. Davis team, for which Dr. Watenpaugh is the principal investigator, gave an overview of the Syrian conflict and the human impact it is having in the region and how the A26BP can be a possible tool in aiding access to further education. Dr. Hana El-Ghali, with the Issam Fares Institute of the American University of Beirut, provided context from a Lebanese perspective, specifically discussing how the crisis has impacted higher education in the country.

The Article 26 Backpack was then introduced through an overview of the basic technology that will allow the student to create a digital portfolio that has the ability to safe and securely upload, store and share documentation. An additional feature of the A26BP is the ability for the student to decide to have their educational documentation assessed by a team of global professionals. The A26BP is not only a tool for potential higher education institutions and employers to use, but it enables the student to create a digital identity that showcases their unique personality, experiences, skills and passions.

After the stage had been set and the problem outlined, each panelist provided an overview of the initiatives their organization has been involved in with the support of refugees, specifically in relation to the assessment of educational documentation. Although there were differences found between panelists' specific processes when assessing educational documentation and in the reconstruction process, there were many common elements found between them:

- They are based on the recognition that there is a growing refugee crisis.
- Many refugees want and need a credible evaluation of their credentials for academic or professional purposes.
- Many refugees lack verified documents, requiring creative, resourceful, alternative credential evaluation methods.
- Organizations are often starting small and undertaking pilots of new credential evaluation methods for individuals without verified documentation. This may involve working with individuals to recreate their transcript and/or conduct in-depth personal interviews.
- Partnerships with higher education institutions as well as government entities are important in identifying appropriate candidates.
- The pilots are working. Alternative credential evaluation methods are providing great value for refugees as well as for institutions and employers.

The symposium concluded with an overview from Hala Abu Araj, Interim Registrar with the American University Beirut on issues with admissions of Syrian refugees, as well as vulnerable

young Lebanese students. Ms. Araj examined how the A26BP could be utilized to mitigate many of these issues, highlighting the centralization of documents, a 'One Stop shop' for admissions officers and a paperless environment.

## **Conclusion**

It is foreseeable that beyond the current crisis, individuals and communities will continue to have their lives and education interrupted by natural disaster, political turmoil and conflict. The needs of these vulnerable persons have been clearly articulated and identified and the global credential evaluation community has responded in force. From a general desire to help has emerged a sense of duty and commitment to ensure that displaced and vulnerable persons be supported in their desires to re-enter education systems, to the benefit of both the individual and to society at large.

Despite the fact that there are no industry set standards for foreign credential evaluation or the assessment of education from which there is incomplete or no documentation, the global credential evaluation community does follow similar sets of process and philosophical approaches in the examination and validation of documentation. Leading practices have emerged and will continue to be refined and built upon as needs and technology and education systems evolve.

The Article 26 Backpack project, while still in development phases, aims to create a platform and a network that will knit together the myriad of leading and emerging practices to help mitigate barriers that refugee and vulnerable young people face as they seek access to higher education. In order to meet the project goals, and more importantly, the needs of individuals and communities, it will continue to be crucial to continue to engage the with knowledgeable and committed entities to ensure that the professional community that desires to serve and support these vulnerable persons can build upon the collective knowledge of the field to further their projects and support a greater number of individuals.

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*Executive Summary*

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## AACRAO INTERNATIONAL FALL SYMPOSIUM

### Overview

Refugees often face significant challenges in continuing to pursue their education or in gaining employment. Higher education institutions and employers typically require verified documentation about an individual's academic credentials, but this documentation is often not available.

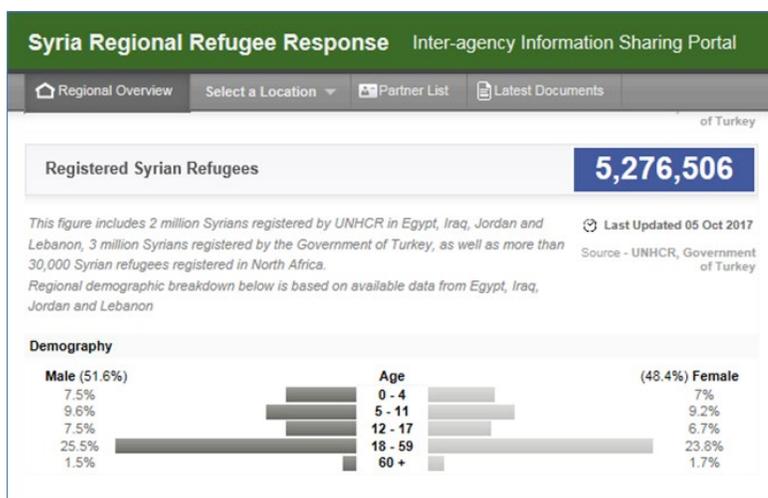
Credential evaluators along with organizations in several countries have developed initiatives (often beginning with pilots) focused on helping refugees secure the documentation they need. These initiatives show promising results. Importantly, beyond just equipping refugees with the documentation they need, these efforts provide refugees with a sense of hope and opportunity about their future.

