Substantial Difference in the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications?

A Research Study on the Practices of Credential Evaluators in Irish Higher Education Institutions

Volume I of II

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February 2015

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Abstract

This study investigates the practices of those individuals acting as foreign credential evaluators with a focus on postgraduate access at Irish higher education institutions (HEIs). Using a research design that involves a refined form of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2000, 2006; Glaser 2001), the researcher explores what constitutes and influences practice in differing local contexts for credential evaluators. A preliminary research phase aided the development of four research questions which facilitated the conducting of 14 semi-structured interviews and two focus group interviews with credential evaluators. Each of the four research questions concern a key aspect of the work of credential evaluators.

- Role: What do credential evaluators feel their role entails, and what are their priorities when evaluating foreign qualifications?
- Values: What values are important to credential evaluators in evaluating foreign qualifications?
- Processes: What resources, tools and procedures are used in carrying out credential evaluation?
- Policy: What policies impact on the work of a credential evaluator and how?

These specific questions do not exhaust the broader aims of the research. These are concerned with advancing understanding of credential evaluation practice at HEIs, thereby offering a reliable means of improving practice, based on an analysis of best available information and knowledge. Based on the researcher's interpretation of the data, five key issues impacting on credential evaluation practice emerged from the interviews.

I.   Discrepancies in approach to credential evaluation in higher education institutions

II.   Benefits and difficulties in using UK NARIC as an authority in credential evaluation

III.   Differing levels of professional support for credential evaluation within and across higher education institutions

IV.   Understanding credential evaluation practice through connections with existing policies and activities

V.   Tensions between the needs of the individual applicant, the credential evaluator and the higher education institution

The issues highlighted above are interdependent with the matter of professional identity offered by the researcher as the main connecting thread. Firstly, there is as yet no designated role of evaluator of foreign credentials in Irish HEIs, leading to a lack of clarity. Secondly, extensive use of UK NARIC services, although helpful in some key respects, can also exacerbate confusions where the role of Irish HEIs as competent recognition authorities is concerned. The duration and depth of experience of a credential evaluator have a strong impact on his/her capability, especially when seeking and accessing appropriate assistance for credential evaluation activities. This experience factor is all the more important currently, as the context for foreign credential evaluation is changing rapidly. The global demand for higher education has increased exponentially, resulting in increased mobility of potential students and the development of a plethora of credential evaluation tools. This dynamic has led to greater demands on HEIs for transparency, fairness and accountability in how foreign qualifications are recognised. Finally, while the Lisbon Recognition Convention provides a legal and ethical framework to guide practice, the research undertaken for this thesis suggests that decision-making is highly individualised. It frequently relies on tacit knowledge, experience and informal networks and is impacted on by the prevailing organisational culture. There is a tension between the push for standardised approaches to practice on the one hand and the pressures of internationalisation, and the autonomy of academics and institutions on the other. In summary, credential evaluation at Irish HEIs is shown to be an emergent, rather than established practice.

Based on analysis of the findings, the thesis explores the merits of promoting community of practice approaches (Wenger 1998) to address fruitfully the main issues of concern investigated during the research. The study concludes by offering a number of recommendations for attention and action by credential evaluators and management staff at HEIs in particular. A number of reflections by the researcher are also offered.

Acknowledgements

There are many whom I need to thank for making this thesis a reality:

I thank God for His everlasting love and support. He has blessed me with health and a loving family. I only hope that I live the life He has given to me as He would like.

I would like to thank the staff at the Departments of Education and Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University for their inspiration and encouragement at all times. In particular, I wish to express my appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Pádraig Hogan for his patient guidance and attention to detail. Your sustained interest in this research was such a motivation for me!

My sincere thanks to Ms. Gill Roe (Education in Ireland) for access to statistics on international students in Ireland.

I would like to acknowledge the ongoing support and enthusiasm from my colleagues at QQI, and especially to Dr. Rhona Dempsey for her advice and endless encouragement.

To all my fellow learners on the programme – thanks for all the fun and support over the past years.

I would like to thank my friends (you know who you are!) for their support and encouragement.

To Ms. Gráinne Barrett – thank you for the references!!

To my parents, Jim and Patricia; my brothers Darragh and Jimmy and my sisters, Róisín and Orla - thank you so much for always being there for me.

To my extended family and the White family – a big thanks for the encouragement and baby-sitting!!

Finally, but certainly not least - to Tomás and my beautiful girls, Megan, Éabha and Ella. Thank you for changing my life.

Dedication

For Mossy, my husband and best friend

Don't walk behind me; I may not lead. Don't walk in front of me; I may not follow. Just walk beside me and be my friend.

Albert Camus

Chapter One

An Introduction to the Field of Recognition and Issues for Consideration

Introduction

The recognition of qualifications across borders is a complex and fascinating phenomenon as distinct from being merely, or even mainly, a technical task. In this study, the researcher opens up to scrutiny the world of credential evaluation from a practitioners' point of view. This opening chapter first identifies the specific focus and main aims of this research study while emphasising the broad objective of improving practice. The central research questions are also introduced and the background and context for the study, including the researcher's own role and interests, are explained. In addition, the choice of topic and focus is justified and a brief synopsis is given of the remaining chapters in the thesis.

This Research Study – Focus, Aims and Research Questions

The practices involved in the recognition of foreign qualifications for the purpose of accessing postgraduate study[1] at Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) are the focus of this research study. The main aims are outlined below with the ultimate objective of informing the improvement of credential evaluation practice at HEIs.

1. To explore institutional practice at Irish HEIs relating to the recognition of foreign qualifications with a focus on access to postgraduate study.

2. To identify staff members acting as credential evaluators at HEIs for postgraduate access, and allow them an opportunity to reflect on their professional practice, and have their voices heard in the wider context of recognition activities and developments.

3. To gain a picture of the consistency of recognition decisions made for the purpose of postgraduate access across Irish HEIs.

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[1] Postgraduate study in the context of this thesis is taken to mean study on programmes leading to the following awards on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) – Higher Diploma (NFQ Level 8); Post-Graduate Diploma and Master Degree (NFQ Level 9) and Doctoral Degree (NFQ Level 10), or equivalent as Irish HEIs may offer postgraduate programmes leading to awards from another jurisdiction, for example, the UK.

4. To enhance awareness and understanding of factors impacting on recognition at HEIs.

5. To demonstrate to individual credential evaluators and HEIs the importance of maximising consistency and transparency in recognition and related practices in achieving their aims and fulfilling obligations.

6. To illuminate connections between credential evaluation and an array of both national and international developments and initiatives.

7. To help inform policy development to enhance best practice in credential evaluation.

8. To provide the researcher with a mechanism for reflection on her own practice while facilitating her understanding of credential evaluation at HEIs.

Higher education institutions are critically important actors in recognition. This study focuses on the practices of those individuals (credential evaluators) in Irish HEIs making recognition decisions on foreign qualifications presented to them for the purpose of access to postgraduate study. Their practices will be examined and discussed in the context of the following four central research questions.

- Role: As a credential evaluator, what do you feel your role entails, and what are your priorities when evaluating foreign qualifications?
- Values: What values are important in your practice when evaluating foreign qualifications?
- Processes: What resources, tools and procedures do you use to evaluate foreign qualifications?
- Policy: What policies impact on your work as a credential evaluator and how?

The preceding research questions are not designed to exhaust the aims of this research. Their purpose is to inform the improvement of credential evaluation practice in the future as the answers to these questions will be very significant in how the broader aims of the thesis will be fulfilled.

This research is being undertaken to address a dearth in knowledge on credential evaluation practice in Irish HEIs for postgraduate access. While the particular focus of the study will be justified later in detail, the importance of fair recognition of foreign qualifications is outlined now to provide a rationale for research on this topic. A glossary of acronyms and terms used throughout the thesis are included in Appendix A (Volume II p3) for ease of reference.

Qualifications are, in essence, formal statements acknowledging the learning achievements of individuals and ultimately mechanisms through which many gain access to further education and/or employment. The massification of higher education in many parts of the world, and an increase in mobility (whether voluntary or otherwise) means that the importance of the recognition of qualifications and previous learning is reinforced, not only for an individual but for society as a whole. Migration is generally considered as increasingly important for addressing 'skills gaps' (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs 2007 p7). The recognition of qualifications is viewed as an important element towards the achievement of integration and social cohesion (Integrating Ireland 2005). Migrants are a vulnerable group and there is evidence to suggest that their skills and knowledge tend to be under-valued in the workplace (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2008 p104; European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) 2011 p76). The National Economic & Social Council have documented that migrants are more negatively impacted in terms of employment during a recession (NESC 2011 p31). This is significant given recent difficult economic conditions in Ireland. Furthermore, it is claimed by migrants that certain international qualifications may be under-valued or not recognised at all by HEIs and professional bodies (Fagan 2007 p145-146). But the voice of the credential evaluator has not been heard to date in this debate. The fair recognition of qualifications held by international students is also important to support the European mobility agenda and to build Ireland's reputation as a destination for high quality education provision.

To begin to provide a context and background for the study, a brief overview of relevant legislative arrangements and main actors is now presented.

Recognising Foreign Qualifications in Ireland – Legislation, Actors and Figures

Recognition in the context of this research study means the academic recognition of qualifications gained outside of the State, typically referred to as foreign or international qualifications, awards or credentials. The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region represents the principal international legal text aimed at helping achieve fair recognition of both completed higher education qualifications, and qualifications providing access to higher education in the European Region. This joint Convention of the Council of Europe (CoE) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

(UNESCO) is commonly referred to as the Lisbon Recognition Convention of 1997 (LRC). Recognition is defined as

> a formal acknowledgement by a competent authority of the value of a foreign educational qualification with a view to access to educational and/or employment activities (Council of Europe 1997).

Ireland is bound by the LRC, having ratified the Convention in 2004. While the LRC specifically concerns academic recognition in the sense of participation in higher education, its principles are relevant and increasingly applied (Rauhvargers 2006 p23-24) for access to both regulated and unregulated employment. Thus, three broad categories of competent recognition authority in Ireland are outlined in Table 1.1 below, with a more detailed explanation of each provided in Chapter Two.

Table 1-1: Competent Recognition Authorities in Ireland

Competent Authority	Role - Recognition of qualifications for access to:
Education Institutions, including Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)	Further study
Professional Recognition Bodies (PRBs)	Regulated professions
Employers	Unregulated employment

Competent recognition authorities may also be involved in the recognition of periods of study (also covered by the LRC). While this dimension is acknowledged as an important aspect of the recognition context for HEIs, the focus of this study is on the recognition of completed foreign qualifications. The term 'recognition' will be used to mean the outcome or decision from credential evaluation, the latter being used interchangeably with recognition activities/processes, to indicate the process of assessing or evaluating the value of a foreign qualification.

Although not a competent recognition authority, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), an agency of the Department of Education and Skills (DES), provides advice on the academic recognition of qualifications for a variety of stakeholders, including HEIs. The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)[2] for Ireland, a system of ten levels

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[2] An interactive diagram of the NFQ is available on the QQI website. See:
http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-(NFQ).aspx

used to describe the Irish qualifications system, is used to place a foreign qualification in the context of the Irish education and training system. Advice is issued by the service called Qualifications Recognition (QR), which acts as the Irish centre in the European Network of Information Centres (ENIC)[3] and National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC)[4] networks. With a total of 55 centres, both networks liaise closely together for the purposes of facilitating the recognition of foreign qualifications in their countries and the recognition of national qualifications abroad[5]. The overall goal is essentially the promotion of enhanced mobility for individuals. Of key significance here is the ENIC-NARIC network (the Network) as a key mechanism through which principles of the LRC are promoted to competent recognition authorities. Arguably, the Network is also of strategic importance in bridging the gap between policy and practice in credential evaluation. This will be further discussed in subsequent chapters.

The researcher is based at QQI and is responsible for managing the QR service which is underpinned by legislation, with the general requirement for the organisation to

> promote, maintain, further develop and implement the Framework [(NFQ) and to] co-operate with international bodies on qualifications and quality assurance policies and their implementation and in particular to (i) liaise with awarding bodies outside the State for the purposes of facilitating the recognition in the State of awards of those bodies, and (ii) facilitate the recognition outside the State of awards made in the State (Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland is also involved in external quality assurance in further and higher education, is responsible for validating programmes and making awards for certain providers, and acts as custodian of the NFQ. Further, QQI is designated as the national contact point (NCP) for many European initiatives related to education and training. The location of the researcher within such a central and well-connected organisation both nationally and internationally facilitates her in making connections between credential evaluation and relevant areas of policy and practice. An overview of the technical and policy work of QR is provided in Chapter Two.

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[3] The ENIC network, established by the CoE and UNESCO in 1994, is made up of the States party to the European Cultural Convention or the UNESCO Europe Region.

[4] The NARIC network, an initiative of the European Commission from 1984 comprises Member States of the European Union (EU) countries, the European Economic Area (EEA) countries and Turkey. See: www.enic-naric.net.

[5] The ENIC and NARIC Networks share a website. See: www.enic-naric.net.

The collection of data on migration, and more specifically on international students in Ireland, serves as a starting point for this study in demonstrating the increasing significance of, and interest in, the field of credential evaluation. The emergence of favourable economic conditions in the 1990s resulted in the beginning of large scale immigration to Ireland. Based on data collected by the Central Statistics Office (CSO), Figure 1-1 provides a picture of migration to and from Ireland for the years 1996 to 2014 (CSO 2014) which includes returning individuals of Irish nationality.

Figure 1-1: Inward and Outward Migration - Ireland, 1996-2014[1]
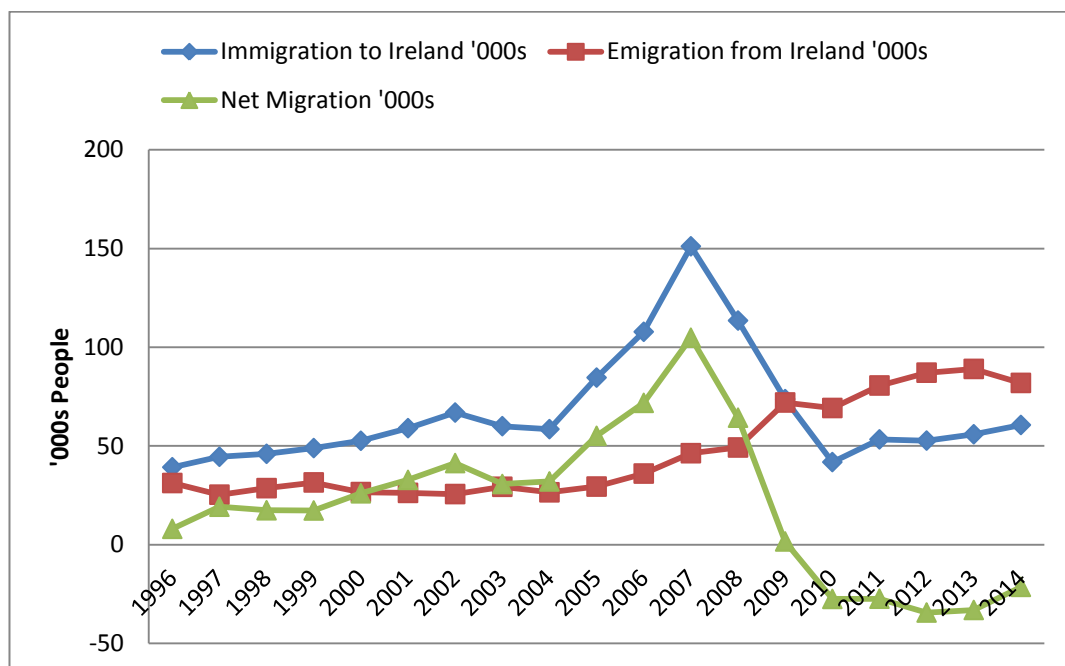
[1] Figures for 2012, 2013 and 2014 are preliminary.

In the period 1996 to 2004, net migration to Ireland was 224,700 people and this figure peaked in 2007 with an annual migration of 104,800 (CSO 2012a p2). This change in the country's migration profile from "emigrant nursery to immigrant destination" (Gilmartin and White 2008 p144) was rapid and lasted for a period of fourteen years – from 1996 to 2009. These migration trends are of immense importance for those involved in credential evaluation practice. There are increased numbers of potential foreign qualification holders (including returning Irish) in Ireland, the majority of whom may be seeking access to continuing education and training and/or employment. Indeed, the number of non-Irish nationals living in Ireland increased by 143 per cent between 2002 and 2011 to 544,357 and represented 199 different nations (CSO 2012b). Census 2011 shows that 60 per cent of non-Irish nationals are in the 22-44 year age group, in stark contrast to 32 per cent of Irish nationals. Further, 30.7 per cent of non-Irish

nationals hold at least a degree (*ibid.*). Such a rapid increase in the diversity of the population impacts on recognition activities. This study aims to shed light on the consequent challenges faced by credential evaluators at HEIs.

To offer some insight on where qualifications may originate from when presented for recognition in Ireland, Table 1-2 below provides information on different nationality groupings of immigrants over the time period 2006 to 2014 (CSO 2014).

