



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

## UNESCO EVALUATION INSIGHTS IOS EVALUATION OFFICE

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**EVALUATION INSIGHTS** provides a snap-shot of UNESCO's work in evaluation. Its purpose is to share insights and ideas with interested stakeholders and to feed into ongoing discussions about the contribution of evaluation to the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

The second edition of **EVALUATION INSIGHTS** is dedicated to an Evaluation of UNESCO's Regional Conventions on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education.

### UNESCO'S REGIONAL CONVENTIONS ON THE RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

*Recognition: a formal acknowledgement by a competent authority of the value of a foreign education qualification with a view to accessing educational and/or employment activities.*

#### The 1997 Lisbon Convention

With a globalised economy that depends on technical innovations and competitive use of knowledge by highly skilled individuals, higher education is seen as increasingly necessary for countries' economic growth and standard of living. The Sustainable Development Goals established in 2015 acknowledge this through the inclusion of a target on ensuring equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university. However, those seeking to pursue further higher education, or highly skilled work in a different country from that in which they obtained their higher education qualifications, may find that their existing qualifications are not appropriately recognised.

#### UNESCO's recognition conventions

As the only United Nations agency with a mandate in higher education, and recognizing the challenge that recognition poses for mobility, UNESCO has a long history of engagement with this issue. Efforts to create a global convention on recognition eventually resulted in six regional recognition conventions (for Latin America and the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the Arab States, Europe, Africa, and the Asia-Pacific regions) in the 1970s and 1980s, which established a unique legal framework for allowing the recognition of qualifications in higher education between States Parties at a regional level.

More recent revised regional conventions now exist for Europe, the Asia-Pacific region, and for Africa, although the latter two do not yet have sufficient States Parties to enter into force<sup>1</sup>. UNESCO's Member States agreed to also revise the convention for Latin America and the Caribbean, and to develop a possible global convention on recognition. Initial steps have begun on both of these. The main objective of the regional conventions is to promote international cooperation in higher education and to reduce obstacles to the mobility of skilled workers, students, and graduates.



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#### Why this evaluation?

The main purpose of the evaluation is to generate findings and recommendations that will inform the development, management and implementation of the new generation of regional recognition conventions, and that will potentially also feed into the development and implementation of a future global convention. This is the first comprehensive evaluation ever undertaken of the recognition conventions.

#### What we learned

##### The role and importance of the conventions

With significant improvements in access to basic and secondary education, an increase in students crossing borders to pursue higher education, a desire for more mobility within economic regions, the changing nature of the global economy, and the increase in trade agreements that incorporate provisions on recognition, the issue of recognition has become increasingly important. The special consideration given by the revised conventions to the recognition of qualifications of refugees also increases their relevance in today's world.

1. Access the conventions here: <http://www.unesco.org>

Highly inconsistent (and often outdated) recognition practices suggest a need for standard-setting tools such as the UNESCO regional recognition conventions. While they are not the only tool available to address recognition, the conventions are unique in their scope and scale, and the only legal instruments on recognition available at regional levels.

### Governing the conventions

With the exception of the 1997 Lisbon Convention, and to some extent the 1983 Bangkok Convention, none of the governance mechanisms for the regional recognition conventions are currently functional. Therefore, none of the Committees of the first generation of the Latin American, Arab, or Mediterranean Conventions are meeting today, or actively facilitating the implementation of these conventions. The 1997 Lisbon Convention, however, has a strong governance mechanism and provides an example of a number of good practices, such as creating supplementary texts to guide convention implementation.

Monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the first generation of conventions has been largely insufficient and one of the main challenges encountered in the standard-setting work on recognition. Monitoring data is therefore hardly available at regional levels. This makes it difficult to determine to what extent the first generation of conventions has been implemented, what the challenges were, and what lessons could be drawn for the new generation of conventions.



Peking University (Beijing Da Xue), Beijing, China  
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### Supporting the conventions

Although it is ultimately the responsibility of Member States to ratify and implement the conventions, UNESCO's advocacy and support are essential at this point in time. A significant challenge is that the Secretariats of the Conventions suffer from lack of capacities to various degrees, especially since significant budget cuts affected UNESCO in 2011. Overall, both in headquarters and in the field, the evaluation observed a significant discrepancy between UNESCO's standard-setting mandate on one hand, and its capacity to support ratification and implementation at regional and global levels on the other.

With this in mind, and expecting that the workload of the

Secretariats will increase as remaining conventions are revised and more signatories join, and as implementation is pushed forward, future work needs to be considered with a more strategic lens. The emphasis should be on activities that help multiply UNESCO's reach and engage other stakeholders so that these can also undertake the work of informing and advocating for the conventions.

Clear goals and indicators for supporting ratification and implementation should be developed, and supported by adequate human and financial resources both in HQ and in Convention Secretariats. Developing a long-term fundraising strategy to achieve these goals will be needed to enable long-term planning. Sustaining momentum over time through continuity of UNESCO's support activities is key for achieving progress with the ratification and implementation of the regional conventions.

There is also a need for UNESCO to communicate a more compelling narrative about the importance of the recognition conventions, tailored to the regional context(s), and based on evidence.

In order to increase the speed of ratification and implementation of the conventions, wider engagement of stakeholder groups appears also necessary. These include universities, and students, but also Government institutions outside the education sector, such as Foreign Affairs and Labour, who are important stakeholders in the process of ratification; as well as public and private higher education institutions, who are key players in the process of recognition; and others who have an interest in the topic, such as regional economic organizations.

Generating and sharing knowledge and experiences on recognition within and between regions has also been an extremely important element in the work on the conventions, including in revision processes. However, these efforts suffer from a lack of an evidence base to support the work on the recognition conventions.

Information on the gender dimensions of recognition, for instance on the differences in the level of recognition applied to women's and men's qualifications, and analytical data on any potential gender-based discrimination related to recognition is also scarce. This makes it difficult to even establish whether such discrimination exists and how it could be addressed.

With a set of new generation conventions in place, and a number of revisions ongoing, a momentum and opportunity exist to significantly advance the work on recognition over the next couple of years. This will require addressing the issues identified by this evaluation, which offers eight key recommendations and suggests a number of related action points for convention secretariats, committees, and Member States. They are aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the work on the regional recognition conventions in the future.