This Symposium brought together knowledgeable experts in the field of credential evaluation as well as experienced professionals in assisting refugees. Participants shared insights from their own experiences and discussed the potential for the Article 26 Backpack.

The A26 Backpack is a visionary idea to leverage digital, cloud-based technology to provide refugees (and then eventually others) the ability to store, access, and share documents and information with third parties. A goal for the A26 Backpack is to be a free, universal tool that enhances mobility and empowers refugees. An initial pilot of the A26 Backpack will commence in Lebanon in late 2017 to demonstrate proof of concept, with a goal of developing best practices, expanding its use, and developing a sustainable model.

### Background

Dr. Keith David Watenpaugh of the University of California Davis called attention to enormity of the Syrian refugee problem. He cited information on the UN website indicating there are currently more than 5.2 million Syrian refugees, many of whom are students, and all of whom have a personal, human story. Part of that story often involves the stripping of information about a refugee's identity, including academic information.



Source: [UN High Commission on Refugees](#); October 10, 2017

Dr. Watenpaugh emphasized that education is a basic human right. New technologies make it possible to store and share a person's information, eliminating an important barrier in refugees being able to continue their education.

*"We will be able to address this issue, this problem, in a way that we might achieve solutions that were unthought of in the past."*

*Keith David Watenpaugh, University of California Davis*

## Introductions

Each symposium participant introduced themselves, highlighting their extensive experiences working with academic qualifications, credential evaluations, and refugees around the world. Several participants are particularly moved by this topic as they are immigrants themselves or have relatives or friends who are immigrants. Participants noted that similar problems have existed for years, with only the location changing.

## The Problem – The Challenges Experienced by Syrian Refugees

In setting the stage for this symposium, Dr. Hana Addam El-Ghali shared research findings on the challenges and issues faced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon, with a specific focus on the impact on and implications for refugee students. She noted that these individuals are unique—they are not immigrants and are not typical international students.

Even beginning to understand the situation for Syrian refugees who are university students starts with some basic facts about the situation in Syria:

- **Humanitarian effects.** As of April 2017 (per the UN) there have been 400,000 casualties and more than half of Syria's population has been forcibly displaced, with more than 5 million refugees. Among those still in Syria, about 60% live in extreme poverty. Further, there have been about 200,000 births in unsafe conditions.
- **Physical destruction.** About 10% of all school buildings have been destroyed and more than 50% have been partially damaged.
- **Economic consequences.** Per capita GDP has shrunk from 2010 to 2016, creating very difficult living standards.

There are an estimated 1.1 million Syrians in Lebanon; about 102,000 are age appropriate for universities at 18 to 24 years old. In 2015-16, Syrians represented about 5.8% of students in Lebanon's universities, though this has decreased to about 4%. Education in general and higher education in particular produce strong returns. Students are empowered, can use their education to achieve a better life, and can help reconstruct the Middle East.

However, of great concern is that the pipeline for Syrian refugee education in Lebanon is collapsing, with most students dropping out in elementary school (between grades 1 and 5) and almost no students in middle school.

For Syrian refugees who are higher education students, language has not been a barrier. But showing residency and academic equivalency have been barriers. Proof of residency is required for admission to tertiary education institutions, as are certificates showing educational equivalency to undergraduate admission, transfer, and graduate admission. While this has been a barrier, it is possible to overcome it.

Yet, after barriers in accessing education are overcome, many Syrian students have struggled in Lebanon universities. One reason is that the way of learning is very different than Syrian students are accustomed to. One recommendation is a year of preparation for incoming students to become more acclimated to the way of learning in Lebanon.

Also, post-graduation, there are barriers in gaining employment. In Lebanon the Ministry of Labor only allows Syrians to work in three sectors: agriculture, construction, and environment. Other countries also restrict the employment options of Syrian refugees.

For Syrian children and students, the situation is extremely discouraging. Dr. El-Ghali believes that children lack a vision and a sense of opportunity for what could be.