Table 1-2: Immigrants to Ireland Classified by Nationality, 2006-2014

Nationality	Percentage of Total Annual Immigration to Ireland								
	2006	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**[1]	**2012**[2]	**2013**[2]	**2014**[2]
Irish	18%	20%	21%	31%	43%	37%	39%	28%	19%
UK	9%	3%	6%	5%	6%	8%	4%	9%	8%
Rest of EU-15[3]	12%	8%	9%	16%	15%	13%	14	13%	14%
EU-13[4]	46%	56%	48%	29%	22%	19%	20%	19%	17%
Rest of World	15%	13%	16%	19%	14%	23%	23%	31%	42%
Total (000's)	107.8 100%	151.1 100%	113.5 100%	73.7 100%	41.8 100%	53.3 100%	52.7 100%	55.9 100%	60.6 100%

[1] Census of Population.
[2] Preliminary figures.
[3] Rest of EU15: countries before enlargement on 1 May 2004, i.e., Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Portugal.
[4] EU13: defined as 10 countries that joined the EU on 1 May 2004 (i.e., Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), along with Bulgaria and Romania that joined on 1 January 2007 and Croatia that joined on 1 July 2013.

Table 1-2 reveals that, on average for the period 2006 to 2013, approximately 80 per cent of immigrants had EU nationality. This information is significant for this study as those individuals attempting to access higher education with qualifications from the EU should have their qualifications evaluated based on the principles of the LRC.

While data originating from the CSO includes different types of migrant, such as asylum seekers and refugees, the figures also include those moving across borders purposefully for education. Both Education in Ireland (EI)[6] and the Higher Education

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[6] Enterprise Ireland is responsible for managing and promoting Ireland's 'Education in Ireland' brand relating to international higher education provision (www.educationinireland.com). This responsibility was assigned following closure of The International Education Board Ireland in late 2009.

Authority (HEA)[7] are involved in compiling statistics relating to international students in Irish higher education. Such figures are of particular importance in providing a context for the current study. The most recent report from EI (2012 p13) provides information on international student numbers in addition to their mode of study for the three academic years to 2012, as shown in Table 1-3 below.

Table 1-3: International Student Numbers in Ireland by Mode of Study: 2009/10, 2010/11 & 2011/12

Study Mode	2009/10		2010/11		2011/12	
Full time	16,201	*66%*	14,960	*51%*	15,596	*49%*
Exchange/Short	8,447	*34%*	9,227	*31%*	9,110	*28%*
Distance	109	*<1%*	489	*2%*	1,128	*4%*
Offshore	Not Collected	---	4,503	*15%*	6,166	*19%*
Not Specified	21	*<1%*	197	*1%*	123	*<1%*
Total No. Students	24,778	*100%*	29,376	*100%*	32,123	*100%*

Table 1-3 illustrates an increase in international students availing of Irish higher education from 2009-2012 and demonstrates the growing importance of transnational or offshore education, with a corresponding decrease in the number of full-time students physically present in the State. A question arises as to the potential impact, if any, of these trends on credential evaluation practice at HEIs.

Education in Ireland data includes country of origin, type of host institution and level of study accessed. In the year 2009/10, 38 per cent of international students were from European countries while 70 per cent of EU and 63 per cent of non-EU students were

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[7] The HEA is an agency of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) involved in planning and policy development for Irish higher education and research. It also acts as the funding authority for certain institutions in the higher education sector.

studying at Bachelor level, with Humanities and Business the two most popular disciplines (EI 2010 p6). The corresponding figures for postgraduate study were 20 and 25 per cent, respectively (*ibid.* p7).The university sector dominates with 70 per cent of Irish-based international students enrolled there (EI 2012 p12). The situation is dynamic in terms of country of origin. Table 1-4 shows international students' country of origin (top ten in terms of numbers) in the period 2010-12 (*ibid.* p22).

Table 1-4: Total Numbers of International Students in Irish Higher Education Institutions by Country of Origin, 2010-12

Rank	Country of Origin	Ireland	Offshore/ Distance	2011/12 Totals	2010/11 Totals	Difference
1	China	2,751	2,349	5,100	5,105	-5
2	USA	4,415	31	4,446	4,386	60
3	France	2,092	5	2,097	2,447	-350
4	Singapore	141	1,678	1,819	1,545	274
5	Germany	1,727	22	1,749	1,709	40
6	UK	1,310	58	1,368	1,611	-243
7	Malaysia	1,168	123	1,291	1,168	123
8	Sri Lanka	17	1,126	1,143	723	420
9	Spain	909	227	1,136	1,110	26
10	Canada	975	69	1,044	884	160

Key countries in terms of numbers are detailed in Table 1-4, with six of the top ten being non-EU. This is no surprise given government policy direction to be discussed later. The growing numbers of Asian students is noticeable. The OECD (2011 p318) report that approximately 3.7 million students enrolled in higher education outside of their country of citizenship in 2009, while 52 per cent of all international students worldwide are Asian.

UNESCO (2009 p44) reports that worldwide, the demand by mobile students (not residents or citizens) for International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)[8] 5A and 6 programmes, is 40 and seven per cent, respectively. In the Irish context, this means that almost 50 per cent of mobile students across the world are seeking

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[8] ISCED is a national standard classification of education. Further information is available from: http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-standard-classifcation-of-education.aspx.

admission to programmes leading to the equivalent of Honours Bachelor Degrees, Post-Graduate Diplomas and Master Degrees (ISCED 5A), and Doctoral Degrees (ISCED 6). Table 1-5 gives the number of full-time students studying for postgraduate qualifications by NFQ Level, in addition to their location and domicile.

Table 1-5: Full-Time International Postgraduate Student Numbers by Qualification and NFQ Level, Location, and Domicile - 2011/12[1, 2]

NFQ Level	Level 8	Level 9				Level 10
Qualification	Higher Diploma	Postgrad. Diploma	Masters (taught)	Masters (research)	Unspecified	
Numbers of Full-Time International Postgraduate Students						
	102	166	2,495	206	14	3,147
Sub-total	102	2,881				3,147
Full-time International Students across all NFQ levels = 15,596 (100%); of which;						
% of All (Undergrad. and Postgrad.) Full-time International Students						
	7%	18.5%				20.2%
Location of Full-time Postgraduate International Students[3]						
University	50	2,071				3,097
IoT	4	208				133
Ind. / Other state-aided	48	602				17
Sub-total	102 (100%)	2,881				3,147
Domicile of Full-time Postgraduate International Students						
EU	44	732				1,580
Non-EU	58	2,149				1,567
Sub-total	102 (100%)	2,881				3,147

[1] Detailed figures for this table were obtained directly from EI by the researcher.
[2] Figures include transnational and offshore students.
[3] There are four broad categories of HEI as defined by the DES: the university sector (seven universities in addition to university recognised colleges and colleges of education); 13 Institutes of Technology (IoTs) and Dublin Institute of Technology; independent/private colleges and other state-aided colleges.

The increasing numbers of international students in Irish postgraduate education is of particular note for this study. For the academic year 2003/04, 16 per cent (3005) of the

total number of international students were accessing postgraduate programmes (The International Education Board Ireland 2004 p26), while this number increased to 23 per cent (5,930) for 2009/10 (EI 2010 p9). In that year, eight per cent of international students in Ireland were enrolled on doctoral programmes (*ibid.* p9); the international average is seven per cent (UNESCO 2009 p44). For the academic year 2011/12, 20 per cent (6,400) of Ireland's international students were enrolled on doctoral programmes. For comparison purposes, it is interesting to note that the UK has 13 per cent of the global market share of international students and ranks second behind the USA (OECD 2014 p344). The number of international students in the UK rose from approximately 44,000 in 1972 to over 435,000 in 2012 (European Parliament 2015 p184). Meanwhile, in Finland, to take an example of a country more similar in population to Ireland, approximately 20,000 international students were enrolled in 2015 (*ibid.* p92).

Table 1-5 clearly demonstrates the dominance of the university sector as the location of choice for international students in Ireland. The attractiveness of Irish postgraduate education for non-EU students, perhaps as an English-speaking country, is also of note, as are the relatively high numbers of students accessing taught master and doctoral degree programmes. There are clear preferences in terms of fields of study chosen by international students as demonstrated in Figure 1-2.

Figure 1-2: Fields of Study for Full-Time International Postgraduate Students by NFQ Level, 2011-12
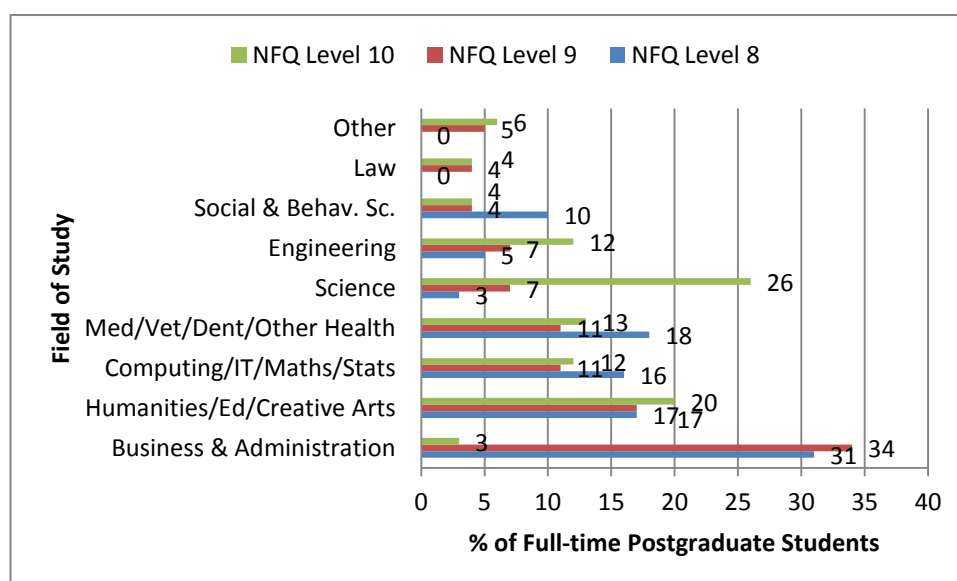
For awards at NFQ Level 9, programmes in business and administration are most popular, with programmes in science being most important in terms of leading to awards at NFQ Level 10. Incidentally, these fields of study, respectively, represent the highest fields of enrolment by mobile students worldwide (UNESCO 2009 p45).

The EI figures are indicative of individuals who have moved across borders to study and try to exclude those whose domicile is Ireland. Those presenting foreign qualifications to HEIs for recognition may or may not have domicile in Ireland. Data from some institutions may be based on nationality rather than domicile (EI 2012 p6), despite the definition of 'international student' adopted in the International Education Strategy (DES 2010 p30). Although the HEA records data on actual enrolments, there is no publicly available data on the number or origin of foreign qualifications presented to HEIs in Ireland in an effort to gain access to their programmes. While undergraduate admission is somewhat centralised, with individuals acting as credential evaluators more easily identified, the same is not generally true for postgraduate study. Clarification is required on who is involved in credential evaluation for postgraduate access and how it takes place.

The focus now shifts to an examination of why credential evaluation practice for postgraduate access is considered worthy of investigation in this study. The researcher argues why the specific focus of this study is particularly relevant and timely in the context of ongoing activities and policy direction.

The Importance of Exploring Credential Evaluation Practice at Higher Education Institutions

On an international level, the ENIC-NARIC network has a mandate through the LRC to promote best practice in credential evaluation and identifies HEIs as key stakeholders. However, it is quite surprising that most national centres, including Ireland, are not aware of credential evaluation practices in their HEIs. This dearth of information on institutional practice is confirmed through the analysis of National Action Plans (NAPs) for recognition sought through the Bologna Process (Rauhvargers and Rusakova 2009). The latter is a political process and a key mechanism for reform in higher education in Ireland, Europe and further afield. Its origins are in the Bologna Declaration (The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) 1999) where 29 countries pledged to reform

their higher education systems in a convergent way. It aimed to create the EHEA by 2010 with the recognition and transparency of qualifications a core concern. For the aims of the Bologna process to be successfully realised, they must ultimately materialise at institutional level and this relies on implementation by individuals. In the NAPs on recognition submitted, the section on institutional practice was described as "one of the least informative: several countries just report that they do not have any information on institutional practices" (Rauhvargers and Rusakova 2009 p56). Years earlier, the European Commission (2006 p5) had recommended that

> procedures for academic recognition should...be reviewed to ensure quicker and more predictable outcomes (in particular, by publishing universities' recognition policies).

This study aims to contribute towards filling this information gap nationally. In addition, 2013 marked the 15th anniversary of the LRC (the only legal document of the Bologna Process) so a study relating to the spirit within which this Convention is implemented at HEIs is warranted, to provide information on implementation and to help inform future policy developments.

Along with the Bologna Process, there are a plethora of credential evaluation tools and initiatives which have been developed at European level, with Ireland at the forefront of many in terms of implementation. These tools will be identified in subsequent chapters. It is sufficient to say here that a recent consultation on the European Area of Skills and Qualifications (EASQ) conducted by the European Commission (2014) resulted in no new information. Synergy amongst existing recognition tools in addition to an enhanced focus on the end-user was emphasised. This study will help identify the level of awareness and use of such tools in practice.

A key element in national policy currently is the aggressive promotion of our higher education and English language sectors to international students, as demonstrated through both the International Education Strategy, 2010-2015 (DES 2010) and The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (DES 2011 p81). Indeed, attracting international students is mentioned in the Irish government's strategy for economic recovery (Department of the Taoiseach 2008). Further, the 'Education in Ireland' brand was developed and launched in 2011 with the aim of doubling the total number of international students (to 38,000) in Irish HEIs by 2015 (DES 2010 p31). Fair recognition of previous qualifications and periods of learning is a central component of these policies, as it is for the European Commission's Modernisation of Higher

Education (European Commission 2011) and internationalisation (European Commission 2013) agendas. Not surprisingly, there are inherent tensions between the marketisation of education and credential evaluation practice. These need to be identified and investigated in a research context. Lynch (2006 p16) draws attention to the challenges for a university where "it is at the one time a product of cultural practice and a creator of culture; it is a powerful interest and a creator of interests".

This study is particularly timely on a national level for two main reasons. In the first instance, the International Education Strategy is being reviewed (DES 2013a). Secondly, the establishment of an International Education Mark (IEM)[9], essentially a quality mark for the provision of education and training to international students, is a statutory function of QQI. The IEM is to be launched in 2016. An understanding of what this might mean for credential evaluators at HEIs is essential. While recognition activities are referred to in the Irish Higher Education Quality Network's (IHEQN) document on provision of education to international students (IHEQN 2009 p5), this is a voluntary code. In contrast, where an institution wishes to hold the IEM, a code will be imposed which will presumably include reference to credential evaluation practice as part of recruitment activities. But the issue of an increasing push for external accountability versus autonomy may continually surface here within the actual carrying-out of credential evaluation. This issue has arisen in considering the performance of public HEIs as a whole, and the HEA acknowledges that

> while there is consensus about the need for both autonomy and accountability, there is a divergence of opinion as to what constitutes the optimal balance between them (2013 p16).

This study focuses on postgraduate access for a number of reasons. Firstly, migrants in general, as indicated earlier, have a high level of educational attainment. Secondly, statistics show that Ireland is an increasingly attractive destination for postgraduate study. Finally, at undergraduate level, much work has been undertaken by HEIs in partnership to standardise how school-leaving qualifications from outside of the State are evaluated. Similar work for postgraduate access has not taken place and this research hopes to illuminate practice here.

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[9] Introduced under the 2012 Quality and Quality Assurance Act that established QQI, and aims to establish a code of practice for the provision of programmes of education and training to international students.

Why a focus on the practices of credential evaluators? While there are many technical areas of recognition worthy of further exploration, such as aspects of professional recognition or the use of qualification frameworks (QFs), the central role of credential evaluators as individuals is particularly intriguing. Credential evaluation is not an exact science. While many technical tools exist to help credential evaluators, value judgements are made. It could be argued that the subjective element of credential evaluation is concerned with the concept of 'substantial difference' which has its origins in the LRC, a notion that will be revisited in Chapter 3. Article VI.1 of the Convention stipulates that

> each Party shall recognize 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 (Council of Europe 1997).

As it is not possible to define substantial difference exactly, or to cover all eventualities in a best practice guide, this concept can be as troublesome as it is helpful, dominating many lengthy and ongoing discussions on the recognition of foreign qualifications. There is no public data available on the consistency of recognition decisions made across institutions or even within institutions. The burden of proof lies with the decision-maker in terms of the LRC. Surprisingly, it appears that little emphasis has been placed to date on the perspectives of those individuals acting as credential evaluators with regard to daily activity in the recognition of foreign qualifications. Evaluation of foreign qualifications is difficult. The difficulties faced in credential evaluation practice are placed in perspective by a recent report by Duffy (2014) where there was disagreement as to the value of even national qualifications, with degrees from Trinity College Dublin differentiated from those of Ireland's other universities. This research seeks to offer recommendations to help implement best practices for the fair recognition of foreign qualifications at HEIs for those seeking to participate in postgraduate education in Ireland.

Conclusion

As a country with a large diaspora, Ireland's people – including individuals and family members, are no strangers to issues relating to the recognition of qualifications. The search for fair recognition of qualifications is again prevalent in the current economic circumstances where large numbers of Irish citizens are travelling abroad and

immigration of non-Irish nationals to Ireland continues. In addition, increasing numbers of international students are seeking to continue their studies in Ireland and are being actively recruited by HEIs.

