Understanding ‘substantial difference’

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Skype session with Dr E. Stephen Hunt

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What does substantial difference mean?

• We can define the concept
• We can’t define all possible substantial differences
• Each country can have their own interpretation of substantial differences
  – How substantial is too substantial?
  – How different is too different?
Background to substantial difference

- Substantial difference is for qualifications recognition specialists
- Does not prescribe how to recognise
- Provides context/framework to ensure transparency, coherence and reliability
- Makes our jobs easier
- Allows flexibility
Substantial difference in Europe

“…each Party shall recognise the higher education qualifications conferred in another Party, unless a substantial difference can be shown between the qualification for which recognition is sought and the corresponding qualification in the Party in which recognition is sought.”

- Lisbon Recognition Convention, 1997
Substantial difference in Europe, cont’d

• Developed out of a principle of fairness
• Up to NIC to demonstrate substantial difference
• Convention text is a legal document
  – Substantial difference cannot be explained or defined in legalistic terms
• Defined and developed through practice and over several years
Substantial difference in Europe, cont’d

• Not every difference is a substantial difference
• A substantial difference does not mean you cannot recognise the qualification
• Substantial difference should relate to:
  – Function of qualification, and/or
  – Purpose of recognition
Substantial difference in the Asia-Pacific

“…each Party shall recognise the qualifications in higher education in another Party, unless substantial difference can be shown.”

- Revised Asia-Pacific Regional Convention, Tokyo, 2011
Why is substantial difference important?

- Equivalence versus comparability
- Acknowledges that differences are not a barrier to recognition
- Promotes flexibility and consideration of the context (i.e. outcomes not inputs, purpose of recognition, additional factors)
Possible definition of substantial difference

“…substantial differences are those that may have a serious impact on the fitness of the qualification for the purpose for which the learner would like to use it.”

- Developing attitudes to recognition: substantial differences in an age of globalisation, 2009
Possible definition of substantial difference

“...substantial differences are differences...that are so significant, that they would most likely prevent the applicant from succeeding in the desired activity such as further study, research activities or employment.”

- European Area of Recognition Manual, 2012
Substantial difference in practice

- The differences you identify depend on:
  - foreign qualification
  - purpose of recognition
  - benchmark

- Your assessment methodology is how you identify substantial differences

- Responsibility lies with the NIC to recognise at level unless you identify and explain substantial differences

- No such thing as right or wrong – all a matter of opinion
Benchmarks and purpose of recognition
Session objectives

• Substantial differences are based on a combination of 3 key things:
  – benchmark
  – purpose of recognition
  – foreign qualification

• This session aims to show how your benchmark and the purpose of recognition influences the recognition process
Benchmarks

• National qualifications framework
• Education system
  – Academic qualifications
  – Professional qualifications
• Occupational legislation (licensing/registration)
Benchmarks – the AQF as an example

• Based on qualifications, rather than levels credits or length of study
  – We only recognise completed foreign qualifications

• Qualifications defined by outcomes (knowledge and skills) and accreditation/quality assurance
  – We don’t focus on inputs and quality is a major focus of our methodology
Benchmarks – the AQF as an example

• AQF promotes flexibility and articulation between sectors
  – TVET to HE pathway is not a recognition barrier
  – Credit transfer is rarely an issue

• Status of qualifications is always clear (AQF/not AQF)
  – Limited recognition for foreign qualifications offered outside the regulated education system
Benchmarks – the AQF as an example

• Generic framework
  – We don’t issue subject-specific assessments

• Subject to routine review
  – Frequent adjustments to methodology and assessment outcomes needed
Your benchmark

- An NQF isn’t necessary to undertake recognition work
- You may use your higher education qualifications as a benchmark
- For consistency, transparency and equity you need a clear understanding of your benchmark
- You need to be able to explain your benchmark to clients
Purpose of recognition

- Study
- Employment
  - In a regulated profession
  - In an unregulated profession
- Migration
- Depending on the purpose of recognition there may be:
  - different decision-makers
  - different recognition processes
Purpose of recognition, cont’d