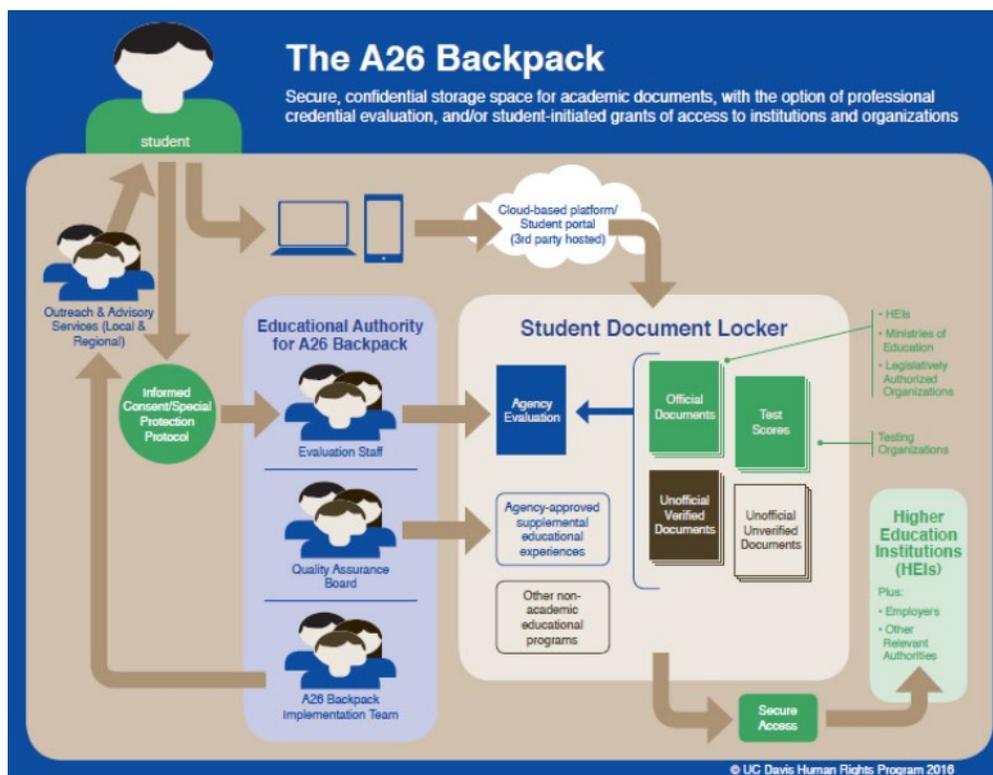
**THE PROBLEM IN BRIEF<sup>1</sup>**

Refugees face real problems as they try to (re)enter higher education: missing educational data, lack of information about testing, little clarity as to the transferability of other kinds of learning, and difficulties in sharing documents with relevant higher education officials or scholarship agencies.

When refugees possess credentials, they aren't "official" and can be easily dismissed for bureaucratic reasons or because of concerns about their legitimacy due to the wide circulation of fraudulent documents. But the biggest problem for refugees in this field is explaining who they are as complex people, and who they have continued to become in exile.

## A Solution – The Article 26 (A26) Backpack

Dr. Watenpaugh provided a conceptual overview of the A26 Backpack initiative. The A26 Backpack is an idea to help the most needy, vulnerable students store, share, and have evaluated their educational documentation. It is a digital-assisted, empowering ecosystem for the safe and effective narration, collation, storage, and evaluation of refugee students' accomplishments, experiences, and skills as whole people. The Backpack's content can be shared with credential evaluators, higher education institutions, granting agencies, and employers to better access admissions and jobs.<sup>2</sup>



Source: UC Davis Human Rights Program 2016; [link](#)

The A26 Backpack will allow individuals to move across borders and still be able to access their identifying academic information. Young people can trust that their documents will be kept safe and private, which has not been the experience of most refugees, who often come from societies that have lacked safety and privacy of information. Also, while originally developed as a solution for refugees, the A26 Backpack will eventually be a valuable tool for all students.

A graphic novel that will be translated into multiple languages will be used to explain the Backpack concept and how it works. Also, this idea is not just a technology or an app. It includes human connections where a student talks with another person about their educational achievement and what they want to do in the future.