While much has been achieved in terms of fair recognition which must be celebrated, such as the establishment of the ENIC-NARIC network, development of the LRC and initiation of the Bologna Process, concerns still exist relating to how the LRC is implemented in practice (Council of Europe 2014). The practices of individuals acting as credential evaluators at HEIs warrant attention. This research aims to bring to centre stage the professional practices of Ireland's credential evaluators, and the issues arising within these practices.

In advance of a review of relevant policy and research literature, Chapter Two will seek to locate the researcher and her professional work within the field of credential evaluation.

Thesis Layout

The following paragraphs provide a reference for the reader in indicating how the thesis as a whole is constructed. The main content of each remaining chapter of the thesis is now summarised.

Chapter Two contributes to the thesis in two main ways. Firstly, relevant tools are introduced in providing an overview of how credential evaluation at the Irish ENIC-NARIC centre is conducted. This gives the reader an insight into the technical aspect of credential evaluation and an opportunity to understand the context for the researcher as a practitioner. Secondly, the role of QR, and its location within a larger organisation primarily concerned with quality assurance, is critically considered from the perspective of influencing improvements in credential evaluation practice. This discussion offers the reader an insight into the positioning of the researcher in the context of the current research.

Chapter Three discusses issues pertaining to the recognition of foreign qualifications both in Ireland and internationally through a review of the policy and research literature. It provides an overview on the evolution of thinking on recognition. Of particular note is the broad understanding about what recognition actually encompasses in a modern context. Definitions are provided and reference to the role of the credential evaluator in a HEI is critically reviewed. Further, the chapter aims to highlight key issues for

recognition at the level of both policy and practice impacting on HEIs. The chapter concludes with an initial consideration of the perspectives of individuals, and their needs and rights when presenting their foreign qualifications for recognition at a HEI.

Chapter Four is concerned chiefly with the research design and methodology. An explanation is given as to the reasons why this research is guided by constructivist grounded theory (CGT). Ethical considerations deemed relevant to the study are considered. The different data collection methods used – web reviews, a questionnaire, interviews and focus group interviews - are also outlined and justified. The chapter concludes by briefly signposting the approach taken to present and analyse data in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Five presents findings from the preliminary phase of the research study. The importance of this pre-research phase is emphasised as a means of informing sampling decisions and relevant interview questions, while providing context for the study. Details on the website reviews carried out are presented initially. Analysis of relevant institutional websites, in particular, influenced subsequent data collection to achieve the overall aims of the research. Subsequently, items from the questionnaire and unstructured interviews conducted with key HEI stakeholders are highlighted.

Chapter Six presents data obtained through 14 individual and two focus group interviews with credential evaluators. The chapter first highlights the five key discoveries from the research:

I.   Discrepancies in approach to credential evaluation in higher education institutions
II. Benefits and difficulties in using UK NARIC as an authority in credential evaluation
III. Differing levels of professional support for credential evaluation within and across higher education institutions
IV. Understanding credential evaluation practice through connections with existing policies and activities
V.   Tensions between the needs of the individual applicant, the credential evaluator and the higher education institution

Each of the key findings, although interlinked, particularly in terms of a professional identity for credential evaluators, is discussed in turn, in an initial analysis of the

findings. Finally, the researcher argues that the findings lead to a need for exploring how colleagues in HEIs might most effectively learn from each other. It is proposed, at that point, that findings of this research are analysed through the framework provided by Wenger's (1998) concept of community of practice (CoP). The introduction and incremental development of community of practice approaches is considered to hold significant promise in enhancing credential evaluation in Ireland. This would involve a gradual movement from the widely differing approaches that prevail at present – as reviewed particularly in Chapter 6 - to a more coherent understanding of credential evaluation practice itself and to progressive improvements in that practice.

Chapter Seven proceeds to provide a critical analysis of how CoP approaches might be used effectively in meeting the challenges associated with the five key discoveries identified in the previous chapter. The concept of a CoP in the context of a HEI is first introduced. Subsequently, each of the key findings initially presented in Chapter Six is considered in the context of learning from colleagues through participation in a CoP. The benefits of a CoP approach for improving credential evaluation practice are highlighted, while limitations of a CoP in the context of a HEI are also identified.

Chapter Eight brings the thesis to a close, providing both an explanation of the main findings from the study, and recommendations for consideration with the intention of improving credential evaluation practice. The contribution made by this study to the field of credential evaluation is discussed and limitations detailed. Options for further research are proposed. To conclude, a number of reflections are offered by the researcher and final comments are made.

Chapter Two

A Critical Review of the Role, Activities and Connections of the Irish ENIC-NARIC centre

Introduction

The first chapter of the thesis introduced the field of recognition and key stakeholders involved. It also served to identify the specific focus of this research study and the overall aim of this work. The purpose of Chapter Two is to illustrate and review the role and activities of the Irish ENIC-NARIC centre within the field of credential evaluation. An overview of the criteria, tools and resources used for credential evaluation by QR is discussed initially, to allow the reader gain an insight into the technical aspects of practice. Particular attention is paid to contrasting the roles of different actors in the field. Clarity on actors in credential evaluation and their responsibilities is essential in meeting the aim of improving practice. Activities of QR are considered within an organisational, national and international context, to help demonstrate interconnectivities with credential evaluation work in HEIs. A further objective of the chapter is to help the reader clearly locate the researcher and her professional work in the field of credential evaluation.

The Qualifications Recognition Service

In 2003, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI)[10] was designated as the Irish ENIC-NARIC centre by the DES. The centre is now hosted by QQI since its establishment in 2012. The legislative basis for this work, as indicated earlier, is the LRC on an international level (see Chapter One p15). Nationally, the legislative remit of QQI, as described in Section 9 of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act (Education and Training) 2012, is relevant. The NQAI's policy in this area, dated 2004 and titled 'National Policy Approach to the Recognition of International Awards in Ireland',was inherited by QQI and replaced in 2015 following consultation and subsequent agreement.. The current policy reflects the 'Joint ENIC/NARIC Charter of

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[10] The NQAI was established on a statutory basis under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act,1999, on 26 February 2001. In 2012, the NQAI was amalgamated with three other qualifications bodies, namely The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC); The Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) to form Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). The latter organisation was established on 6 November 2012 under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012.

Activities and Services' (The Committee of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region 2004). However, it should be noted that individual centres of the Network are very diverse in terms of remit and activities, an issue to be discussed later.

Qualifications Recognition provides advice on the academic recognition of completed foreign qualifications to qualification-holders and a diverse group of stakeholders such as education organisations, employers and recruiters. Further, the centre promotes the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad, emphasising the reciprocal nature of recognition, with trust an implicit feature. The matter of reciprocity will be revisited later. However, it is important to note for this research that QR offers only non-binding advice on academic recognition, while HEIs have the right, as competent recognition authorities under the LRC, to make their own recognition decisions.

An application process is in place for those seeking advice on general academic recognition of their foreign qualification from QR. A completed application consists of an application form accompanied by copies of relevant documents – a parchment and transcripts (in addition to translations and documents relating to change of name where necessary). Qualifications Recognition uses the NFQ as the basis for recognition, and aims to compare a foreign qualification to a major award that is placed at a particular level on the NFQ. Ireland ratified the LRC on 8 March 2004 and the service aims to facilitate fair recognition for foreign qualifications, through implementation of LRC principles and best practice guidelines, regardless of the qualification's country of origin.

Tools used to provide recognition advice include those relating to the qualification itself, such as learning outcomes (LOs) and volume, in addition to those tools which provide information on the relationship of the individual qualification to the larger qualifications and education system, of which it is a part (such as meta-frameworks, which are discussed below). Tools used to assess[11] comparability of foreign qualifications include those indicated in Diagram 2-1, where applicable.

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[11] The words 'assess' and 'evaluate' are used interchangeably in this thesis. Both are used in the LRC.

Diagram 2-1: Credential Evaluation Tools
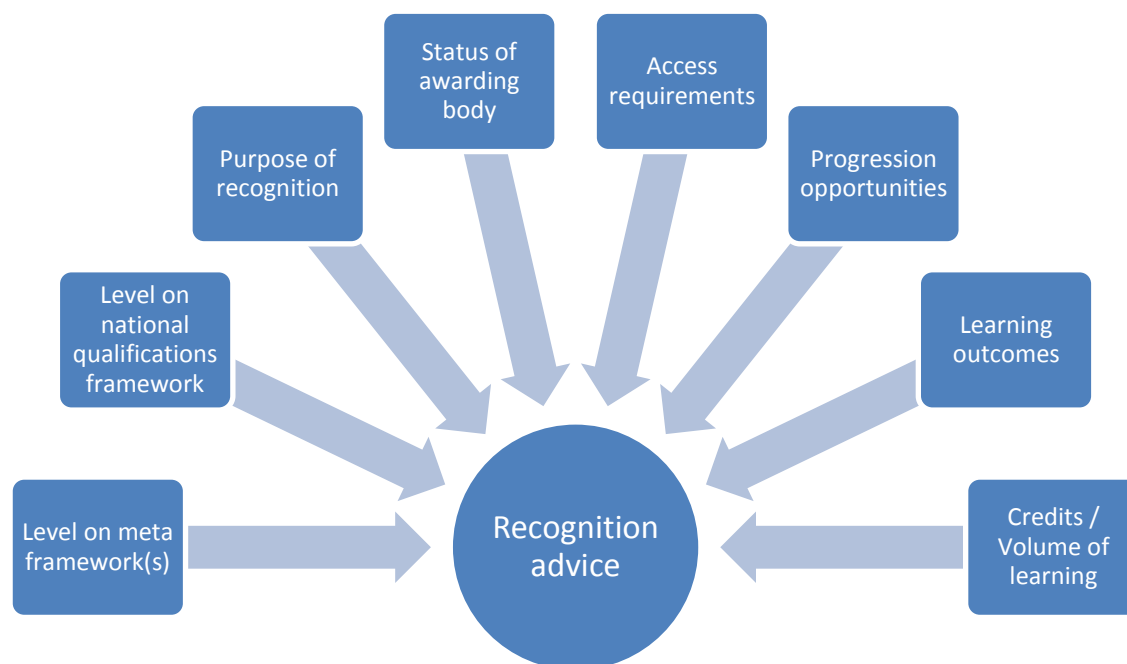
Information collated on the foreign qualification is then used to provide advice on the most closely comparable Irish award. Applicants are issued with a comparability statement, placing their foreign qualification in the context of the Irish education and training system. For example, "[X foreign qualification] is considered comparable to an Ordinary Bachelor Degree which is placed at Level 7 on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications". These statements, which are advisory in nature, also provide information on the LOs associated with the NFQ level to which the award has been compared, in addition to a copy of the 'fan diagram' (see Figure 2-1). Although comparability statements issued by QR are personalised, established precedent published on the QQI website, www.QQI.ie is used in providing recognition advice. In contrast, credential evaluation at HEIs occurs where applications are typically evaluated on a case-by-case basis for the purpose of admission to a particular programme of study. The researcher is not aware of the extent to which advice available on the website is used by HEI staff, if at all. There is anecdotal evidence of HEIs referring individuals holding foreign qualifications to QR. Little is known as to the circumstances involved, or how the advice offered is used. Indeed, advice provided in a comprehensive database managed by our colleagues at the UK's NARIC centre is, anecdotally, extensively used by Irish HEIs. Again, little is known as to how this subscription service is used in practice.

The Framework shown in Figure 2-1 is used to illustrate the Irish qualifications system. It consists of 10 levels, from basic learning to doctoral awards, with levels based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners; that is, what an individual is expected to know, understand and be able to do (LOs) following successful completion of a period of learning.

Figure 2-1: The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)
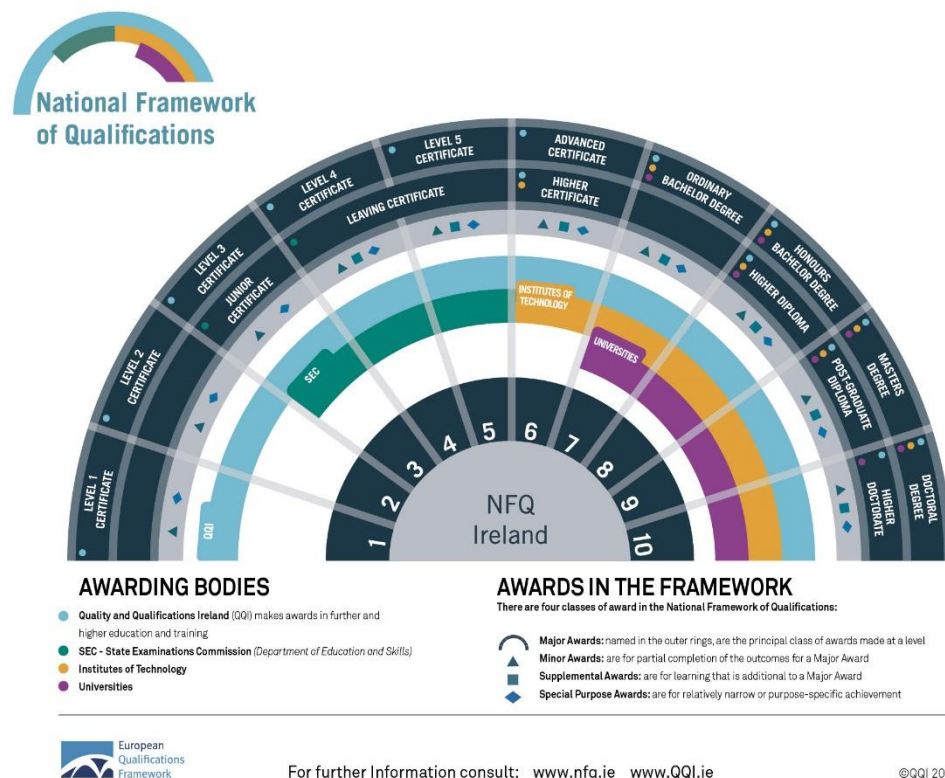
The NFQ is shown here to be a central mechanism for facilitating the recognition of foreign qualifications. The significance of the Framework for recognition in Ireland, and its international links will be discussed further in Chapter Three. Here, the critical international dimension of the NFQ as a technical tool will be introduced briefly. Ireland, through the NQAI, and now QQI, has been actively engaged at the forefront of QF developments. The Irish Framework was verified as compatible with the QF-EHEA, or 'Bologna' Framework in November 2006 (see Chapter One p24). In June 2009, the NFQ was referenced to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF). The Recommendation to establish the EQF as a means of promoting citizen mobility, through improving transparency of qualifications across the EU, was formally adopted by the European Parliament and Council on 23 April 2008 (European

Parliament Council 2008). Participation in the EQF, as with the Bologna Process, is voluntary. The major awards of the NFQ are set out in Table 2-1, together with confirmation on alignment to the QF-EHEA and referencing to the EQF.

Table 2-1: The Irish NFQ and Over-arching Meta-Frameworks

EQF Level	QF-EHEA (Bologna)	NFQ Level	NFQ Major Award-Types
EQF Level 1		NFQ Level 1	Level 1 Certificate
		NFQ Level 2	Level 2 Certificate
EQF Level 2		NFQ Level 3	Level 3 Certificate; Junior Certificate
EQF Level 3		NFQ Level 4	Level 4 Certificate; Leaving Certificate
EQF Level 4		NFQ Level 5	Level 5 Certificate; Leaving Certificate
EQF Level 5		NFQ Level 6	Advanced Certificate
	Short Cycle within First Cycle		Higher Certificate
EQF Level 6	First Cycle	NFQ Level 7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree
		NFQ Level 8	Honours Bachelor Degree; Higher Diploma
EQF Level 7	Second Cycle	NFQ Level 9	Masters Degree; Post-Graduate Dip.
EQF Level 8	Third Cycle	NFQ Level 10	Doctoral Degree; Higher Doctorate

So, where qualifications are received from a country where either the QF, or qualifications system, has been formally deemed compatible with either of these over-arching meta-frameworks, the latter essentially act as high-level translation devices for credential evaluation. These meta-frameworks are compatible, and their implementation is coordinated at national and European level. Figure 2-2 below (European Commission 2005 p13) shows how the EQF can be used in credential evaluation.

