12th Session of the Regional Committee on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific in conjunction with Regional Workshop on the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

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Country Report

TONGA

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1. Introduction

The Kingdom of Tonga is located in the South Pacific north east of New Zealand, east of Sydney and south east of Fiji. It takes three hours by plane from Auckland, five hours from Sydney and one and a half hours from Fiji.

Education in Tonga is free and compulsory from the age of six to 14. However, plans are underway to revise the Education Act and extend the compulsory age to go from five to 18. This is in response to the growing number of young people leaving the school system at a very young age thus contributing to the economic burden faced by the country as well as other socio-economic issues such as unemployment and youth related problems.

Development of education in Tonga began in the 1820s, and could be summarized into four main periods.

(i) 1820s – 1881
In this early period, the focus was on the acquisition of basic literacy, numeracy, and the knowledge considered necessary by the missionaries for the appropriation of ‘civilised’ habits and the conversion to proper Christian life based on values of the mid-19th century English middle class. The curriculum of the first secondary school emphasized Mathematics, History, Geography, Music and Divinity. It is important to note that English did not attract significant attention at the time.

(ii) 1882 – mid 1940s
During this period the emphasis shifted towards achieving universal primary education and developing secondary education. Moral education became a significant part of education with the provision for religious instruction in all schools. Literacy in the vernacular and numeracy were given greater attention and English teaching and English as the language for education became more and more important in the syllabus.

(iii) Late 1940s – early 1980s
With the achievement of universal primary education in the late fifties and early sixties, the needs of the economic sector became paramount and the education system was geared accordingly. Secondary schools expanded both in numbers and sizes and attention was given to curriculum development. There was also a significant increase in the number of students sent overseas for higher education. A secondary school (Tonga High School) was established to educated the selected academically gifted Tongan children for the New Zealand School Certificate and University Entrance examinations. During this period the Ministry of Education expressed concerns about the teaching of English and Tongan languages, the need to upgrade Teacher Education programmes
and the problem relating to availability and quality of suitable texts and reading materials for the students in both English and Tongan.

(iv) **Mid-1980s – present**

From the mid-eighties when universal secondary education could be considered 'achieved', there has been gradual movement away from basic education at the primary and secondary levels to increasing emphasis on post-secondary and tertiary/higher education. This was reflected in the 6th Development Plan where one of the major aims of development was to “expand post-secondary training programmes in areas that are important to the development of the country (e.g. technical skills, health, tourism etc.)”

Development and monitoring of higher education continued to be the focus of education in Tonga. The latest development being the establishment of a quality assurance agency with accompanying legislations to ensure that standards and quality of higher education in Tonga are maintained. A qualifications framework was also developed to facilitate students and labour mobility through the provision of alternative pathways not only domestically but internationally as well.

2. **Higher Education in Tonga**

Higher education is a recent development in Tonga. Until the late 1980s most of Tonga’s students were sent overseas for tertiary education as this sector in Tonga was still under developed. The only post-secondary institutions in the country were the Tonga Teachers' College, the Queen Salote School of Nursing and the Police Training School. For higher and university education, students were sent to Fiji, New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Graduates from these countries were readily accepted and automatically recognized. Such were the benefits of having an overseas education and qualification that a good and well paid job was always available.

As the number of secondary school and high school graduates increased it became more and more expensive to send students overseas for further and higher education. The number of students needing higher education increased at an exponential rate while the number of opportunities for overseas places remained virtually unchanged. Competition was tough and selection became a major national issue. From the late 1980s and early 1990s higher education institutions both government and private started to appear offering a variety of programmes to cater for the increasing number of students coming out of high schools. As the number of institutions increase, the number and variety of training programmes also increased giving rise to the issues of standard, comparability, portability and recognition.
Today, higher education is under the broad umbrella of the Ministry of Education and the authority of the Minister of Education as stipulated by the Education Act. However, institutions are controlled and managed by the controlling authorities. There are three main categories of HE providers: government owned, church owned and privately owned.