## The Underlying Technology

In developing the A26 Backpack a secure, cloud-based, software-as-a-service (SaaS) platform that is accessible via any Internet-connected computer or mobile device. This solution enables refugees—and eventually any student—to create a digital identity with a comprehensive, personal portfolio of information. This information includes academic documents, certifications, credentials, and information showing experiences and skills, such as a resume or CV, along with examples of projects. This might include videos, artwork, and links to an individual’s personal website. The idea includes critical academic documentation, but goes further, to be a repository of information about each student’s unique personality, experiences, skills, and passions.

*“The idea is to create a way for students to really express their identity for an institution to be able to see who they are.”*

Students will be able to register and create their own digital identity. Registrants can then upload academic and other information. Once uploaded, students will have the ability to share information, for example, with international credential evaluators, and to have credentials verified. This tool is easy to access from any location (including a refugee camp) and is extremely easy to use.

## Panel Presentations

Speakers from South Africa, Norway, Italy, Canada, Lebanon, and the United States described programs to evaluate credentials for refugees, particularly Syrian refugees. These programs shared several common elements:

- They are based on the recognition that there is a growing refugee crisis.
- Many refugees want and need a credible evaluation of their credentials for academic or professional purposes.
- Many refugees lack verified documents, requiring creative, resourceful, alternative credential evaluation methods.
- Organizations are often starting small and undertaking pilots of new credential evaluation methods for individuals without verified documentation. This may involve working with individuals to recreate their transcript and/or conduct in-depth personal interviews.

- Partnerships with higher education institutions as well as government entities are important in identifying appropriate candidates.
- The pilots are working. Alternative credential evaluation methods are providing great value for refugees as well as for institutions and employers.

In several countries efforts are now underway to develop best practices, to expand and scale the successful pilots, and to leverage technology as a way to help scale.

### ***South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)***

SAQA is a statutory body in South Africa. One of its key functions is to evaluate the foreign qualifications of persons interested in studying or working in the country. In fact, a foreigner may not study or work in South Africa without a certification from SAQA. Each year, SAQA evaluates thousands of foreign qualifications. Many are from refugees or asylum seekers in the country.



SAQA is interested in the A26 Backpack initiative because the African continent hosts a large number of refugees and displaced persons, representing 30% of all displaced persons in the world.

**“SAQA receives a number of qualifications or evaluations from asylum seekers and refugees.”**

*Navin Vasudev, SAQA*

SAQA's interest is also driven by challenges in verifying qualifications. Using the normal methodology it is simple to contact the institution in the individual's mother country to find out if the individual was awarded the qualification. But for asylum seekers and refugees this can put a person at risk. Another issue is that systemic pressures may cause some refugees and asylum seekers to misrepresent their documents.

In looking at issues related to refugees and asylum seekers, SAQA is early in its journey. At this point, SAQA is focused on:

- Better understanding the issues and challenges affecting asylum seekers and refugees.
- Consulting with a wide range of stakeholders.
- Eventually developing a plan of action for creation of a policy addendum for implementation.

SAQA has formed a task force and held meetings, is gathering information from multiple sources including NGOs, and has initiated a survey among asylum seekers and refugees, along with higher education institutions and professional bodies. While the survey is still underway, some of the initial findings include:

- A large number of SAQA's applicants are not actually economic refugees, but are people who have been forced to flee their countries due to political turmoil.
- Based on current policies, persons who lack documentation or who have incomplete documentation cannot enter the SAQA system.

“There are a whole group of people who actually cannot enter the [SAQA] system because of lack of documentation or incomplete documentation.”

*Navin Vasudev, SAQA*

- Many respondents expressed stress in getting their documents together and complying with the SAQA requirement regarding qualification documentation. For many, this is their number one challenge.
- There is a stigma among many about “being outed” during this process.
- There are difficulties faced by respondents due to verification delays and issues of security during the verification process.
- There are difficulties among individuals in accessing higher education and the labor market.
- Some higher education institutions do not have any policy on dealing with admission applications from refugees/asylum seekers, while others deal with it on a case-by-case basis.
- Professional bodies do not have policies or strategies to work with refugees/asylum seekers in terms of license to practice.

Next steps for SAQA include completing the survey and analyzing findings, sharing a report of the results with multiple stakeholders, collaborating with various international organizations, and developing a position and policy for SAQA and for South Africa for similar initiatives on the African continent, as well as reviewing SAQA’s internal procedures.

### ***Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT)***

Marina Malgina of NOKUT described how Norway thinks about assessing refugees’ qualifications, and discussed specific projects related to refugees.