Figure 2-2: Using the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)
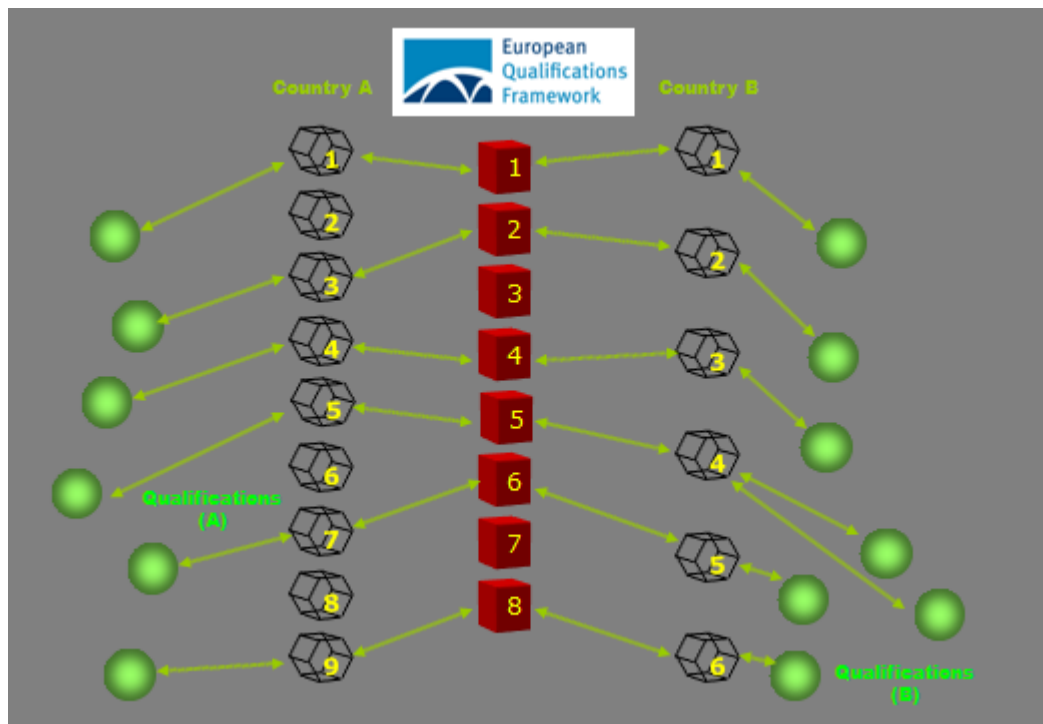
For example, countries A and B have their nine and six level national qualification frameworks, respectively, referenced to the eight-level EQF. As qualifications are placed at particular levels in the national frameworks, the EQF provides a quick reference tool contributing information on the general academic level of a qualification.

While the tools and resources mentioned above are used to guide credential evaluation, advice is necessarily provided by QR on a 'best fit' basis, in terms of the NFQ (bearing in mind the concept of substantial difference – see Chapter One p27). The process cannot be entirely objective. Difficulties with the meaning of the adjective 'objective' are taken up at a later stage in the thesis. The tools described above are used by individual credential evaluators, with their own background perceptions and levels of experience. The researcher suggests that diagram 2-1 fails to acknowledge the credential evaluator, an individual, as a significant and dynamic credential evaluation tool. While

formal tools provide useful information to QR in providing recognition advice, the researcher predicts that additional knowledge plays a more central role in making complex credential evaluation decisions within a HEI. The extent to which formal tools are known or used in HEIs by credential evaluators is not clear.

Focus now shifts to explaining the concept of recognition of foreign qualifications, as it applies to different actors in this field. Diagram 2-2 below depicts the main groups involved in recognition in Ireland. While each group has a different and distinct purpose for their work, they are connected as the result is a form of 'recognition' for an individual and their qualifications / learning.

Diagram 2-2: Main Stakeholder Groups Involved in Recognition Activities

Professional recognition bodies are involved in *de jure* recognition of foreign qualifications for the purpose of employment in a regulated profession, defined by the DES (2013b) as a profession "where access to, or practice of, a profession is restricted by national law to those holding specific qualifications". Designated competent authorities[12] for each regulated profession apply provisions for professional recognition

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[12] Regulated professions and their respective competent authorities are detailed on the website of the Department of Education and Skills (DES). See: http://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Qualifications-Recognition/.

set down under EU Directive 2013/55/EC on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications,[13] where appropriate. Examples in Ireland include teaching, social work and medical science. Outside of the regulated professions in Ireland, potential employers are the ultimate 'recogniser' of foreign qualifications. Although advice originating from QR is not legally binding, anecdotally it is often taken as *de facto* recognition by employers. Education institutions, particularly HEIs, are important actors in recognition. Individuals may seek recognition of completed qualifications and/or periods of learning for the purposes of access to both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Indeed**,** a 'continuum of recognition' is evident. So, while QR provides advice on general academic recognition of a foreign qualification, the other groups identified may use such general information as a means of making recognition decisions which Diagram 2-3 is used to illustrate.

Diagram 2-3: Continuum of Recognition

Qualifications Recognition

Advice on General Academic Recognition of a Foreign Qualification

Professional Body	Employer	Education Institution
- Does the foreign qualification meet the academic standard required? - Does the foreign qualification holder meet specific requirements for this profession?	- Does the foreign qualification meet the qualification requirement? - Does the foreign qualification holder have the knowledge and skills for this job?	- Does the foreign qualification meet the minimum entry requirements? - Does the foreign qualification holder have the ability to successfully participate in this programme?

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[13] Further information on the Directive can be found as follows: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:354:0132:0170:en:PDF.

Diagram 2-3 illustrates a key concept in this study – QR facilitates the recognition of foreign qualifications, while HEIs and others actually make recognition decisions. Implications of these diverse roles are significant, particularly from the point of view of qualification holders. Clarification on the structures in place for credential evaluation at HEIs and the role of a credential evaluator is considered vital in meeting the necessity for a certain level of transparency and accountability.

It is argued here that QR potentially has a more central role to play in coordinating general academic recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland to meet present and future challenges (introduced in Chapter One and elaborated upon in Chapter Three and beyond). Particularly for this study, the contrasting role of QR and HEIs in recognition creates difficulties for both actors in understanding respective practices, in addition to confusion for individuals seeking recognition of their foreign qualifications in Ireland. A question arises as to the experience and understanding existing within QR of the context for recognition at HEIs despite the apparent clarity on institutional practice espoused through the Irish NAP on recognition from 2006. The researcher suggests that QR is not sufficiently informed regarding credential evaluation practice to meet the possible needs of HEIs, or individual qualification holders seeking access to higher education programmes. It is not possible to co-ordinate action to improve practice (a responsibility of each ENIC-NARIC centre) to a satisfactory level in HEIs without such knowledge. Further, it is the researcher's belief that practices within and between institutions need to be clarified by HEIs for their own purposes, given that arrangements are not provided currently for the purposes of external quality assurance reviews. This will be discussed further in subsequent chapters.

One reason for a lack of knowledge on institutional practice in QR is suggested by looking at the purpose for which recognition advice is sought by qualification holders from QR. As a voluntary service, the majority of those making applications are doing so for the purpose of access to unregulated employment in Ireland (where purpose is specified on the application form). This general trend is found to be true by considering a snapshot of figures concerning the QR service. Firstly, Figure 2-3 gives information on the number of formal applications received by QR for each year since establishment in 2003 (QQI 2014).

Figure 2-3: Number of Formal Applications for Advice on Academic Recognition of a Foreign Qualification Received by Qualifications Recognition, 2003-2014[1]
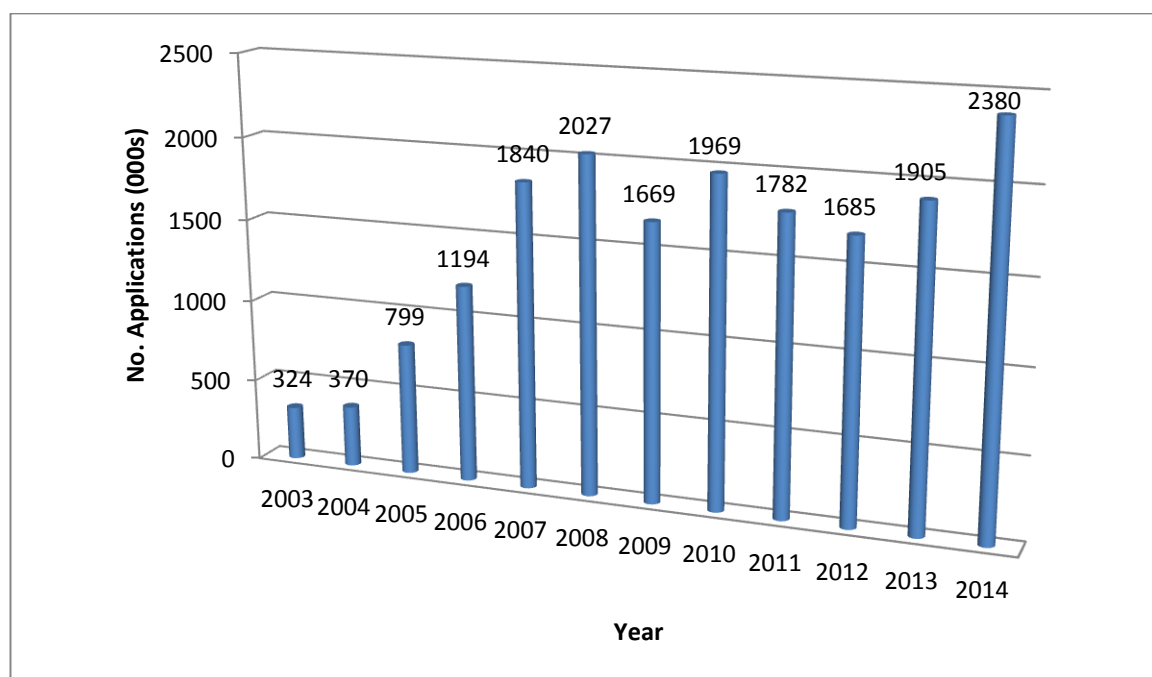
[1] Figures for 2014 are preliminary and not published.

The number of formal applications (on average, 66 per cent of applications received over the period 2008 to 2014 related to higher education qualifications) received by QR rose generally in tandem with net in-migration to Ireland and peaked initially in 2008. Despite net out-migration since 2010 (CSO 2014), QR has not experienced a dramatic fall in the number of applications received. As shown in Figure 2-3, the number of formal applications received in 2014 actually surpassed the 2008 figure. It could be the case that, as unemployment increased after 2008, individuals were required to seek recognition of their prior qualifications either to pursue new employment opportunities or to access education for up-skilling. Similarly, an increase in applications over the past two years could be attributed to a more favourable job market and the availability of opportunities to pursue further education. Thus, a lack of insight into the practices of credential evaluators in HEIs represents an increasing problem as a knowledge gap. Secondly, Table 2-2 shows the top ten countries of origin for qualifications presented to QR in 2003, 2006 and 2011 (QQI 2014).

Table 2-2: Top Ten Countries of Origin with Numbers of Qualifications Presented to Qualifications Recognition - 2003, 2006 and 2011

	Number of applications		
Rank	2003	2006	2011
1	UK (97)	Poland (182)	Poland (358)
2	Ukraine (23)	UK (115)	UK (200)
3	Spain (22)	Nigeria (101)	Lithuania (149)
4	Nigeria (20)	Lithuania (70)	Romania (96)
5	Romania (20)	Russia (61)	Latvia (68)
6	Germany (19)	Ukraine (58)	Nigeria (50)
7	USA (13)	China (51)	USA (45)
8	Italy (11)	Romania (49)	Russia (43)
9	Russia (11)	India (41)	Philippines (41)
10	Moldova (7)	Belarus (36)	Spain (40)
Total Top 10	243	764	1090
Total for Year	324	1194	1782
Top 10 as % of Total	75	64	61
Non-EU Qualifications as % of Top 10[1]	30	46	16

[1] Although Romania only joined the EU on 01 January 2007, it is treated as EU for the purpose of this table.

Table 2-2 indicates that the majority of applications were received from a handful of countries, with new EU countries being increasingly prominent. The years presented in Table 2-2 were chosen to allow comparison with the top ten national groups in Ireland based on population numbers in the same census years, as presented in Table 2-3 (Gilmartin 2012 p9).

Table 2-3: Top Ten National Groups in Ireland by Census: 2002, 2006 & 2011

Rank	2002		2006		2011	
1	UK	101,257	UK	112,548	Poland	122,585
2	USA	11,135	Poland	63,276	UK	112,259
3	Nigeria	8,650	Lithuania	24,628	Lithuania	36,683
4	Germany	7,033	Nigeria	16,300	Latvia	20,593
5	France	6,231	Latvia	13,319	Nigeria	17,642
6	China	5,766	USA	12,475	Romania	17,304
7	Romania	4,910	China	11,161	India	16,986
8	Spain	4,347	Germany	10,289	Philippines	12,791
9	South Africa	4,113	Philippines	9,548	Germany	11,305
10	Philippines	3,742	France	9,064	USA	11,015

Clearly evident in Table 2-3 is the rising population of national groups from Eastern Europe – Romania, Latvia, Lithuania and particularly Poland, which denied the UK the top position in the 2011 census. This rise coincides with accession to the EU. It could be argued that the country of origin of qualifications presented to QR is strongly indicative of economic migration. The census data as presented in table 2-3 reflects more strongly the applications received by Qualifications Recognition as opposed to the country of origin of international students at Irish HEIs (see Table 1-4 p21) where six of the top ten countries are non-EU. It can be assumed, therefore, that QR is being presented with relatively few foreign qualifications for the purpose of access to higher education. Thus, there is less experience available within QR on qualifications from other countries, particularly those outside of the European Economic Area (EEA). Attracting students from these latter countries is a priority for HEIs, given our national international education strategy and the relatively high fees in place for such students. To promote fair recognition of qualifications from countries outside of the EEA, it is essential that QR are aware of credential evaluation practice at HEIs, particularly given its location within QQI as a quality assurance body. It should be considered that there are issues relating to international education and the terminology used (see p24). The definition of an international student is not consistent and this impacts on data and its reliability (Education in Ireland 2012 p5; Irish Universities Association 2013 p3). It is possible that different definitions also impact on credential evaluation practice within a HEI.

The development of QR in recent years and its connections, which are now discussed, presents opportunities to positively influence credential evaluation practice at HEIs.

Qualifications Recognition – Connections and Developments

The QR service has grown significantly as indicated earlier, not only in volume, but in the expertise available within the centre. To date, although much effort has been made to promote the service and to collaborate further with others involved in recognition, there is relatively little contact with those individuals working as credential evaluators at HEIs in particular. The service continues to work towards providing as much information online as possible through the QQI website, although too little reliable information on the consistency of recognition decisions at HEIs is yet available.

Amalgamation of the service as part of NQAI to QQI in late 2012 represented an enormous change for QR and presents a real opportunity to positively impact credential evaluation practice. The amalgamation process is ongoing through policy development at the organisation. It has given a timely opportunity for the centre to critically reflect on how the service is meeting the needs of stakeholders in the context of reducing resources available. Consideration of the location of the service within a larger organisation concerned mainly with quality assurance is also important, given that a call was made through the Bologna Process to link credential evaluation practice with quality assurance procedures (discussed further in Chapter 3). The current "Policy and Criteria for Facilitating the Academic Recognition of Foreign Qualifications" (QQI 2015) will determine the future direction for QR and impact on its interaction with HEIs. A policy in this area was overdue with the NQAI's policy as referred to above (p30) seriously out of date. It has been surpassed by developments both in the national and European education and training landscape.

As the Irish ENIC-NARIC centre, QR has a responsibility to advocate and share best practice in recognition, based on the principles of the LRC and subsidiary texts. To this end, it is involved in a number of projects funded by the EU through the NARIC network. Of particular significance for this study is a project called the 'European Area of Recognition for Higher Education Institutions' or EAR-HEI, where a best practice manual for HEIs[14] was developed, based on a similar resource in place for ENIC-NARIC centres (The European Area of Recognition or 'EAR' Manual). Although HEIs

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[14] The EAR-HEI manual and additional information can be accessed at:
http://eurorecognition.eu/News.aspx.

in countries where ENIC-NARIC centre project members are operating have been consulted, the researcher remains cautious of the Network having developed a manual for HEIs rather than with HEIs. As a next step, the project team plan to offer online training to credential evaluators in HEIs during 2015. The researcher argues here that such an approach fails to recognise the existence and appreciation of knowledge amongst staff within and across HEIs themselves in credential evaluation. A more collaborative style is considered appropriate.

A further NARIC project, entitled 'Evaluation and Assessment of the Role of NARICs' concerns the establishment of standards and guidelines for quality assurance within ENIC-NARIC centres themselves. This project is particularly relevant in the context of this study. Fair recognition for Irish qualifications based on trust and a reputation for quality is essential for reciprocity, which will be further discussed in Chapter Three, as an essential element of internationalisation. Another project called the 'Changing Role of NARICs II'[15] or CHARONA II aims to build on a comprehensive review of the evolution of ENIC-NARIC centres and their expanding remit. This project is particularly timely on a national level as it aims to consider the updating of the Joint ENIC/NARIC Charter of Activities and Services (the Charter) adopted in 2004 (see page 31). A revision will impact on the services viewed as relevant for HEIs and the extent to which the Network can be involved in relevant policy development.

Finally, due to the location of QR within QQI, the centre is centrally involved in development and implementation of the NFQ, nationally and internationally. This is a key connection as the centre influences how QFs, regarded as fundamental tools in credential evaluation, are used in practice.

The researcher hopes that the potential of the ENIC-NARIC network and, in particular, the Irish centre to aid in the development of best practice in credential evaluation at HEIs will be clarified through this research. Also, the study will help identify opportunities for further collaboration in the future.

Conclusion

Qualifications Recognition based at QQI provides general academic recognition of foreign qualifications to individual qualification holders and other stakeholders, such as education institutions and employers. The basis for such advice is the Irish NFQ which

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[15] The CHARONA project website is: https://charonaproject.wordpress.com/.

acts as a mechanism to place foreign awards in the context of the Irish education and training system. In addition, the NFQ is used to promote the recognition and portability of Irish awards.

Qualifications Recognition is strategically located at QQI and actively engages with national and international stakeholders; the aims being the provision of authoritative recognition advice, the promotion of fair recognition nationally for foreign qualifications, and supporting the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad.