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3. Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

Practices concerning the recognition of qualifications have developed considerably over the past two decades. Whereas in times gone by an assessment of foreign qualifications may have entailed a detailed comparison of curricula and lists of material studied ("equivalence"), the emphasis has now shifted to a broader comparison of the qualifications earned ("recognition").

(Lisbon Recognition Convention Explanatory Note 13)

As international mobility increases and qualifications and learning programmes diversify it becomes increasingly problematic to attempt to assess equivalence. International experts consider that the diversity in qualification programmes means that no two qualifications, even if awarded in the same country would be equivalent in principle or practice – “let alone two qualifications awarded in different countries”. As learning programmes in higher education become increasingly personalised, even a programme within a learning institution may have some diverse outcomes for graduates of that programme.

Facilitating and supporting the recognition of foreign qualifications alongside indicating some comparability is a trend that authorities are encouraged to support. International instruments such as the 1997 Lisbon Convention on Academic Recognition promote this notion of recognition.

In Tonga the verification and recognition of foreign qualifications was carried out by the Ministry of Education prior to 2009. In 2007 the Tonga National Qualifications and Accreditation Board (TNQAB) was established. The TNQAB Secretariat was established in 2009 and TNQAB then became the quality assurance agency and competent authority to carry out verification and recognition of foreign qualifications under the TNQAB Act 2004 and the subsequent TNQAB Regulations 2010. The Qualification Services section of the Secretariat carries out this function.
3.1 Procedure for recognition of foreign qualifications

In evaluating and verifying a foreign qualification, the Qualification Services section follows the general procedure below.

(i) Examine and judge the authenticity of qualification documentation and verify this if unsure. All sample is verified.
(ii) Establish the accreditation status of the qualification and/or awarding body or institution in the country of origin at time of award
(iii) Benchmark overseas qualifications to substantially similar qualifications listed on the TQF or other National Qualification Framework such NZQF.

3.2 Criteria and Guidelines for the evaluation of foreign qualifications

For purposes of consistency, it is desirable that various levels of evaluation leading to the recognition of foreign qualifications should comply with a single set of basic guidelines. This should offer shared principles and mutual support. If two or more sets of guidelines are in use, they should at least be non-contradictory. In order to promote agreement, the guiding principles, procedures and criteria applied by the TNQAB. The also provides assistance in the interpretation of its evaluation processes and recommendations.

3.2.1 Guiding principles

In accordance with international best practice, the TNQAB abides by the following broad principles:

A comparative approach

Assessment is based on the structural comparison of indicators in education and training systems and the features of qualifications within those systems. Recommendations are expressed in terms of the closest (minimum) comparable Tonga qualification that can be identified, referring also, as far as this is possible, to a particular level of the TQF. In taking this approach, the TNQAB acknowledges the international tendency to move away from merely determining equivalence in favour of an intention that actively promotes acceptance (or recognition).

Access to the evaluation service

The evaluation service is conducted in a way that makes it as accessible as possible to all holders of foreign qualifications applying for assessment, as well as to institutions applying on their behalf. No individual or other party is barred from access on any
rounds not related to the criteria applied to evaluate the qualification(s) as contained in this document.

The accessibility of the evaluation service is reviewed from time to time with a view to improvement.

**Evaluation without prejudice**

Applications are considered and processed without prejudice. No discrimination is made on the grounds of gender, race, colour, disability, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status. The only consideration is the merit of the qualification(s) for which recognition is sought.

The TNQAB has a fundamental commitment to serving clients fairly, honestly and consistently. Clients’ applications are treated confidentially within the confines of the law.

**Fair, transparent, coherent and reliable criteria**

Provision is made for the fair assessment of all applications according to criteria that are transparent, coherent and reliable. These criteria are applied consistently to all cases, including cases of study periods (uncompleted programmes). Fairness and consistency of approach and methodology are pursued - even if this leads to an outcome that does not meet the expectations of the applicant.

Criteria and procedures are reviewed periodically to ensure continued best practice.

**Professional integrity**

In addition to treating clients and conducting evaluations fairly and consistently, the staff of the TNQAB are required to resist and refuse all improper attempts, including offers of reward, compensation or personal benefit, to influence the outcomes of evaluations.