Norway thinks about recognition of refugees’ qualifications as:

- More than a technical exercise.
- More than a preparation for further studies or employment.
- A key to building inclusive societies.
- Part of seeing the human behind the qualification.
- Facilitating inclusion, empowerment, and participation.
- Reducing the risk of social, political, and economic alienation.

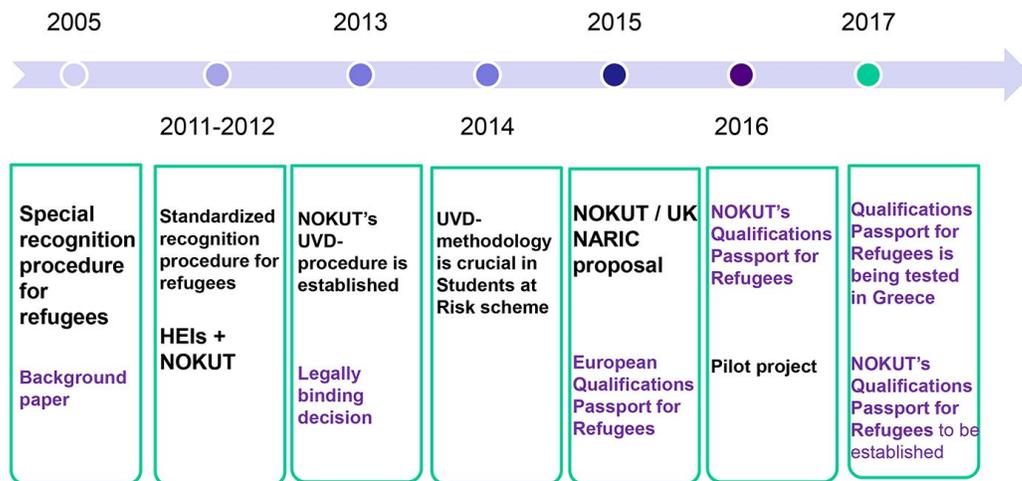
As a signatory to the Lisbon Recognition Convention, Norway is obligated by Section VII to support refugees and displaced persons.

#### **LISBON RECOGNITION CONVENTION, SECTION VII:**

##### ***Recognition of qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation***

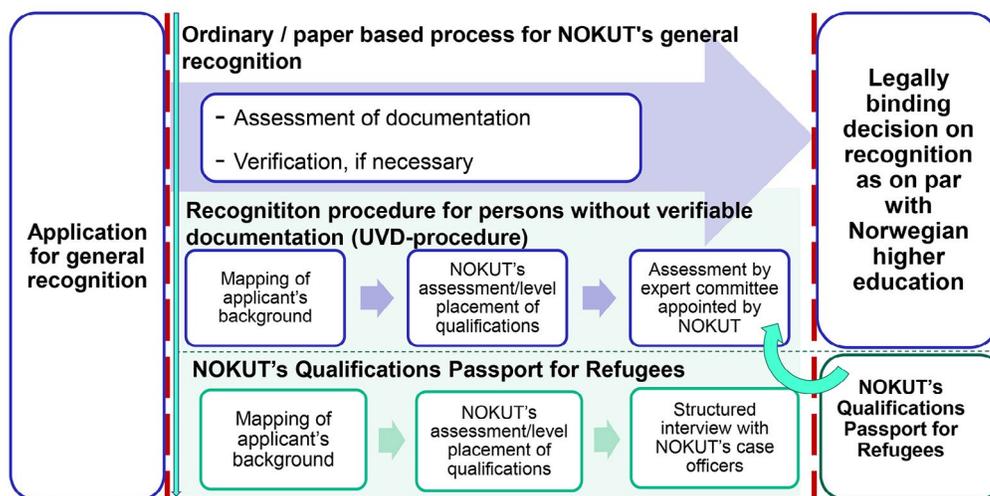
Each Party shall take all feasible and reasonable steps within the framework of its education system and in conformity with its constitutional, legal, and regulatory provisions to develop procedures designed to assess fairly and expeditiously whether refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation fulfil the relevant requirements for access to higher education, to further higher education programmes or to employment activities, even in cases in which the qualifications obtained in one of the Parties cannot be proven through documentary evidence.<sup>3</sup>

Norway has a long history of accepting and supporting refugees, dating to 1917 when Norway welcomed many Russian refugees. Over the past 20 to 30 years there has been a large influx in the number of refugees entering Norway. In 2005, Norway started developing a special recognition procedure for refugees and in 2011 created a standardized recognition procedure. In 2016 NOKUT embarked on creating a Qualifications Passport for refugees and initiated a pilot project.