This chapter represents an important bridge for the reader in making necessary connections between the field of recognition as it relates to QR, the broader ENIC-NARIC network, and the context within which credential evaluation takes place at HEIs. More importantly, the researcher is identified as a professional arguably located centrally within the field of credential evaluation, yet an outsider with respect to actual practice within HEIs. It is proposed that credential evaluation is more than just a technical exercise. Chapter Three now examines the context for credential evaluation at Irish HEIs and seeks to explore the literature available on practice.

Chapter Three

The Research Context: Credential Evaluation in Higher Education Institutions

Introduction

In this chapter, both research and policy literature relevant to the aims identified earlier in Chapter One (p13) is drawn upon to explore the complex web of interacting actors, practices and policies impacting on the recognition of foreign qualifications at Irish HEIs. Of particular significance is the dearth of research concerning credential evaluation practice at HEIs, despite their being a central actor. Six key angles have been identified by the researcher as being particularly pertinent for credential evaluation at Irish HEIs. These six items, based on the researcher's professional experience and bearing in mind the issues raised in the previous two chapters, will be presented and discussed in turn as follows.

I. Recognition of foreign qualifications: associated key ideas and concepts
II. Higher education institutions - interaction with the ENIC-NARIC network
III. Qualifications Frameworks and the Bologna Process as credential evaluation tools: significance and implications for higher education institutions
IV. The context for credential evaluation at Irish higher education institutions
V. Credential evaluation practice within higher education institutions
VI. Foreign qualification holders and recognition at higher education institutions

Each of the broad angles above necessarily overlaps with others although the degree to which this occurs in the context of any particular HEI is not known. The initial focus of this review is on key ideas and concepts in recognition, an essential discussion given the rapid evolution of this field in the past two decades in particular.

I.   Recognition of Foreign Qualifications – Associated Key Ideas & Concepts

The image of a bridge is often used as a metaphor for depicting the process of recognition as it signifies physical mobility. Bergan and Hunt (2009 p7) develop the concept and consider recognition a "customs office" with its rules and regulations, with which an individual must liaise before he/she can hopefully continue their journey and carry their qualification across with its full value intact.

The concept of recognition has evolved significantly with increasing demand for recognition of qualifications and periods of learning across borders. From the 1950s through to 70s, the recognition or credential evaluation process was typically referred to as nostrification (from the Latin phrase '*facere rei nostra*' or 'to make it ours'), homologation, or equivalence; essentially meaning that the programme leading to a foreign qualification was required to be almost identical as the one leading to a similar qualification in the receiving country. Current best practice based on principles of the LRC underpins the 'acceptance' approach to recognition with the understanding that differences in education and qualification systems are worthy of celebration. In this context, facilitating the portability of qualifications is of paramount importance, given the scale of internationalisation.

More recently, the acceptance approach is being considered in a broader sense with the idea of "automatic recognition" mooted through the Bologna Process (2002; 2012 p5), the meaning of which is not clear practically and will be discussed further later. Suffice to say here that the extent to which diverse as opposed to unified systems of higher education is being promoted is questioned by the researcher. There is increasing pressure on HEIs to offer programmes to appeal to an international audience to increase revenue and to award high quality qualifications readily accepted abroad. While similar qualifications across countries may aid credential evaluation, a corresponding loss in diversity would be regrettable. Credential evaluators at HEIs are key actors in promoting the diversity of education programmes where qualifications derived are fairly recognised subsequently.

The customs officer or credential evaluator needs to be active in building bridges for fair recognition to be achieved. The building of bridges (engaging actively with the principles of fair recognition) and maintenance of them (imparting positive values and attitudes with regard to recognition on others) does not happen passively. Upon a cursory investigation, the recognition of foreign qualifications might be considered a

purely administrative or technical matter. However, there are many forces at play, which, on closer inspection, belie this picture. At first glance, a qualification may just represent the end product of a period of learning but it also "confers official recognition of value in the labour market and in further education and training" (OECD 2007 p22). Regardless of where qualifications are presented for recognition, they are typically not viewed in isolation as each is part of a multifaceted complex qualifications system, the latter defined by the OECD (*ibid*. p22) as

> all aspects of a country's activity that result in the recognition of learning. These systems include the means of developing and operationalising national or regional policy on qualifications, institutional arrangements, quality assurance processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society.

Hidden behind the definition above are individuals involved in credential evaluation, who bring to the recognition of qualifications their own luggage in terms of attitudes, perspectives and experiences.

Allen, in CEDEFOP (2010 p37), suggests that there are three broad purposes of a qualifications system, the first being "social reproduction" through the impartation of certain values. Secondly, the formal organisation of pathways to employment and further education and training, and finally, a basis for designing learning programmes. Its contribution to the realisation of the purposes of education, outside of preparing for employment, is identified as active citizenship, personal development and expansion of knowledge (Bergan 2011 p178). Acquisition of a qualification is a public testament to achievement. As qualifications exist to serve different functions, how a qualification's value is actually decided and the extent to which the decision is considered fair by those involved are core questions. The practices of credential evaluators in HEIs come under scrutiny in this current study.

Higher education institutions, as indicated previously, are considered a 'competent recognition authority' in terms of the LRC (see Chapter One p16). The purpose for which recognition is sought is important, and in the case of a HEI relates predominantly to admission for an individual to a particular programme of study. However, one should note the significance of the word 'access', as included in the definition of recognition in the LRC (see Chapter One p16). Access relates to the right for a qualified individual to be considered for admission, while admission itself is concerned with actual selection of students (Council of Europe 1997). Thus, credential evaluation could be viewed as an

initial and fundamental well-defined step in a broader admissions process. The reality is not so simple.

Qualifications systems depend on the associated education and training system, and both systems are inherently based on trust. Despite a plethora of credential evaluation tools available, much power lies in the hands of a credential evaluator, as to the value attributed to a qualification presented to them for recognition for a specific purpose (see Chapter Two p36). Raffe supports this point by arguing that

> qualifications are social constructs more than they are technical constructs; they are based on deeply rooted social relations and practices and political interests (2015 p5).

Raffe further elaborates that the value associated with a qualification

> depends on familiarity, reciprocity and above all, trust – all of which tend to develop in the context of practice, in relatively stable institutional contexts, over a period of time (*ibid.* p5).

Deriving full value for qualifications achieved is crucially important for individuals in pursuit of their personal goals. It could be argued that the LRC is the most fundamental best practice guide for fair recognition, with the concept associated with assessment of "qualifications within a reasonable time limit, according to transparent, coherent and reliable procedures and without discrimination" (Blomqvist 2009 p5). On a practical level, fairness relates to a qualification granting the same academic and professional rights to the holder in the host country as those available to them in the country of origin (Council of Europe 1997). As referred to in Chapter One (p27), the LRC stipulates that a qualification presented should be recognised unless a substantial difference can be discerned between it and a similar one in the country where recognition is sought. Of particular significance is the fact that the burden of proof with regard to a substantial difference lies with the credential evaluator.

From discussions to this point, the LRC, adopted by national representatives of 27 countries at Lisbon in April 1997, is shown to be a seminal and fundamental instrument in communicating the principles of fair recognition. There were 50 ratifications recorded by January 2010, making it one of the top five in terms of signatories for the CoE. This demonstrates the importance of the subject. The broad coverage of the Convention is also of note as it extends beyond geographical Europe to North America, parts of Central Asia and Israel. Australia and New Zealand are also associated with the LRC by virtue of being parties to the convention. The LRC is only one of a number of

regional UNESCO conventions concerning the recognition of qualifications worldwide[16]. Currently, the feasibility of a 'global standard-setting instrument', or convention, is being pursued by UNESCO to reflect rapid globalisation[17]. At face value, this is a positive development. However, if regional conventions are not working adequately, it is unlikely that expending effort on such a development will change practice on the ground. It is argued here that affording opportunities to credential evaluators internationally to discuss, share and interpret best practice should be the top priority in helping achieve a culture for fair recognition.

As indicated in Chapter Two (p32), credential evaluators have access to a range of tools for their work within the overarching concept of fair recognition provided by the LRC. The researcher considers that there is currently too little information on practice and the nature of recognition problems. Research initiatives are called for to enable practitioners keep pace with emergent issues.

The role of the ENIC-NARIC network and in particular the Irish centre is now discussed, focusing on HEIs as a core stakeholder group.

II.   Higher Education Institutions - Interaction with the ENIC-NARIC Network

The ENIC-NARIC network is considered by the secretariat (European Commission, Council of Europe and UNESCO) to be one of an array of tools for credential evaluators. As explained in Chapter Two (p31), the ENIC-NARIC Charter details services and functions for stakeholders, including HEIs. However, it must be remembered that centres may have very different remits based on national legislative arrangements. Activities include provision of information on recognition, cooperation with HEIs on related matters and contributions to policy development in higher education at local, national and international levels. However, the extent to which HEIs regard the ENIC-NARIC network and respective centres as a key stakeholder is

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[16] Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in the African States (1981); Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees concerning Higher Education in the Arab States (1978); Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific (Revised 2011); Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Latin America and the Caribbean (1974); International Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab and European States bordering on the Mediterranean (1976).
[17] Preliminary Study on the Technical and Legal Aspects Relating to the Desirability of a Global Standard-Setting Instrument on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications. Available from: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002226/222664e.pdf.

questionable. A first example was provided in Chapter One (p24) where centres generally did not have information on institutional practice reflecting a communication gap. Fast-forward to more recent publications where increased collaboration between the Network and HEIs is recommended (Davies 2014 p137; UK NARIC 2014 p7[18]). The policy approach of QR (see Chapter Two p31) considers the needs of Irish HEIs as a priority given the volume of foreign qualifications presented to them for which binding recognition decisions are made. Indeed, Collins *et al.* (2009 p45) refer to the importance of interaction between QR and admissions staff at HEIs. The weak links between the Network and HEIs are perhaps partly explained by a lack of understanding by the latter as to the meaning and practical implications of being a 'competent recognition authority' through the LRC. It is interesting to note that in the most recent Bologna implementation report (Bologna Process 2015), 20 countries report that their HEIs take recognition decisions based on advice from their respective ENIC-NARIC centres.

The ENIC-NARIC network and QR have invested heavily in recent years in supporting recognition activities at HEIs through various projects. The Irish ENIC-NARIC conference - 'Different Roles, Different Responsibilities' in 2008 invited admission and international officers in HEIs to come together to discuss their respective roles. Despite successful interaction on the day and subsequent actions agreed, QR has made limited progress in sustaining contact with HEIs. The lack of continuing interaction with HEIs is not a unique issue for the Irish centre, as indicated through the NAPs (see Chapter One p24). The community of credential evaluators in HEIs perhaps are not aware of how the Network can be leveraged effectively for their purpose. It is likely that insufficient time has been invested by both parties in delivering closer collaboration. This criticism is justified on the basis that credential evaluation is overlooked as a professional field in its own right with a necessity for specialist knowledge and expertise. For example, credential evaluation is not included in quality assurance arrangements or internationalisation strategies (discussed further later). Indeed, Blomqvist, de Bruin and Lokhoff (2012 p61) request that "recognition is recognized" at a national and international level. Another explanation for little collaboration may be associated with institutional autonomy discussed on p69.

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[18] The final report of the CHARONA project is available from:
http://ecctis.co.uk/NARIC/documents/contributions/CHARONA.pdf.

Lengthy discussions relating to practical implementation of the LRC and related concepts are captured in the 'EAR Manual' (see Chapter Two p43), which acts as a go-to best practice guide for individual centres of the Network. The EAR manual was endorsed by Ministers in the Bucharest Communiqué (2012) of the Bologna Process – a considerable achievement for the Network and most definitely a step in the right direction for those advocating for fair recognition of foreign qualifications. However, the necessity for continuing to share experiences cannot be dismissed. Knowledge of actual practice is the only guide to interpretation and implementation of the LRC by HEIs, hence the current research study.

As mentioned in Chapter Two (p43), a NARIC project currently underway seeks to develop an online training platform aimed for credential evaluators at HEIs on the basis of the EAR-HEI manual. Although HEIs have been consulted on development of the manual, and again for this project, the researcher suggests that there is insufficient understanding of the context for recognition within HEIs. Only through sustained contact can the Network gain an appreciation of practice at HEIs, and credential evaluators at HEIs learn how to leverage resources of the Network for their benefit. Indeed, the unique selling point for the Networks is the in-depth knowledge amongst members on practical testing and implementation of tools designed to assist credential evaluation.

The strength of the Network lies in members being able to easily share relevant information via an online facility. More importantly, the centres act as a relatively cohesive structure regarding recognition issues and policy, cultivated and promoted through two meetings in particular – an annual ENIC-NARIC meeting held in June in a member state, and an annual NARIC meeting held typically in December in Brussels. The Network operates succinctly using a website (www.enic-naric.net) as its main communication tool. In the Irish context, the absence of a platform to facilitate collaboration between QR and HEIs does not help to streamline credential evaluation practice.

It is fair to say that the LRC is considered the international model to follow as implementation is considerably more advanced than Conventions in other regions, facilitated by relatively well developed and resourced ENIC-NARIC centres. More importantly, these centres can share their experiences to aid in the establishment and development of similar information centres in other regions, such as Asia-Pacific (see

p49). In 2012, political agreement was achieved aimed at facilitating further collaboration between the LRC and Tokyo Conventions – the so called ASEM Recognition Bridging Declaration[19]. The Network actively pursues connections and synergies with other parts of the world to promote fair recognition. In 2007, a working group on 'recognition within a global setting'[20] was established. Indeed, Blomqvist reports that LRC principles are commonly applied to all applicants regardless of the country of origin of their qualifications (2009 p5). The researcher asks if this work is in vain where Ireland is concerned, particularly in the absence of sustained collaboration between QR and HEIs. More importantly, this work could be redundant for credential evaluators at HEIs if there is no means of discussing such developments, and their implications on practice, at institutional and national levels. Interaction amongst credential evaluators at HEIs is required so that the latter may take ownership of the EAR-HEI manual, and leverage resources available through the ENIC-NARIC network. It is only through interaction and negotiation that challenges can be overcome. A useful example is provided by the Network itself. Although members of the community may acknowledge best practice and wish to implement it, there can be barriers on a national level, such as legislative arrangements that conflict with the LRC (Wegewijs and de Bruin 2009 p96). As Bergan (2009a p105) explains, "actual practice does...not always correspond to desirable practice – even in the eyes of those responsible for the practice". Opportunities to discuss why practice may differ from best practice are invaluable in helping build awareness of issues so that solutions may be negotiated.

ENIC-NARIC centres have evolved significantly since the Charter was published, reflecting rapid policy developments in higher education pertinent to recognition (to be highlighted later). Of particular note is the Network's increasing capacity to influence policy developments, both on a national and international level, due to better organisation. In response, the CHARONA II project (see Chapter Two p44) may lead to a revision of the Charter to reflect how ENIC-NARIC centres have evolved since its adoption in 2004. Higher education institutions need to take account of this. The debate

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[19] The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is a structured process of dialogue and cooperation bringing together the 27 European Union Member States, two other European countries in addition to the European Commission, with 20 Asian countries and served by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat. The ASEM dialogue addresses political, economic and cultural issues, with the objective of strengthening the relationship between the two regions. Further information available from: http://archimedes.ee/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/ASEM-Bridging-Declaration-final.pdf.

[20] Further information relating to the ENIC-NARIC working group on 'Recognition in a Global Setting' is available at:
http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/llp/projects/public_parts/documents/naric2007/15th_joint_enic_naric_meeting.pdf.

around inclusion of recognition procedures in quality assurance procedures, and the soon to be launched 'IEM' are challenges that Irish HEIs could face, perhaps on a more united basis, in the context of credential evaluation practice.

The researcher argues that the Network is more than just a tool to achieve the EASQ (see Chapter One p25). The ENIC-NARIC network is a broader overarching initiative which brings together credential evaluation tools, foresees synergies, makes links and ultimately interprets, tests and uses tools and other initiatives in a practical way, to either facilitate or provide recognition for qualifications. Higher education institutions are a target audience for this work as recognition is not static. The Lisbon Convention Committee was established in 1999 to oversee implementation of the Convention, with powers to develop, consult on, and adopt recommendations related to recognition. These so-called subsidiary texts provide guidelines on practical implementation of the Convention in light of an ever changing higher education landscape. The latest is a recommendation concerning the "Use of Qualifications Frameworks in the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications" (The Committee of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region 2012). The implementation of the LRC and subsidiary texts in practice in different contexts requires sustained negotiation and discussion.

Focus now shifts to QFs and the Bologna Process as credential evaluation tools. Qualifications Frameworks incorporate many other tools but require significant negotiation for practical use with meanings often complex and nuanced.

III. Qualifications Frameworks and the Bologna Process as Credential Evaluation Tools: Significance and Implications for Higher Education Institutions

Qualifications Frameworks (QFs) in particular are having a profound impact as tools for credential evaluation. It could be argued that they are one of the main developments in attempting to reduce subjectivity in recognition activities. Rauhvargers claims that QFs will facilitate credential evaluators to compare the level and LOs of qualifications more easily, rather than "attempting to infer them" (2009 p121), from available information such as programme content and duration. However, he warns that such benefit only arises where QFs are actively implemented with a common understanding of integral elements such as LOs. These concerns are echoed by Birtwistle (2009) given the fact that higher education is "deeply culturally embedded" within States, and the changes

required for successful implementation of the Bologna Process, for example, cannot be achieved "at the stroke of a pen" (*ibid.* p57).