**Consistency of evaluation outcomes**

Unless exceptional circumstances warrant otherwise, similar qualifications should have similar evaluation outcomes. To this end, an inventory of previous evaluation outcomes is maintained.
3.2.2 Procedural guidelines

The guidelines below refer to procedural issues as related to clients and do not include the standard operating procedures according to which the TNQAB functions. These are available as an internal document.

Information

The responsibility for provision of information is shared by the TNQAB, the qualification holder and the awarding education and training institution.

TNQAB

Standardised information on procedures and criteria is contained in the TNQAB’s application guidelines. This information is made available to applicants making preliminary enquiries. The information includes documentary requirements, tariffs and payment methods, approximate timelines, the procedure for appeal and the status of the assessment.

The TNQAB is also responsible for the maintenance of up to date and reliable information on education and training systems and qualifications, including the Tonga system and its qualifications.

A qualification holder has the right to be informed of the rationale underlying the evaluation of his/her qualification(s).

Qualification holders

It is the responsibility of the qualification holders to furnish TNQAB with the required documentation, as well as information meeting the requirements and enabling TNQAB to consider an evaluation. In doing this they may be supported by the education and training institutions where they completed studies.

Applicants are expected to, in good faith, provide accurate and true information, not wilfully omitting any relevant detail.

Education and training institutions

Education and training institutions have a responsibility to make available complete sets of qualification documents, as well as to furnish all the required information pertaining to a particular programme or qualification to the TNQAB upon request.

Processing time and delay

The TNQAB’s evaluation results are made within reasonable time limits. Various options for processing time are specified upfront together with terms and conditions. Prioritisation of applications is linked to additional fees. Applications are processed
according to certain priority options paid for upfront and, within these categories, on a first-come-first-serve basis. An application is considered active and processing time calculated only from such time that the applicant has provided all the necessary information, documentation and payment.

In cases where a substantial delay is expected - for example when more information is requested from the country of origin - clients are informed to this effect. The TNQAB has no control over the response time for information from abroad, but makes every effort to ensure that contact is established in the most effective way.

**Fees**

The fees charged for evaluation are thus kept as low as possible in order not to constitute a barrier.

**Documentary requirements**

*Original documents required*
- award certificates
- transcripts of results, mark sheets or academic records
- evidence of vocational or trades training
- certificate of completion of final year at a general or junior secondary school
- current practising certificate, registration or licence as appropriate

These documents must be originals. Translations into English must be provided by a recognised official translation service.

*Additional documents*
- employment records or employer references describing your work experience
- evidence of name changes (passport, marriage certificate)

These documents may be Certified Copies.

If the original documents are written in a language other than the English language, an English version must be provided by a recognised official translation service.

All documents will be returned to the applicant with the completed International Qualification Report.

Documents are scrutinised for evidence of misrepresentation. If misrepresentation is suspected, a further investigation incorporating verification measures is lodged. If proof of such misrepresentation has been established, an evaluation report is not issued, moneys are retained and the relevant authorities are notified.

Verbatim translations by sworn (certified) translators are required in respect of key or primary documents. These do not substitute for documents in the original language, but are intended as supporting documentation and should be attached to the documents in
the original language. Qualification titles in the original language must be provided at all times.

3.2.3 Right of appeal

Qualification holders have the right to be informed of the underlying rationale and may appeal against evaluation results that are not in accordance with their expectations. An appeals procedure is in place to facilitate this process.

Wherever possible, guidance is offered to assist applicants in taking the remedial measures needed to meet the requirements of the levels to which they seek admission.

3.3 The process for evaluating foreign qualifications

The following procedures are followed by the TNQAB when evaluating foreign qualifications. A schematic outline of this is shown below. As required by other contexts the sequence of these steps may vary, or steps may overlap.
The Assessment Process

- Application Received
- File Setup
- Allocation to Evaluator
- Evaluation
- Verification/Accreditation requests (if required)
- Quality Checking
- Managerial approval
- Sent to Client
3.4 Criteria for evaluation

A qualification is situated within the framework of the education and training system it belongs to. The evaluation process aims to determine the qualification’s relative place and function, compared to other qualification in the same framework, and then to identify the most comparable Tongan qualification.