NOKUT's recognition procedures (shown below) provide processes for recognition for individuals who do not have verifiable documentation:

- An **ordinary paper-based process** for general recognition, using assessment of documentation and verification (if necessary).
- **Recognition procedures for persons without verifiable documentation**, which includes mapping an applicant's background, assessing their qualifications, and assessment by an expert committee. In the event of lack of documentation, experts with extensive experience will conduct their own research.
- **NOKUT's Qualifications Passport for Refugees**, which maps an applicant's background, assesses their qualifications, and involves a structured interview with NOKUT's case officers.



The objectives of the Qualification Passport for Refugees are to provide refugees with an assessment of qualifications in situations where qualification cannot be fully documented or verified, and to have the assessment be accepted across borders.

Specifics of the Qualifications Passport for Refugees include:

- **Task.** To map, summarize, and present available information on the applicant's educational level, work experience, and language proficiency in order to provide information that can be relevant to applications for employment or internship, qualification courses, and admission to studies. However, while such information is a necessary prerequisite for universities and employers, it does not mean that a higher education institution has to accept an applicant or that an employer has to hire a person.
- **Method.** A combination of an assessment of available documentation and a structured interview, conducted by a qualified credential evaluator, and identification of missing documentation by use of previously evaluated cases.

This project is a multinational toolkit that is applicable to any country in Europe. The aim is to develop common recognition methods and tools to secure effective and streamlined recognition of qualifications for refugees and persons in a refugee-like situation in signatory countries of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. In addition to the evaluation or assessment, there is an explanation, and practical advice for a person on what to do when they arrive in a new country.

Thus far, while early, 62 refugees have completed the interview process.

This tool alone does not solve all challenges for refugees, but it is an important step in granting validity that provides students with more standing in the admissions process and when seeking employment.

### *Information Centre on Academic Mobility and Equivalence (CIMEA)*

Located in Italy, CIMEA is a credentialing information service and is the official Italian Centre within the National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC)—the network of the European Union—and the European National Information Centres (ENIC).



As with Norway, Italy has ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention and has a legislative decree (as of 2007) for the recognition of diplomas, certificates, professional qualifications, and other qualifications by those with refugee status—even when refugees lack documentation and certification. In recent years many refugees have arrived in Italy, as the country is facing a crisis of refugees.

Since 2014, institutions have been asked to find alternative recognition procedures for refugees in order to evaluate qualifications in cases where individuals have partial or no documents. In the case of insufficient documentation or documentation that cannot be verified, the information and competencies declared by the student will be evaluated.

At this time CIMEA is involved with multiple projects related to recognition; these include RecoNOW, Refugees and Recognition, Recognition of Refugees Qualifications, and MERIC-net. Also, CIMEA provides statements of comparability free of charge for refugees and others in need.

In addition, CIMEA has been involved in establishing National Coordination for the Evaluation of Refugee Qualifications (CNVQR). The aim to create a network of experts who operate inside higher education institutions and deal with the recognition of qualifications. As of August 2017, 28 institutions were involved. This is activated and coordinated by CIMEA.

CNVQR has created an instrument called “The Academic Pass of Refugee Qualifications.” This Pass provides recipients with access to studies within higher education institutions. A Pass is issued jointly by CIMEA and at least one higher education institution. It is not a legal document but a useful tool intended to be of help in connecting applicants with further studies, but it does not guarantee recognition of foreign qualifications.

Applicants for Academic Passes must provide all existing documents (if there are any) to a host institution, must complete a questionnaire, and must participate in a rigorous interview with experts. In this process, the applicant is one of the main sources of information. This evaluation process is different from the normal evaluation process for applicants. This tool aims to help refugees in Italy and elsewhere get access to higher education.



WORLD EDUCATION SERVICES

### *World Education Services (WES)*

WES is a nonprofit education credential assessment agency with more than 40 years of experience in assessing academic credentials. In that time WES has provided more than 1.5 million credential evaluation reports to immigrants and international students, as well as shared its expertise with the academic community through publications, training and research. For example, in 2016 it published a report on Recognizing Refugee Qualifications: Practical Tips for Credential Assessment, and most recently released *A Way Forward for Refugees*, its findings from a pilot project begun in 2016 to provide credential assessments to Syrian refugees in Canada.