Qualifications Frameworks have been adopted internationally at staggering pace, particularly in the last five years, with 142 countries and territories now reported to be involved in QF development and implementation (CEDEFOP 2013 p10). Although used as a reform tool in some instances, most countries consider the main function of QFs to be a means of increasing the transparency of their national qualifications systems, to aid individuals' mobility with existing qualifications (CEDEFOP 2012 p1). Thus, while there may be differences in political agendas behind the development and implementation of a national QF, the "intrinsic logic" (Raffe 2007 p496) of using the instrument to organise and make transparent a qualifications system has maintained an interest in the tool worldwide. Raffe notes that "the introduction of an effective NQF has to be understood as a dynamic process, and that it is a social and political process as much as (or more than) a technical process" (2009 p6). The trust placed in QFs for the purposes of indicating a comparative level of educational achievement across borders is a matter for continuous negotiation. Indeed, Ermenc and Keep (2015 p112) warn that

> insofar as the building blocks of an NQF are the qualifications that are to be inserted within its framework, in some countries, the blocks consist of little more than sand and wishful thinking.

A major milestone for recognition in Ireland was the introduction of the NFQ in 2003. The impetus for establishing a Framework in Ireland reflected a number of developments around that time, including a recognised need for a coherent national approach to the qualifications system and to support the development of a knowledge society, both at European and international levels. The NFQ is envisaged as a lifelong learning (LLL) framework, with the learner firmly at the core:

> The development of the Framework of qualifications is set in the context of a vision for the recognition of learning and is in line with the broad national and European policy of promoting a lifelong learning society...While the Framework is about awards, it is also learner centred and values learning (NQAI 2003 p6).

More specifically, the NFQ provides a means of recognising qualifications from outside of the State and is described as

> the single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards (*ibid.* p6).

The researcher contends that the ability of the Framework to facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications depends on acceptance and understanding of this tool amongst those presented with foreign qualifications. Of course, a change in the structure of the qualifications system due to the technical tool that is the Framework should not be confused with the value assigned to any individual qualification; the latter influenced as discussed earlier by social, economic and political factors.

The Irish NFQ is part of a reform agenda in education on an international level, and has been formally linked to the overarching meta-frameworks which allow national frameworks to 'talk' - the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) or 'Bologna' Framework in November 2006, and the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) in June 2009. Specifically associated with higher education, the former Framework is of particular relevance here, and was adopted through the Bologna Process (the Process) in 2005 (see Chapter One p24).

The purpose of Bologna as a political process, now encompassing 47 states, is not to create a single European higher education system but to help forge coherent development between the rich diversity of education systems as an aid to mobility. The objectives of the Process (EHEA 1999), all tightly linked to the recognition of qualifications, are to:

- embrace a system to facilitate the comparability of qualifications across borders, an important document being the Diploma Supplement[21] - To help individuals communicate their skills and competences to credential evaluators in order to actively use their qualifications, and promote European education. In addition, credential evaluators need a reliable source of information;
- adopt higher education systems based on two main cycles, undergraduate and postgraduate; the Bologna Framework – To facilitate credential evaluation by offering a more transparent structure for a higher education system in terms of access and progression opportunities;

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[21] The Diploma Supplement is a personalised document issued to graduates by HEIs along with their parchment and transcripts. The document aims to provide additional information on the qualification and skills held by the learner for the purposes of facilitating subsequent recognition.

- establish a mechanism to demonstrate volume of learning - the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)[22] – To aid recognition of periods of learning to facilitate individuals' mobility and lifelong learning;

- promote student mobility in addition to the unrestricted movement of HEI staff - Active use of the LRC principles is encouraged to promote smooth recognition of learning, wherever it might take place;

- encourage co-operation in quality assurance - Trust in, and understanding of, quality assurance systems is essential in making fair recognition decisions on foreign qualifications;

- promote the European dimensions in higher education - Reciprocity in terms of the fair recognition of qualifications across borders is an integral aspect of encouraging collaboration amongst institutions, in areas such as mobility programmes and the development of joint awards.

The Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) acts as the support mechanism with working groups (WGs) established as required to implement workplans based on agreed priorities. Recognition is a central concern in the Bologna Process and developments of particular note are identified in Appendix B (Volume II p7). The importance of the "international competitiveness" (EHEA 1999) of European higher education quickly influenced the focus. In 2005, the "external dimension" of the Bologna Process was discussed by Ministers in Bergen and the 'Strategy for the European Higher Education Area in a Global Setting' was subsequently developed (Bologna Process 2007). One pillar of this key Strategy concerns the fair recognition of qualifications through the development of specific policies and practice.

There are three points made in the Strategy of particular note for this research. Firstly, its success "relies on a balanced mix of institutional, national and European policies within a common overall framework" (Bologna Process 2007 p2). Secondly, it is acknowledged that all staff of a HEI are involved – academics and administrators. Finally, the necessity to build a common understanding of what constitutes substantial difference is mentioned. An accompanying document to the Strategy entitled "Elements for Possible Future Action" omits, however, to consider explicitly stronger links between HEIs and the ENIC-NARIC network.

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[22] Further information on ECTS is available from: http://ec.europa.eu/education/tools/ects_en.htm.

A BFUG Working Group on Recognition, established to follow-up on the recommendations resulting from an analysis of the 2007 NAPs on Recognition (see Chapter One p24), made a number of recommendations to improve the recognition of qualifications and credits across the EHEA and with other parts of the world. Of particular note are calls for HEIs to include recognition activities in their internal quality assurance systems and internationalisation strategies, while quality assurance agencies are encouraged to include recognition in external quality assurance activities (Bologna Process 2012a p4). These recommendations suggest that credential evaluation needs to be viewed as a professional activity in its own right and thus provide an important context for this study.

More recently, a pathfinder group looking at the concept of automatic recognition was convened, regarded by Bruun Pedersen (2014 p241) as "a product of too many complaints to the European Commission on barriers for recognition". The concept of automatic recognition, although well-meaning, may act to heighten expectations for qualification holders even to the point of being unrealistic. Bruun Pedersen too questions the applicability of automatic recognition for admissions in HEIs (*ibid.* p247). The researcher also feels that the concept of automatic recognition acts to lessen the status of credential evaluation as a professional field in its own right, and may possibly impact negatively on an institution's autonomy in this area to the detriment of practice. The latter will be further discussed later in this chapter.

Much progress has been made in bedding down structures and tools for recognition through the Bologna Process. For example, in establishing a European form of undergraduate and graduate education; establishing a credit system for qualifications and promoting mobility. However, recognition tools must be interpreted and translated into practice by credential evaluators working in their national and local contexts, including HEIs, to result in fair recognition. A question arises about how much real progress has been made in credential evaluation practices. Many items regarded as issues in recognition in 2002 are still present. In fact, some of the same recommendations are being made more than a decade later (Bologna Process 2002, 2012b).

Recommendations for HEIs made in 2002, and of particular interest for this study, are the provision of easily accessible information on recognition procedures for the benefit of students and other stakeholders, the availability of adequate internal structures, the promotion of best practice in credential evaluation to academics and administrators, and the inclusion of recognition procedures in internal quality assurance arrangements. Cooperation in automatic recognition is even mentioned. Policy has clearly raced ahead of practice. Indeed, Bologna surveys circulated in 2014 to populate country reports included many questions attempting to capture recognition processes. However, a survey is not an appropriate instrument to adequately capture practice on the ground. Further, it is likely that Bologna reports have the capacity to drive only mere compliance as opposed to inspiring a culture of best practice in credential evaluation. Both Bergan (2009b p47) and Rauhvargers (2004 p335) emphasise the need for positive attitudes and willing dispositions in conducting credential evaluation work with success of the Bologna Process hinging on the involvement of "all levels of higher education staff...to bring it all 'down to institutional reality'" (*ibid.* p345-346).

To enable critique of the Bologna Process and its impact on credential evaluators, one has to first decipher what the Process is trying to do and the values espoused. Zgaga (2012 p25) argues convincingly that the Process itself has no explicit principles. A variety of terms such as objectives, rules and action lines are used in documentation. Values with which individuals can engage and which they can foster are left to be deduced from the environment the individual inhabits. Curiously, the "basic principles" (Bologna Process 2005 p10) referred to by the BFUG for the Bergen Communiqué as "an important element in the description of the EHEA" were never included, and are not available to date. The researcher concludes that the pivotal role of individual staff members at HEIs, such as credential evaluators, to initiate change was not emphasised or given adequate consideration. This issue will be borne keenly in mind in conducting the current research. It should be noted that recognition activities are an increasingly important aspect in meeting the Bologna 2020 target of 20 per cent of EHEA graduates involved in a study or training period abroad (Bologna Process 2012b).

While it is significant that the LRC is the only legal document of the Process, exactly how much weight this carries is difficult to judge. Problems in recognition, although not very clearly defined, remain, and countries are still being encouraged to revise national legislation where it might contradict the LRC (Bologna Process 2012a), even though

international legislation takes precedence over national arrangements. This research seeks to shed light on the importance of such legislation on credential evaluation practice.

In using QFs for recognition, it is important to acknowledge that the meta-frameworks in place (Bologna and EQF) are compatible, and their respective implementation is coordinated at national and European level (see Chapter Two p35). While it is envisaged that parchments issued nationally should include reference to an EQF level, it is important for credential evaluators to consider that primacy remains with national qualifications systems and frameworks. More importantly, the value of placing EQF levels on parchments is questionable as it may undermine institutional autonomy and credential evaluation as a professional practice.

A further interesting development relates to interest expressed by third countries to reference their QFs to the EQF (European Commission 2013). If such work progresses, a question arises as to the implications for credential evaluation practice. Regardless, QFs represent structures that are meaningless unless used, tested and developed in practice to effect true change for learners, particularly in relation to the portability of their qualifications outside of the home country. Raffe (2015 p5-6) provides an insightful explanation of how the reform of qualifications takes place, "based on horticulture rather than engineering". The same point could be argued for credential evaluation activity and the use of QFs. A key concern for this research relates to the use, if any, of meta-frameworks in credential evaluation practice. Indeed, Johnson and Wolf (2009 p9) comment on the paucity of research concerning the impact of tools and policies on academic recognition, indicating that "evaluation lags far behind innovation". Evidence of the impact of QFs in terms of increasing the transparency of qualifications is minimal (Allais 2011; Raffe 2013). It is hoped that this research will help contribute to available knowledge as to the helpfulness and relevance, or otherwise, of QFs in practice.

Qualifications Frameworks are not automatic recognition tools. The structure is there, but they evolve as their use is interpreted in practice by credential evaluators, amongst others. Thus, while the LRC provides principles for fair recognition, subsidiary texts such as that adopted on using QFs in 2013 (see page 54) demonstrate the dynamic nature of recognition. The key influences in implementing the principles of fair

recognition are the credential evaluators themselves. This review will now look further at a number of policies providing a context for recognition activities at HEIs.

IV.   The Context for Credential Evaluation at Irish Higher Education Institutions

Politics is central to both past and present developments in higher education. The example of the Bologna Process already discussed provides a particularly important wider context for recognition in HEIs. Indeed, Skilbeck points out that monumental change has occurred in universities in the past century:

> The university is no longer a quiet place to teach and do scholarly work at a measured pace and contemplate the universe as in centuries past. It is a big, complex, demanding, competitive, business requiring largescale ongoing investment (*ibid.* p7).

What this business involves is rarely fully clear and needs to be explored in the context of its possible impact on credential evaluation. There appear to be very explicit tensions in place. The recognition of foreign qualifications at Irish HEIs is impacted by a wide range of other national policies and strategies, heavily influenced of course by developments in the EU and beyond. For example, the strategies for Higher Education to 2030 and International Education (see Chapter One p25) emphasise the political nature and marketisation of education. There is a noticeable tendency for national internationalisation strategies worldwide to associate the concept of internationalisation predominantly with the recruitment of international students (European Parliament 2015) Indeed, figures on full-time international students in Ireland solely occupy the heading of internationalisation in the profiling of higher education (HEA 2013). Internationalisation policy uses the language of economics with reference to targets, competitiveness and market intelligence. An institution's response to globalisation encompasses of course much more than such recruitment (DES 2011 p81), with institutional links likely to be particularly important for credential evaluation activities in this study.

The recruitment element of internationalisation is brought to the fore in no small part by the aggressive promotion of the 'Education in Ireland' brand by Enterprise Ireland. The latter is a state agency involved in supporting the development of companies offering services traded internationally. A question arises as to the compatibility of the broad functions of this agency and the 'service' of education. It may be the case that this

tension impacts on credential evaluation at HEIs. Also, the consultation paper on the review of Ireland's International Education Strategy in 2013 (DES 2013a p2) includes "closer alignment between education and immigration policies" as important progress. This progress refers to new arrangements in place for full-time non-EEA students. Economic migration under the guise of a student visa (which allows a student work for 20 hours per week), is deemed an ongoing high risk (Department of Justice and Law Reform 2010 p2).

The increasing presence of international students in HEIs is likely due to massification and higher education policy on a national and international level. The recognition of foreign qualifications in HEIs is occurring within the realm of internationalisation which is "ongoing, comprehensive and multifaceted" (Schoorman 2000 p2). The importance of international experience and networking of administrators is acknowledged (*ibid.* p27). Yet, internationalisation strategies at institutional and national level exclude recognition activities, despite a recommendation for their inclusion (Bologna Process 2012a p4).

In the current economic climate, there is increasing tension in accessing higher education. High levels of unemployment and a concerted effort to boost international student numbers to generate revenue on the one hand (Skilbeck 2001 p9), challenge increased access for non-traditional students on the other hand. It is significant, and in a regrettable way, that the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (HEA 2008) does not include explicit actions to target access issues relating to ethnicity. This omission occurs despite the acknowledged "need to have special regard to the needs of recent immigrants" (*ibid.* p11), and reference in the document, to difficulties such as differential levels of fees incurred depending on institution, language ability and the recognition of previous qualifications. The Mid-Term Review of the Plan indicates that training opportunities are open to "access personnel" (HEA 2010 p2). The content of such training and the staff to whom it is available is not clear. Following reviews of institutional websites for this study (see Chapters Four and Five), institutional access plans do not appear to be readily available online, or to include reference to the immigrant community or ethnic groups. The unprecedented level of migration of non-Irish nationals to the country during the 'boom' perhaps had an impact on credential evaluators and their behaviour. Although Gilmartin and White (2008) comment on the unprepared nature of responses in certain sectors to large scale immigration, HEIs are commonly known for their international outlook so this is surely not new territory.

A related policy of particular interest for credential evaluation is Ireland's first Intercultural Education Strategy (Department of Education and Skills and Office of the Minister for Integration[23] 2010). This strategy is informed by the Statement on Integration Strategy and Diversity Management (Office of the Minister for Integration 2008). Gaining appropriate value of one's foreign qualification(s) is a central element in the achievement of economic integration (Immigrant Council of Ireland 2008 p5; Integrating Ireland 2005), which in turn impacts on social cohesion. If and how this strategy impacts on credential evaluators is of interest in the current study. The Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI) suggest that research studies on integration begin with personal experience as the process is "framed by broader societal structures, beliefs and barriers" (ICI 2008 p4) that can impinge on an individual's capacity to integrate into the host society. While the ICI concentrate on migrants' experiences, it is acknowledged that this is only one stakeholder group and that "future research needs to address the experiences and attitudes of the host population" (*ibid.* p4). This study focuses on the attitudes and values of those working as evaluators of foreign qualifications in HEIs; a small subset of the host population. This work is timely, however, as the Department of Justice and Equality recently announced a review of Ireland's approach to integration (Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration 2014).

For the current research, it is important to identify the challenges facing HEIs which may manifest themselves through staff behaviour. Daily activities such as teaching, quality assurance and research may co-exist precariously with pressures such as massification, internationalisation and increasing revenue. The purposes of higher education referred to previously (p48) now compete increasingly with such pressures at HEIs for staff attention. The OECD (2004) commended Ireland on the links made between higher education and economics but identified the relatively low numbers of non-EU students as a weakness. Such an official commendation shows tellingly the extent to which higher education in the Republic has become commercialised. Its ability to generate income is being harnessed for the purposes of attaining a knowledge-based society, evidenced through the General Agreement on Trade in Services (World Trade Organisation 1994 p291) and the Europe 2020 Strategy (European Commission 2010). Indeed, Tyson (2014 p275) proposes that "academic mobility is the secret ingredient in

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[23] Strategies for integration are coordinated by the Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration in the Department of Justice and Equality (www.integration.ie).

the fuel which powers the engine of human capital development", thus illustrating the central importance of recognition activities. The OECD acknowledge the considerable dependency of Irish HEIs on public funding, representing 85.1 per cent of total funding in 2006 and 82.6 per cent in 2008 (OECD 2011 p245). This downward trend is continuing with the HE strategy advocating a broadening of the funding base for higher education (DES 2011 p111). Thus, the "fragmented sector" of international education (The International Education Board Ireland (IEBI) 2004 p37) is now receiving much attention with a particular focus on increasing the number of international students as discussed earlier. The broader significance of the pressure to increase international students on credential evaluation practice merits close attention from the research community. A concern noted by the IEBI of particular relevance here is that of quality assurance in the context of pastoral care. In response, the IEM (see Chapter One p26) is being developed for the provision of international education, with the associated code of practice envisaged to include the care of potential students in recruitment activities. Credential evaluation activities should then be a key concern here and will bring practice in this area to the fore.