Qualifications of seemingly comparable level may in fact show considerable differences in duration, content, profile or learning outcomes. These differences are to be considered in a flexible way, but ultimately differences that are substantial may be pointed out and may have an influence on the outcome of the evaluation. The overarching aim is that foreign qualifications should be recognised, unless substantial differences can be indicated with regards to the following:

- Academic and professional legal rights conferred by a qualification in the country of origin.
- Access to further activities offered by the qualification in the country of origin (next level of study, research or employment).
- Key elements of the programme leading to the qualification.
- Quality of the programme, in as far as this can be determined.

3.4.1 Status of the awarding institution

It is vitally important to determine the status of the awarding institution as a first step in the evaluation. The wide diversity of provider institutions in higher education and training, plus recent developments in transnational education and training make this necessary – not to mention the opportunism of dubious institutions and their exploitation of learners. The evaluation process therefore needs to establish beyond doubt whether an awarding institution belongs to the national education and training system in the country of origin of the qualification. Transnational arrangements between institutions need to be scrutinised.

3.4.2 Key elements of the programme leading to the qualification

- The following key elements inform the analysis of qualifications:
  - Purpose for which the qualification was designed.
  - Date of completion. Qualifications issued several years ago may be outdated, but may need to be considered in conjunction with experience.
  - Minimum stipulated entry requirement, as an indicator of the level at which the qualification is pitched. A benchmark approach is followed in this regard, allowing, for example, for school leaving qualifications to be accepted, regardless
of differences in the duration of schooling.

- Minimum stipulated duration, whether part-time or full-time.
- Structure and type of the programme, including aspects such as experiential learning, research combined with coursework, vocational training.
- Programme requirements, such as credit totals and distribution, grading, dissertations, internships.
- Further access gained by virtue of the qualification - whether full or restricted access, whether access to general employment, or to a regulated profession or further education at a particular level.
- Formal rights ultimately bestowed on the qualification holder, such as the right to use a professional title.

### 3.4.3 Qualifications frameworks

Qualifications frameworks, where these form a part of education and training systems, are useful indicators of the relative places and status of qualifications in their home countries, as well as of quality assurance processes that are in place.

**Evaluators take account of:**
- The function or purpose of the qualification
- Education pathway outcomes (i.e. rights of progression)
- Entry requirements (e.g. matriculation)
- Levels (on applicable overseas qualification frameworks)
- Workload / academic weight (credits) if applicable
- Key components (e.g. apprenticeship, practicum, thesis)
- Learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, attitudes)
- International benchmarking resources
- Mutual recognition agreements

**Authenticity checks**
- QRS staff need to be trained in documentation examination techniques by the Tonga Police Forensic sections
- Databases of information on verified documents, security features, advice on requirements
- Original documentation required to be submitted
- Close liaison with other agencies

**Liaison with other agencies**
- QRS appreciates assistance from time to time on key contacts in agencies and institutions within jurisdictions and some ‘on the ground’ information / advice on qualification recognition matters, particularly from NZQA QRS unit.
• Happy to facilitate the provision of information as required

3.5 **Comparative Assessment Outcomes**

• Specified outcome
  – Comparable to a named TQF qualification (with or without a Credit value)
    • E.g.: Bachelor of Arts (level 7, 360 credits), National Certificate in Hospitality (Level 4)
    • This means NZQA recognises the overseas qualification as substantially similar in learning outcomes, focus, content and intent to the New Zealand qualification listed in the assessment outcome.

• Generic outcome
  – Comparable to a TQF qualification type (with or without a Credit value)
    • E.g.: a bachelor degree at Level 7 (360 credits), a master degree at Level 9, a diploma at Level 5 (60 credits)
    • This means that while there is substantial similarity in structure and learning outcomes to a Tonga qualification there is not a current Tonga qualification at this level that is substantially similar in focus, content and/or intent.