Since 2015, more than 46,000 Syrian refugees have entered Canada, many of them with post-secondary education. Of those served by the WES Refugee Pilot Project, 57 percent had a bachelor’s degree, 19 percent a master’s degree or higher, and the remainder either a high school diploma or some post-secondary study. These individuals often have difficulty receiving recognition for their qualifications because they lack the necessary documentation.

This pilot project developed and tested methods to provide a credential assessment based on the claims of the individual, some credible (officially-issued) evidence in their possession, and WES’ expertise in validating and even reconstructing an academic program from precedent cases in its database. The pilot also tested the prospect of partnering with community agencies, academic institutions and regulatory bodies to deliver the program.

- As of May 2017 when the pilot was paused for evaluation of the first cohort of applicants, 337 individuals had received an “alternative credential assessment” – a WES assessment based on documents that could not be authenticated in the usual way.
- WES was able to provide assessments for 100 percent of applicants who had at least one credible piece of evidence – proving that the methodology was sound.
- Seventy-two percent of applicants had full transcripts in the original language (as required) and received a course and grade assessment; the remainder relied on WES reconstructing the credential due to partial or missing information – to reflect the courses they would have taken, given the evidence they submitted.
- While a course assessment is not needed by everyone, the pilot confirmed that it is feasible to do for those who need it.
- Personal interaction between a refugee and a caseworker was important to prescreen for eligibility and to support the application process, as well as to mitigate the risk of fraud by positioning the service in a trusted relationship.

## *World Education Services (WES)*



*"This report gave my clients back their dignity. The sooner you can deliver hope, the better. An early sign that your foreign education has value is a priceless gift when everything else has been taken from you."*

*- WES Referral Partner*

WES interviewed and surveyed both applicants and stakeholders to assess the utility of this kind of assessment to obtain credential recognition from employers, academic institutions and regulators and to support refugee integration. Among its findings:

- Applicants felt an increased sense of self-worth, which will help them in advancing their career and academic goals.
  - o The majority of applicants (68 percent) had been in Canada for one to two years, yet 38 percent were still unemployed.
  - o They were universally grateful for the opportunity to document their education, and 78 percent believed it would help them in taking their next step.
  - o Forty-six percent reported they knew how they would use the WES assessment. The remainder were less certain.
  - o Understanding the value of their credential sparked hope and confidence in the future and gave them a tool for exploring their options.
- An overwhelming majority (73 percent) of stakeholders said the methodology used in the assessment gave them confidence in the validity of the report. Most end-users recognize the need for flexibility in document policies to address barriers faced by refugees.
- A key next step is deepening relationships with referral agencies to ensure services for individuals to support their academic and career goals. At the same time WES will continue to advocate with end-users for credential recognition based on the WES assessment.

*"Now that I have something in my hand I can fight for myself. I think it is enough for me."*

*- WES Applicant*

### *Educational Credential Evaluators (ECE)*

ECE, a nonprofit located in Milwaukee that was founded about 30 years ago, is one of the largest credential evaluation services in the United States.



ECE has been extremely active in the Groningen Declaration network and in the Association for International Credential Evaluation Professionals, which is an international organization to try to establish standards and elevate the profession of credential evaluators.

While ECE is a nonprofit, it provides credential evaluation services on a fee-for-service basis; in order to get a credit evaluation it is necessary to pay a fee. If a person, agency, or institution is unable to pay a fee, ECE is unable to provide an evaluation. This used to apply to refugees as well as others in need.

However, ECE didn't feel that turning away refugees was an adequate response. So, as of August 2016 ECE developed a charity division—ECEAid—that provides free credential evaluation reports for people in need. In delivering this service, ECEAid partners with multiple experienced, trusted agencies and institutions. Many partners are colleges and universities that don't have the capacity or expertise to do this type of an evaluation.

*"We're in a position where we're helping the people who need it most."*

*Margit Schatzman, ECE*

Some of the challenges faced in trying to verify refugees' documents:

- An institution has closed or is no longer operating.
- The institution is located in an area of conflict.
- Contacting an institution for verification could put a student or their family at risk.
- A student has limited or no documents available from their previous education.

To address these challenges ECE uses several online verification resources including national and online databases as well as other online or institutional resources.

### *Foreign Credits*

Foreign Credits is a midsized, for-profit, credential evaluation service. The company's product is a credential evaluation of typically 2-3 pages. Some of Foreign Credits' strategies:



- **Flexibility.** Foreign Credits is flexible in its documentation requirements and takes every situation on a case-by-case basis.
- **Mobile friendly.** Foreign Credits has updated its website to be mobile friendly, enabling users to utilize their mobile phone to photograph documents and easily submit information via mobile technology.
- **Translation services.** Foreign Credits has in-house and contract translators.
- **Customer service.** The company's staff goes through extensive training to make the credential evaluation process extremely personal.
- **Collaboration.** The key to success in helping displaced individuals is collaboration of partners and multiple organizations working toward a common goal.