We live in a globally interdependent society. The recognition of qualifications across borders is integral to internationalisation, which in turn depends on reciprocity and trust. The latter issues are discussed in the following section of this review where focus rests on literature available concerning actual credential evaluation practice at HEIs. In addition, reference is made to the availability of supporting documentation.

V.   Credential Evaluation Practice Within Higher Education Institutions

As indicated earlier, a review of the NAPs for Recognition give little insight into credential evaluation practice at HEIs across Bologna countries. It is also apparent that repositories of recognition decisions are not available at national or institutional levels (Bruun Pedersen 2014 p245; Rauhvargers and Rusakova 2009). Further, there is no clarity on who exactly acts as credential evaluators in Irish HEIs and the extent of their influence on this activity within an institution. Nonetheless, foreign qualifications presented for the purpose of access to undergraduate programmes are typically assessed by admissions officers, while the latter may coordinate recognition in association with international officers and heads of departments for postgraduate access.

In Ireland, universities collaborate with Institutes of Technology[24] (IoTs) to make information publicly available on how many foreign school qualifications, in particular, are valued for undergraduate access. This collaboration is a recent development (2013), with separate approaches used in the past. Discrepancies existed, and it made sense to come together to share information and to standardise how qualifications were valued in terms of 'points' assigned though the Central Applications Office (CAO) system. The researcher considers that such collaboration gives positive signals to an international audience, but no such formal information or collaboration exists for postgraduate access.

A useful insight into credential evaluation practice was gained at the Qualifications Recognition - Ireland Conference held in 2006 which aimed to highlight the structures in place nationally to cater for the recognition of foreign qualifications . Douglas (2006) reported that the IoTs were "dealing" with undergraduate applications whilst "evaluation" of postgraduate applications occurred. The researcher considers the choice of wording an important reflection of practice on the ground. There is a suggestion that the recognition of foreign qualifications at undergraduate level is more of an administrative procedure compared to postgraduate level. Douglas (2006) noted that the Bologna Process, with its three cycle structure of Bachelor, Master and Doctorate, was considered by IoTs as an aid for credential evaluation for postgraduate access. For countries outside of the Bologna system, experience of past admissions was important in determining access and

> in some cases has provided reassurance or created reluctance to consider applicants from certain countries. Professor to professor links were often important in this regard (Douglas 2006).

It was also reported that admissions were "often based on individual university reputation rather than any actual or perceived national standard" (*ibid.*). It was also commented that where qualifications are presented from "unknown" countries, institutions depend more heavily on the services provided by QR and others, particularly UK NARIC. This insight into credential evaluation practice is supported by CEDEFOP (2010 p39) which places emphasis on both the subjectivity and past experiences of the credential evaluator, indicating that a

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[24] The Guideline entry requirements for EU/EFTA (European Free Trade Association) applicants is available at: http://www2.cao.ie/downloads/documents/Guidelines-EU-EFTA.pdf.

> lack of confidence by users in specific qualifications [may arise] due to perceptions of lack of quality checks, crisis in the management of a qualification, undue variation in the range of knowledge skills and understanding demonstrated by holders of the qualification.

Anecdotally, the services of UK NARIC are used extensively by Irish HEIs and Integrating Ireland (2005 p13) reports this trend. An obvious question then arises as to the existence of standards in credential evaluation practice, and consistency of decisions taken.

The lack of clear guidelines for foreign qualification holders regarding credential evaluation practice at HEIs was highlighted earlier. The researcher considers that it is difficult for HEIs to defend the absence of such guidelines given the plethora of support now available; for example, the EAR-HEI manual developed through the ENIC-NARIC network and research reports from the Academic Cooperation Association (Muche *et al.* 2004). More specifically, an LRC subsidiary text gives detailed guidance as to procedures complying with the LRC (The Committee of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region 2010). A recent publication (European Commission 2011) concerns the assessment of international qualifications where an Irish university is a partner. While NARIC centres are mentioned, there are none in the partners' list. Although the lack of collaboration is frustrating, the publication does demonstrate interest from an Irish HEI in credential evaluation practice.

The lack of clarity on credential evaluation procedures and practice can perhaps be explained by the need to regard credential evaluation work as more than merely an administrative procedure, but rather an academic endeavour. Bergan and Hunt (2009 p7) make the intriguing point, based on their own research, that for "recognition specialists", substantial differences are "as exciting...as black holes are to astrophysicists, integers to mathematicians and aspect or ergativity to linguists". This may be true but managerialism has impacted significantly on the area of credential evaluation. With an increase in international students and a political push for mobility, Bergan (2009c p15) argues that credential evaluation has shifted from a specialist to a more mainstream activity in terms of higher education policy. Possible tensions are immediately evident.

In the first instance, if credential evaluators are being forced to act as managers as a result of external pressures, the question arises as to what extent quasi-market circumstances are conducive to guiding appropriate action by individuals in HEIs. Secondly, centralising recognition activities within institutions is recommended by some (Sursock and Smidt 2010 p82), as issues with procedures are more likely to be evident in large institutions where activities are largely devolved. Furthermore, the European Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) warns that less centralisation of recognition activities "increases the risk that the staff actually taking these decisions have less knowledge of the overarching legal framework, and less experience in assessing foreign qualifications or credits" (EACEA 2012 p55). However, Davies' (2014 p138) argument for the necessity of a certain degree of devolution in admissions processes raises an important issue to be explored by this present research. Further, Davies (*ibid.* p139) identifies the key issue for achieving fair recognition of foreign qualifications as being "the quality of collaboration" between a central recognition office and various faculties, departments and schools. The importance of an adequate staff resource and training has been recorded frequently (Bologna Process 2002; Muche *et al.* 2004 p165; Davies 2014 p138).

The inclusion of recognition activities in both internal and external quality assurance procedures is recommended through the Bologna Process (2002) and EACEA P9 Eurydice (2012 p55). Only 14 countries[25] report that institutional recognition policies are subject to routine evaluation (EACEA P9 Eurydice 2012 p55). The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), which guide quality assurance activities in Irish HEIs, is expected to include recognition activities more explicitly when a revised version is published in 2015. Currently, the draft revision text makes explicit reference to recognition in standard 1.4, indicating the importance of the LRC principles and of cooperating with other institutions and the national ENIC-NARIC centre (Bologna Process 2014 p10). However, Kelo (2014 p154) decisively argues that the current guidelines already support HEI activities in recognition through the enhancement of trust. While inclusion of recognition activities in internal and external quality assurance arrangements will raise the profile of these practices and promote credential evaluation as a professional field, it will also help satisfy demands for increased accountability and

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[25] From 2014, the Eurydice Network is based in those 36 countries participating in the EU's Erasmus+ programme (EU Member States, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Norway, Serbia and Turkey). The Eurydice Network provides information and analysis on education systems and policies across Europe.

transparency (European Commission 2003 p22; Davies 2014 p128). There are potential drawbacks. The issue of adding further bureaucracy is identified by Davies (2014 p139). In addition, as practitioners in a professional field, it may be difficult for experienced credential evaluators to explain decisions and practices that owe as much to the tacit knowledge of experience, as to the application of formal criteria. Institutional autonomy is important. Excessive bureaucracy and regulation could possibly result in the knowledge and experiences of credential evaluators being overlooked to the detriment of those seeking recognition of their qualifications.

As "it is impossible to define precise features of substantial differences that could be applied to all situations" (Blomqvist 2009 p5), what constitutes a substantial difference for one credential evaluator may not for another. Fagan (2007 p134) demands "changing a mindset" when referring to the attitudes of credential evaluators at Irish HEIs. But Fagan's work neglects the credential evaluator voice which is problematic, as there may be factors not clearly evident restricting implementation of best practice. The work of a credential evaluator is intertwined with the concept of a qualification and its purpose. Indeed, Fagan (2007 p137) describes recognition as a "socio micro-process". Individuals involved in credential evaluation are not neutral in the recognition process and this may impact on recognition decisions. Social justice is among the perspectives that underlie the choice of research topic here. All individuals presenting foreign qualifications in Ireland for access to postgraduate education should be treated fairly and consistently, as will be explored later in the thesis.

There is anecdotal evidence both nationally and internationally to suggest that not all credential evaluators within HEIs can, or are willing to adapt to changing policy and best practices in recognition. By way of example, the European Commission anecdotally receive a large volume of complaints relating to the recognition of qualifications on an annual basis. A major issue here could be a lack of ownership of credential evaluation activities within HEIs. Perhaps some credential evaluators in HEIs feel far removed from policy and planning, even within the institution, and so feel restricted in making decisions which they personally feel are just (see similar issue described regarding practice within the ENIC-NARIC network p53). Nevertheless, they must also be aware of the power they possess over those presenting their foreign qualifications for assessment.

Institutional autonomy is an essential element for HEIs in fulfilling their mission, but the concept does not properly speaking stretch to ignoring the principles of the LRC as an international convention. A lack of information on institutional practices, as discussed previously, means that countries are not aware if the principles of the LRC are being followed. An understanding of practical implementation of the LRC is different to awareness of the LRC itself within HEIs. Statistics on the latter were quoted by Rauhvargers (2004 p338) as though such figures represent practice. However, misinterpretation of autonomy within institutions is often associated with poor recognition practice at HEIs (Rauhvargers and Rusakova 2009 p37; Davies 2014 p134). Some members of the ENIC-NARIC network consider that institutional autonomy has perhaps undermined efforts to liaise with HEIs on issues relating to recognition (Rauhvargers and Rusakova 2009 p38). A question arises as to whether there is genuinely resistance to the LRC in HEIs across countries bound by the Convention or if simply a lack of resources and training is having an impact on credential evaluation. Indeed, Vraa-Jensen (2014 p124) insists that there is no tension between the LRC and academic freedom or institutional autonomy. He argues that a lack of understanding of the LRC on the part of academics constitutes the heart of the issue.

The importance of understanding the perspectives of individuals acting as credential evaluators cannot be overstated if the overall aim of fair recognition for all qualifications is to be achieved. There is no such thing as automatic recognition for qualifications. Rather, fair recognition can be achieved where there is a culture for such. Tyson (2014 p280) emphasises a number of important points. Recognition may often be in the hands of individuals. He further notes that "information is largely static, while knowledge is dynamic". These points indicate the importance of promoting a culture where best practice is constantly negotiated and where valuable experiences can be shared with new staff. Indeed, the relationship between HEIs and their respective ENIC-NARIC centre appears to be evolving. The most recent Bologna Process Implementation Report (Bologna Process 2015) indicates that in 20 countries, HEIs are making recognition decisions based on advice from a centre. An example of the importance of a network is provided by the recent establishment of the U.S. based Association for International Credential Evaluation Professionals (TAICEP) in 2013. Credential evaluators there recognised the need for collaboration and the professionalisation of this work.

Focus now turns to individuals seeking recognition of their foreign qualifications from a HEI. Issues documented are discussed.

VI. Foreign Qualification Holders and Recognition at Higher Education Institutions

Credential evaluation practice and resulting decisions from the point of view of the qualification holder warrants attention. Education is an integral part of an individual's identity constituting "an exceptionally rich cultural and scientific asset for both individuals and society" (Council of Europe 1997 p2).

Those seeking recognition of their qualifications at HEIs can be migrants with domicile in Ireland or international students. Together with factors such as employment and housing, the fair recognition of prior qualifications facilitates migrants "to 'belong' and participate" (ICI 2008 p1) in any host country. Likewise, for international students, one of the attractions in travelling abroad for study is the opportunity to experience a new culture. Integration essentially consists of a series of actions involving both rights and responsibilities for migrants and citizens of the host country (Department of Justice, Equity and Law Reform 2005 p38). Credential evaluators at HEIs have a key role in integration and an associated responsibility in the achievement of an inclusive society. The LRC states that "a fair recognition of qualifications is a key element of the right to education and a responsibility of society" (Council of Europe 1997 p2).

Research conducted by Integrating Ireland (2005 p17) shows that a number of participants perceived less difficulty in gaining recognition of their home jurisdiction qualifications in countries such as Canada, the USA and UK when compared to Ireland. There were two prominent reasons put forward as explanation; greater experience of immigration in those countries and centralised recognition authorities (only two participants from a total of 51 had heard of QR). In terms of non-EU countries, participants considered it inadequate that there was no centralised organisation responsible for recognising foreign qualifications. They were perplexed with the apparent lack of clear criteria and guidance in Irish HEIs regarding evaluation of qualifications from countries outside of the EU. In many instances, participants felt that acceptance into an institution depended on the attitudes of particular departments or individual staff members rather than transparent criteria. It appears that some staff in institutions may be shirking responsibility for fair evaluation of qualifications. A number of applicants were informed that their non-EU qualifications would be

recognised if recognition was first gained in another EU country (*ibid.* p17). An example of credential evaluation based on a legalistic position is also demonstrated as a number of participants refer to recognition being more likely for qualifications originating from countries whose accession to the EU occurred in 2004 and 2007, than from those countries of the former USSR (Integrating Ireland 2005 p17). In the absence of HEI credential evaluator voices, it is only possible to speculate as to the reasons for these differing experiences of foreign qualification holders. It could be the case that expertise amongst credential evaluators is lacking, or perhaps a lack of resources prevents or impedes credential evaluation.

The fair recognition of foreign qualifications requires effort and an open mind (Bergan 2011 p204). It is pointed out by the ICI that discussions surrounding the topic of integration tend to assume that there is a "set of shared and static core values" within the host society (ICI 2008 p4). The ICI claim that power in relationships between migrants and the host people is unbalanced in favour of the latter:

> There are asymmetric power relations between migrants and the host society that often result in the onus for integration being placed solely on migrants (*ibid.* p4).

The ICI study in 2008 focused on the experiences of migrants in terms of integration into Irish society. Participants of four nationalities (Chinese, Indian, Lithuanian and Nigerian) were chosen as representative of migrant experiences. They "generally have different entry routes into Ireland, different legal status, different civic and political entitlements in Ireland, different socio-cultural characteristics, and are differently racialised" (ICI 2008 p3). The report noted that migrants experienced inconsistencies in the recognition of qualifications and described recognition practice as "nebulous" since "there are few clear guidelines, and the levels of discretion exercised often lead to unfair or unequal treatment of migrants". Individuals attempting to access postgraduate programmes with foreign undergraduate qualifications were often required to participate in undergraduate study, sometimes for a period of one or more years, prior to gaining entry to the particular programme. Of particular concern is that participants felt that "a racial hierarchy seemed to be emerging" (*ibid.* p12).

A point worth re-considering here is the difference between access and admission. With no data available on particular problems in credential evaluation at Irish HEIs, it may be the case that some individual qualification holders only have reason to be disappointed rather than having grounds for a grievance. It is suggested here that fair recognition of a

qualification for the applicant may very often be associated, in the applicant's own view, with an offer of a place on a programme. While qualifications may be recognised or not recognised outright, "alternative recognition" is specified in the LRC (Council of Europe 1997) and allows the possibility of partial recognition of a qualification.

Fair recognition of foreign qualifications encompasses much more than simply providing a decision. The manner in which this public service is provided is important. For example, criteria and guidelines followed in making an assessment should be clear for the qualification holder; the decision should be communicated clearly and within a reasonable time period (currently, within a period of three months is recommended by the LRC); there should be a procedure for appeal; and the credential evaluator should be identifiable and accountable.

An element of care is required in recognition activities. In bowing to pressures within a HEI, some staff members may place this care low in their order of priorities. While the NFQ places the learner at the centre of the education and training system, the dominant discourses in government policy related to economic factors as discussed earlier, are pushed to the forefront of debate. Dynamics in higher education have changed.

While the recognition of previous qualifications represents only one factor in terms of selection of an individual for access to a particular programme of study, credential evaluation does constitute an important activity within the overall admissions process. It is unclear if Irish HEIs, consisting of many departments, schools and central offices, operate holistically to cater for those seeking recognition of their foreign qualifications for postgraduate access. A strong argument can be made, therefore, that the voice of credential evaluators themselves has a crucial contribution to make in the development of policy and improved practice in this domain.

Conclusion

This literature review has sought to provide a research-informed context for the pursuit of the research aims. The recognition of foreign qualifications for the purpose of postgraduate access at Irish HEIs is a professional practice in its own right. Credential evaluators need to have the capacity and willingness to adapt, as recognition is dynamic. Thus, questioning assumptions under which we work and critiquing ourselves and practices is required. Many issues requiring attention and new, innovative thinking have been highlighted in the review, in the context of credential evaluation at Irish HEIs.

There are significant social and economic implications of the work of credential evaluators and an appreciation of the uniqueness of each individual applicant is necessary. Streamlining credential evaluation practice is essential. While technical tools are available, it is ultimately credential evaluators, and not technical tools, that interpret rules and regulations and promote a culture of fair recognition practice.

The problem conceptualised for research can change depending on the methodology used. There may be a number of ways of exploring credential evaluation practice at HEIs, but the challenge faced relates to what approach fits best. Research methods are now discussed in Chapter Four.