• Unspecified or Level outcome
  – Comparable to an TQF Level (with or without a Credit value)
    • E.g.: a qualification at Level 7, a qualification at Level 3 (240 credits)
    • This means there are quite substantial difference(s) in structure, focus, content and/or intent between the overseas qualification(s) and qualifications offered on the TQF. There is, however, recognition given for similarity to the broad learning outcomes specified at the particular learning outcome level on the TQF.

3.6 **General Guiding Principles**

QRS uses information available at the time the assessment is made, and takes into account:

• The function or purpose of the qualification
• Education pathway outcomes (i.e. rights of progression)
• Entry requirements (e.g. matriculation)
• Levels (on overseas qualification frameworks)
• Accreditation status and requirements
• Workload (credits) if applicable
• Key components (e.g. apprenticeship, practicum, dissertation, thesis)
• Learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, abilities)
• International Benchmarking resources
• Mutual recognition agreements for the qualification at the time of award.

3.7 Recognition Outcomes in Tonga

• Contributing to the identification of skilled migrants wishing to live and work in Tonga
• ITACs, employers, Government agencies and occupational registration bodies acceptance of TNQAB’s recognition of qualifications gained overseas.
• Contributing to the recognition of Tonga qualifications overseas (by answering enquiries from overseas).
• Assisting in upholding the integrity and quality assurance of the Tonga education system.

3.8 QRS output

• Various types of qualification recognition assessments
• Responses to enquiries from the public, Immigration Tonga, occupational, other government agencies, and other related and relevant stakeholders sectors.
• Contribution to joint working groups

3.9. Issues and Challenges re. recognition of foreign qualifications

Timelines and delays
The timelines indicated of 30 days refer to the minimum period of time required, under fairly ideal circumstances, to process and complete various categories of applications and make results available.

Due to various factors beyond the control of TNQAB, there is always a likelihood that the timelines may be exceeded. Clients should therefore take cognisance of the possibility of delay before lodging an application, but at the same time be assured that the TNQAB will do everything within its power to make results available within the relevant timelines, or as promptly afterwards as is possible. In the event of an extraordinary circumstance causing considerable delay, clients will be informed.

Factors beyond the control of TNQAB include the following:
Lack of information necessary to complete an evaluation, in which case such information normally has to be obtained from the country of origin of the qualification.
In the event of such an enquiry, please note that the finalisation of the evaluation is dependent on a reply from the source, as well as on the quality of the reply. The TNQAB cannot manage a delay in this regard. On receipt of a reply processing is, however, treated with the necessary urgency.

Available human and other resources in the TNQAB temporarily do not at the time match the demand for the service.

The nature of the qualifications submitted for evaluation requires considerably more research and/or consultation than usual.

3.10 Summary of the procedure

- TNQAB requires original documents
- Translations into English must be provided by a recognised official translation service
- The application process will provided in hard-copies
- The applicants must sign the coversheet themselves
- A standard International Qualifications Assessment will take 35 working days to complete, from when TNQAB confirms all required documents have been supplied:
  - This excludes public holidays, weekends, and time taken to verify the qualifications or awarding bodies or receive additional documents or information from the applicant or agent.
- Evaluators judge the authenticity of qualification documentation and verify this if unsure. Qualifications are verified as required.
- Establish the accreditation status of the qualification and/or awarding body or institution in the country of origin.
- Benchmark overseas qualifications against demonstrably similar qualifications currently offered in Tonga and listed on the TQF.

4. Ratification Process of the Revised AP Convention

The Honourable Prime Minister as Acting Minister of Education and Training made the following recommendation:

“That Tonga conveys its intention to the 12th Session that it will commence internal processes to become a signatory to the Convention, in the first instance, and that it will consider ratifying thereafter”
Signing first does not commit Tonga to make legislation right away and it is only approved by Cabinet. To ratify will be a longer process and requires drafting of relevant legislation which has to be approved by Parliament.

The Tonga National Commission for UNESCO in consultation with the Ministry of Education and Training will initiate the process for signatory after the Bangkok Session.

With regards to the National Information Centre (NIC) in Higher Education, the Ministry of Education and Training’s Higher Education Division will carry out this function. Once this setup is properly set up and in operation and has linked up with EMIS (Education Management and Information System) it will then be possible to upload information onto the UNESCO managed web-portals.