**American University of Beirut (AUB)**

Hana Addam El-Ghali of AUB described challenges that AUB has experienced in working with Syrian refugees, initiatives at AUB, and the advantages of the A26 Backpack.



The main challenges that AUB has faced in hosting Syrian refugees are:

- **Residency permits.** Getting residency permits for foreign students can be difficult and slow, and requires detailed information.
- **Unavailability of school documents.** Foreign students coming to school at AUB require documents that show grades, but documents may be missing or unverified.
- **Language barriers.** English is the language at UAB, but many students only speak Arabic and are not fluent in English.

The main initiatives at AUB to address these barriers include:

- **LEAD Initiative.** This initiative focuses on leadership, equity, and diversity, and is linked to various scholarship programs. It provides financial support and leadership development.
- **AUB for Refugees Initiative.** This is a university-wide initiative to address the overall impact of Syrian refugees and nurture cooperation.
- **PADILEIA.** This is the Partnership for Digital Learning and Increased Access, which will launch in October 2017. It is an intensive college-readiness program for Syrian refugees who are high school graduates, ages 18 to 25. It is supported by NGOs. Its aim is to provide English language skills as well as emphasis on critical thinking and subjects like math and science.
- **English teaching program.** English classes are offered on campus five nights per week, taught by student volunteers.

AUB also has an initiative called GHATA, which means “cover.”

In conjunction with its existing initiatives, AUB sees advantages in the Backpack such as:

- **Centralization of documents.** The Backpack will centralize all of the documents pertaining to students, decreasing waiting time and lost documents.
- **One-stop shop.** All documents are in one place, including everything from admissions to acceptance, registration, financial aid and scholarships, records, and diplomas.
- **Documents are in the right hands.** Access to documents is controlled and can be kept confidential.
- **Paperless environment.** Everything is electronic, eliminating the need for paper, and making it easy to share information.

AUB believes in the potential of the Backpack, and sees it helping many individuals.

## Discussion

After the panel presentations, participants reflected on a few main ideas.

- **Standards.** A main theme was regarding the lack of standards in doing credential evaluations. While many evaluators use similar processes and would get similar results, there are no generally accepted industry-wide standards. Many believe that standards would be beneficial.
- **Evaluation components.** Participants see the evaluation process as having a few distinct elements. These are:
  - *Examination of the documents.* This involves reviewing an individual's documents, seeing if an institution exists and is accredited, determining if a program exists, and confirming that the documents are not fraudulent. It may be possible to digitize and automate this step.
  - *An advisory statement.* This is where an evaluator renders advice based on the examination of the documents and based on the individual's situation, context, and goals.

Once a credential evaluator provides this information, it is still the responsibility of the institution or the employer to use the information in making a decision. Even though a credential evaluator may provide an advisory statement, they are not the final decision maker.

- **Collaboration versus competition.** In many ways, the players in the credential evaluation industry work together and collaborate, such as at symposiums like this. Industry members frequently share information about methods and best practices. However, evaluators differentiate themselves and compete based on their proprietary databases, personal experience, and expertise.
- **A26 Backpack: The Backpack aims to be a solution to the challenges and barriers that refugees face.** It contains all documents and information in one place in electronic form. As one individual said, it is "the credential cloud." It enables a "holistic review," ensures confidentiality, and gives the individual control to add or delete documents, and to share information. The very act of participating in this process in some cases may be enough to push students into a mode where they are looking for opportunities.

The idea for the Backpack is to provide free services to those who need it most, and longer term to make this concept available to all students in a way that is financially sustainable. The Backpack will initially be implemented in Lebanon later this year to prove the concept and develop best practices.

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<sup>1</sup> The A26 Backpack™: A Refugee Higher Education Ecosystem, SOLVE, <https://solve.mit.edu/challenges/youth-skills-the-workforce-of-the-future/solutions/97>

<sup>2</sup> The A26 Backpack™: A Refugee Higher Education Ecosystem, SOLVE, <https://solve.mit.edu/challenges/youth-skills-the-workforce-of-the-future/solutions/97>

<sup>3</sup> Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, Council of Europe, <https://rm.coe.int/168007f2c7>

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