- Regardless of the purpose, recognition always considers the foreign qualification
- Possible areas of substantial difference:
  - Qualification: level, sector, status, content, workload, learning outcomes, quality
  - Institution: level, sector, status, quality
  - Country: regulation and quality assurance
Educational recognition

• Recognition for further study purposes
• Possible areas of substantial difference:
  – Subject knowledge
  – Prerequisite subjects
  – Research experience
Professional recognition

- Recognition for employment and/or skilled migration
- Possible areas of substantial difference:
  - Professional knowledge
  - Professional skills
  - Local context
Possible recognition decisions

• Your options are influenced by your benchmark and the purpose of recognition
  – Full recognition
  – Partial recognition
  – No recognition

• Reaching a decision requires a process of identifying substantial differences – this is your recognition methodology
Methodology: identifying substantial differences
Session objectives

• Understand what a methodology is and how it supports your recognition activities
• How to identify substantial difference using a methodology
• Potential factors to consider in making a recognition decision
What is methodology?

• Framework to support recognition decisions
  – supports transparency, coherence and reliability
  – systemic approach to identifying substantial differences
  – assures clients that decisions are not arbitrary
  – supports flexibility needed in managing foreign qualifications and education systems
Types of methodologies

1. Quantitative
   - Quality not considered
   - Quantitative factors (program inputs) considered

2. General qualitative/quantitative
   - Quality considered at country level
   - Quantitative factors also considered

3. Specific qualitative/quantitative
   - Quality considered at country, institution and qualification levels
   - Quantitative factors also considered
Methodology in practice

• Based on research and analysis of a range of qualitative and quantitative factors
  – Country
  – Institution
  – Qualification

• Identifies generic substantial differences
  – Supports decision-making for study, employment and migration purposes
  – Decision-making authorities add specialist value
Methodology in practice, cont’d

- **Country indicators**
  - Funding/resources: % GDP on education, Government distribution of funding, priority areas, reform programs, development loans
  - Statistics: literacy, numeracy, participation
  - Regulation and quality assurance: robustness of processes, effectiveness, variation in quality
  - Administration: Government involvement in education, roles/responsibilities of other authorities
Methodology in practice, cont’d

• Institution indicators
  – Status: recognition in country, sector, public/private, university/college/institute, date of establishment, funding
  – Quality assurance: external and internal mechanisms, accreditation/approval
  – Resources and infrastructure: library facilities, computer facilities, faculties/schools, number of academic staff with PhD, staff/student ratio
  – Other: program diversity, research involvement, professional affiliations, international linkages, areas of specialisation
Methodology in practice, cont’d

• Qualification indicators
  – Type
  – Sector
  – Mode of study
  – Length of study
  – Program requirements
  – Pathways and articulation
  – Academic/professional rights
  – Program analysis: coherence, breadth and depth
Identifying substantial differences

- Decide what factors are important
- Undertake research and analysis
- Up to the applicant to provide information about their qualification
- Up to NIC to find information about substantial differences
Resources and information sources

• Several recognition authorities (NICs or other organisations) publish comparability resources
  – Different methodologies
  – Different benchmarks
  – Different approaches to substantial difference
  – Different levels of detail and transparency

• Ensure you understand the context
Comparability resources

- AACRAO Edge
- CEP Online
- CICIC/IQAS
- International Comparisons
- International Qualifications Database
- NUFFIC Country Modules
Information sources

- UNESCO Portal
- ENIC-NARIC network
- International Handbook of Universities
- World List of Universities
- World Higher Education Database
- World Education Service
  – World Education News and Reviews
Making a decision

- Decisions are based on the best information available at the time of recognition
- Weigh up positive and negative indicators
- Does any difference impact on the suitability of the qualification for the purpose of recognition?
  - Yes: substantial difference
  - No: acceptable difference
Developing a methodology

• Takes time and practical experience
• Must be flexible enough to allow for changes/developments in education systems
• Focus on
  – How it will help you identify substantial differences
  – Practicality
  – Your benchmark and purpose of recognition
Best practice roundtable
Next steps

• What tools do you need to support the use of substantial difference in your recognition work?
• Which principles are fundamental to the region?
• Which topics need further exploration?