Chapter Four

Answering the Research Questions Identified and Meeting the Aims of this Research Study - A Methodology

Introduction

This methodology chapter describes and justifies the research design and its constituent elements. The chapter is organised in three parts. The first part of the chapter outlines the overall methodological approach, which includes significant elements of constructivist grounded theory (CGT). The suitability of the approach taken is discussed in the context of the researcher's conceptual framework. Ethical considerations identified as relevant to the study are also highlighted. Part two outlines the procedure for carrying out the research, which includes the preliminary (its intentions and data gathering instruments) and main phases of the research. The challenges experienced by the researcher are recounted with an explanation of how these were resolved. The third and final part of the chapter then explains the procedure for presentation and analysis of data.

Methodological Approach, Conceptual Framework and Ethics

- Constructivist Grounded Theory

How the researcher influences the research design is a critical consideration. As 'anchor' of this study, the researcher's influence is acknowledged in all aspects of the design of the research and analysis of data. A paucity of information on credential evaluation practice at Irish HEIs is a practical professional problem for the researcher. Such knowledge is needed by the researcher to better understand perceived recognition problems for colleagues at HEIs and qualification holders. Also, an insight into practice and a means of improving it is required for credential evaluators themselves. It is acknowledged that this research is taking place in different contexts for participants, giving rise to multiple realities in terms of their credential evaluation practice. However, it is necessary to collate experiences in a systematic way to result in the kinds of insight that would guide practice in ways that are answerable. Throughout the thesis, the researcher aims to remain explicit about her role throughout in guiding data collection, analysis and finally the conclusions of this research.

The problem conceptualised for research can change depending on the methodology used. The focus here rests on the development of an in-depth understanding of credential evaluation practices at HEIs. This is with a view towards improving practice to achieve the fair recognition of foreign qualifications, by offering a way forward that is defensible, based on best available knowledge. A report from the Commission on the Social Sciences (2003) in the UK criticised social scientists on their removal from real social and policy issues. Taking account of such criticism, this current study will focus on a real social and policy issue, and should be relevant to local, national and international audiences.

Tracing the origins and evolution of Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) allowed the researcher gain insight into the appropriateness of constructivist grounded theory (CGT) to the pursuit of the particular aims of this research. Glaser and Strauss (1967) founded and advocated GTM as an alternative to a positivist approach for social studies. The approach was widely accepted as facilitating the generation of valid findings from qualitative data, by seeking the maximum degree of objective analysis that was attainable in dealing with qualitative, as distinct from quantitative data. Grounded theory methodology has evolved with use and experience. Following the publication of '*Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists'* in 1987 by Strauss, a divergence in approach to grounded research was evident between him and Glaser, with the latter rigidly adhering to the original thinking on grounded theory. This thinking stresses objectivity in the sense of allowing categories to emerge naturally and without prompt in relation to a basic social process, reflecting Glaser's quantitative research background. Strauss, by contrast places emphasis on the verification process for emergent conceptual categories.

Constructivist grounded theory (CGT) championed by Charmaz (2006) is the approach considered most appropriate for this study. In comparison with the GTM outlined above, labelled 'objectivist grounded theory' (OGT) (Bryant 2003, Charmaz 2005), CGT seeks to advance GTM in light of changing philosophical and epistemological perspectives. This approach seeks to acknowledge that there may be multiple realities to be captured, as opposed to one 'objective' reality, and that the research methodology must seek to do justice to this important point.

The relevance of a CGT approach became evident for the following six reasons:

1. The research problem and questions are allowed to emerge in an unforced way

The researcher's professional interest was the initial catalyst for this research study. As discussed in Chapter One (p15), the researcher is not aware of research giving a voice to credential evaluators at HEIs, even though, anecdotally, recognition problems at HEIs are often mentioned. There appears to be little specific information on what the problems are. The researcher started with a professional interest in exploring credential evaluation practice at HEIs. To accommodate the nature of the answers being sought to the research questions identified, a qualitative approach is appropriate. This approach can elicit rich description and provide a mechanism for researcher involvement to help evoke, interpret and portray accurately and succinctly precise detail relating to daily credential evaluation practice. Eisner (2001) proposes that well-designed and executed qualitative research has the ability to make the mundane daily reality strange and question-worthy.

2. Influence of the researcher is acknowledged and kept under scrutiny

Although not a credential evaluator in a HEI, the researcher is aware that she greatly influences all aspects of the current study due to her unique contextual professional and life experiences. Indeed, "guiding interests, sensitizing concepts, and disciplinary perspectives" (Charmaz 2006 p17) offer a starting point for exploration of the research problem. Further, Charmaz (2005 p509) notes that a CGT approach does not assume that data relevant to the research problem is simply waiting to be found, but instead manifests itself based on the way in which the problem is conceptualised by the researcher:

> …what observers see and hear depends on their prior interpretive frames, biographies, and interests as well as the research context, their relationships with research participants, concrete field experiences, and modes of generating and recording empirical materials. No qualitative method relies on pure induction – the questions we ask of the empirical world frame what we know of it. In short, we share in constructing what we define as data.

Thus, the findings presented through this study are an interpretation, as individuals are "not passive receptacles into which data are poured" (Charmaz 2006 p15). Reflecting on the researcher's work in academic recognition, there are value judgements made regularly and this subjectivity cannot be completely avoided, but "systematic attention to value questions should be viewed as a taken-for-granted component of methodological rigour" Gewirtz and Cribb (2006 p141). Professionally, the researcher's context is provided in Chapter Two, while an insight into her attitudes and assumptions

may be gauged through choices made in research design and data collection, as described in the current chapter.

3. There is the necessary degree of flexibility in data collection and analysis

Grounded theory methodology provides a framework for the researcher to proceed with data collection and analysis simultaneously. The researcher was able to use her experience to inform initial research design, and then together with ongoing analysis, make decisions on further sampling as "rich data can spark multiple directions of inquiry" (Charmaz 2006 p99). The researcher's pragmatist approach is evident as she made decisions on data collection as analysis proceeded to follow the research problem identified. The particular approach to analysis applied in this research study is detailed further on.

4. Significant patterns in credential evaluation practice are allowed to emerge

Grounded theory methodology is suitable for this study as a means of "getting close to practice, to getting a first-hand sense" (Eisner 2001 p137). A CGT approach seemed to offer the most promising procedure for pursuing this kind of research where "explanations of social processes" (Charmaz 2006 p5) is required. The methodology allowed the researcher "develop some insights we can work with" (Eisner 2001 p140), while respecting the importance of context to inform subsequent action on improving credential evaluation practice within Irish HEIs. The uniqueness of participants' contexts in relation to their roles and location (office) within diverse types of Irish HEIs add richness to this research. A CGT approach is used in this study to situate data in its context; to learn "about the experience within embedded, hidden networks, situations, and relationships…making visible hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity" (Creswell 2007 p65). Individuals are involved in creating their social reality. Credential evaluation practice is dynamic and it is not possible to hold conditions and circumstances constant.

Although Charmaz reports that the main thrust of GTM comprises "*developing* theories from research grounded in data rather than *deducing* testable hypotheses from existing theories" (2006 p4), this research study does not aim to conclude with theory. In comparison to GTM as advocated by Strauss in his 1987 publication, '*Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*', there is less emphasis on 'testing' the emerging theory in CGT. Thus, the outcome of this study is best described as "plausible accounts" for

research findings (Charmaz 2006 p132). The latter end-product of CGT and this study could be viewed perhaps as "theorets" (Eisner 2001 p141) in contrast to the grand generalisable theories associated with traditional GTM, and often criticised in discourses relating to "theory's fragility" (Thomas 1997 p1).

5. In-built methodological rigour acts to verify findings and provides a framework for high quality research

The flexibility of the CGT approach, however, does not mean that rigour is any less important than in the traditional GTM approach. Charmaz (2005 p525) firstly reminds researchers that vigilance is important in ensuring that any pre-conceived ideas or concepts actually earn their way into analysis. For example, the researcher was aware from her professional work that there is no formal role of credential evaluator as such at Irish HEIs, thus, suggesting an issue with professional identity. Findings (Chapter Six) show that an identity crisis does exist in relation to credential evaluation practice. Secondly, Charmaz 2006 (p182-183) notes four specific quality criteria – credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness – and poses questions to evaluate each. The credibility criterion is concerned with the ability of the researcher to argue and back up any claims made. In this thesis, anonymised transcripts are included for the purpose of promoting openness and transparency. That the research offers new significant knowledge is the basis for the originality criterion, while resonance refers to the extent to which participants' experiences are fully captured in a meaningful way for both participants and others in similar circumstances. Finally, the usefulness criterion considers the ability of the research to be used for good in daily life and in suggesting additional avenues for exploration.

While "subjectivity is inevitable" (Peshkin 1988 p17), cycles of analysis in parallel to data collection in this study, aims to verify as far as possible the resulting insights into credential evaluation practice. Where meaning was not clear for the researcher during transcription of interviews or if she noted any inconsistencies, additional questions were posed to respective participants by email for clarification. The researcher sought such clarification in three cases. In addition, a number of participants were asked to confirm the duration of their credential evaluation experience following conclusion of the interviews. No responses were received from participants 6 or 2C. However, data from their interviews suggest significant experience. Participant 6 makes reference to work trips abroad, while participant 2C refers to experiences over a period of years.

The researcher captures the multiple realities of credential evaluators in this research by keeping the analysis grounded in the voice of participants. Direct quotes are included throughout Chapters Six and Seven to present the perspectives of credential evaluators. These quotes also act as a basis for the reader to facilitate understanding of the researcher's interpretation of experiences.

6. Reflexivity on the researcher's part is expected

Reflexivity of the researcher is critically important to engage with the subject matter on a deeper level. Charmaz (2006 pxii) notes that "grounded theory methods foster creating an analytic edge to your work". However, the significance of how methods are implemented in practice to enrich research is highlighted by Charmaz and Mitchell (1996), with the ability of the researcher to remain alert to intricate detail an essential aspect. It is important that this research engages the researcher in critical reflection to question her underlying assumptions, and to enable her to propose informed recommendations as a conclusion to this research.

- Grounded Theory Methodology as a Conceptual Framework

Grounded Theory Methodology serves as both a methodology and conceptual framework in this study. Using GTM doesn't in advance impose any perspective. This is important given that the researcher, although professionally involved in credential evaluation, works in a different context to those credential evaluators at HEIs. Thus, flexibility is required to enable the practices of credential evaluators in HEIs to emerge in terms of their role, values, procedures and policy. No pre-design is imposed, but allows a neglected perspective to emerge; one that is neglected by the qualitative reviews carried out in Irish HEIs, despite the recognition of foreign qualifications representing an increasingly important dimension of work at HEIs.

The researcher here is not using a conceptual framework *a priori*, and is leaving aside the conceptual frameworks that one might expect because the researcher, as a practitioner, is pursuing the value of justice in a pluralist democracy. This does not preclude further analysis being undertaken through conceptual frameworks such as postcolonialism, for example.

- Ethical Considerations

The researcher invested much time reflecting on ethical considerations for this study. Promoting values such as trust, respect and fairness are integral in terms of collaborating with colleagues in HEIs. This research was designed and conducted with close attention to the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2011). Credential evaluators participated in this study on the understanding that they were doing so anonymously, as per guideline 25 (*ibid.* p8). Further, participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the research (guideline 15) at any time, and to disregard any data collected from them (BERA 2011 p6). One participant did contact the researcher following receipt of her interview transcript. Her concern appeared to relate to anonymity, which the researcher assured her of. As far as the researcher is aware, there were no further issues or concerns for participants. Ethical issues considered by the researcher in connection with her various decisions and actions are noted throughout the chapter.

Research Phases

The population of interest are those staff members at Irish HEIs acting as credential evaluators for foreign qualifications presented to them, for the purpose of access to postgraduate study. The study was carried out in two phases – the preliminary phase and the main phase.

- Preliminary Phase

Individuals acting as foreign credential evaluators for access to postgraduate study at HEIs in Ireland are not readily identifiable. There is no such formal job title at institutions. The researcher used her professional insight and knowledge of relevant literature to pursue some initial "hunches" (Charmaz 2006 p3) concerning data collection. A preliminary phase to the study was considered necessary for two broad purposes; to help identify relevant HEI staff to inform an initial sampling strategy for interviews and, to provide useful contextual insights to alert the researcher to possible issues for discussion, through semi-structured interviews, with credential evaluators in the main research phase. This preliminary phase consisted of four main steps:

I.   Website reviews
II. Questionnaire targeting credential evaluators

III. Requests to registrars for previous recognition decisions and promotion of further participation in the questionnaire

IV. Unstructured interviews with representatives of key HEI stakeholders

Each of the steps is now explained.

I. Website Reviews

Relevant HEIs for this study are those offering postgraduate programmes leading to appropriate awards on the NFQ - Higher Diploma (NFQ Level 8); Post-Graduate Diploma and Master Degree (NFQ Level 9) and Doctoral Degree (NFQ Level 10), or equivalent. Lists of Irish HEIs on the websites of the Department of Education and Skills (www.education.ie) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (www.hetac.ie)[26], acted as an initial step in the identification of relevant HEIs for this study as of 01 April 2013. Institutional websites were then consulted to identify those HEIs offering postgraduate programmes. The 50 relevant HEIs are listed by type (as defined by the DES) in Appendix C (Volume II p11).

The website of each relevant institution was then reviewed as a means of identifying relevant staff members for possible participation in the study. Web-pages of admissions and international offices acted as the initial focus for these reviews, which also sought to gauge the level of information publicly available on credential evaluation. Website analysis was also fruitful in providing contextual information for the study.

Website reviews brought to light a number of pertinent questions for credential evaluation at HEIs. It was decided that a questionnaire would be developed to target credential evaluators (step II), while registrars would be contacted to request past recognition decisions (step III). Meanwhile, representatives of a number of relevant HEI stakeholder organisations were contacted to help illuminate credential evaluation practice and influences (step IV). Each of these steps will be detailed in turn.

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[26] This website is no longer in use and traffic is directed towards www.QQI.ie since October 2014.

II. Questionnaire Targeting Credential Evaluators

The second step in the preliminary research phase was the development and circulation of a questionnaire targeted at credential evaluators. The questionnaire was deemed appropriate to fulfil the purposes of:

- helping identify relevant HEI staff for participation in the study, and to gain agreement from individuals for interviews. Credential evaluators were asked to self-identify if interested in a subsequent interview;

- allowing a potentially greater number of credential evaluators participate in the study. A limited number of in-depth interviews are possible within the scope of the study;

- giving credential evaluators an opportunity to participate, while remaining anonymous. The researcher considered that her position at QQI, an external quality assurance agency, could possibly impact negatively on the willingness of individuals to participate;

- providing qualitative and quantitative data for the study, and its context;

- informing theoretical sampling, if required later, to achieve saturation as the origin of data could not be fully preconceived. Saturation is explained by Glaser (2001 p191) as

> not seeing the same pattern over and over again. It is the conceptualization of comparisons of these incidents which yield different properties of the pattern, until no new properties of the pattern emerge.

The questionnaire, consisting of ten questions can be found at Appendix D (Volume II p13). Table 4-1 provides a brief justification for each of the questions included.

Table 4-1: Rationale for Questions included in Questionnaire

Question Number	Purpose
1	To identify the type of institution at which the credential evaluator works. The researcher suspected that the type of institution may impact on credential evaluation practice
2	To help clarify the roles associated with credential evaluation at HEIs. The researcher suspected that both academics and administrators may be involved
3	To gain data on the NFQ award-type and level of the programme(s) for which the credential evaluator is involved for access. An indication of field of study[1] was also requested. These items may be relevant for credential evaluation in practice
4	To provide qualitative data that can be quantified on the level of awareness of the LRC amongst participants. Such information was considered to be useful in providing context for the study, and potentially offering an additional insight on responses to subsequent questions, particularly question 9
5, 6, 7, 8	As per question 4
9	The four main research questions (see Chapter One p14) were included in the questionnaire to potentially allow more credential evaluators participate in the study than is possible through interviews. It also had the advantage of allowing participants to remain anonymous. Further, answers provided, although brief, helped inform the researcher of angles worth probing at interviews and focus group interviews
10	To allow credential evaluators express an interest in an interview for the study by providing their contact details

[1] Fields of Study as designated in the International Standard Classification of Education (UNESCO 1997).

Questions included were determined by the researcher based on website reviews, prior knowledge of the substantive area of recognition, and familiarity with associated literature. All questions in the questionnaire, conducted online through SurveyMonkey, were mandatory. Colleagues provided feedback on the questionnaire in development and also piloted it. Following some minor language adjustments, and armed with

information gleaned from the website reviews on the identity or most often general location (office) of potential participants, the questionnaire was ready for circulation.

An email was carefully drafted to introduce the research study and researcher to potential participants. The email was brief and clear to encourage participation, and included an embedded link to the questionnaire. A participant information sheet was also attached, which provided the LRC definition of recognition and supplementary detail on the study. In addition, the researcher's role at QQI was clearly stated. The emails requesting participation were sent in mid-May 2013, with a deadline of six weeks later. The questionnaire was sent to 66 individuals directly where the institution website identified them as relevant, and provided a personal email. The majority of emails were sent with no prior contact from the researcher. However, the researcher was known to the recipient in five cases, through prior engagement on a professional level. In eight cases, due to a lack of information available online, the admissions officer of the institution (primarily associated with undergraduate admission) was contacted initially, to ascertain to whom the questionnaire could most appropriately be sent. A further 38 emails requesting participation were sent to general email addresses associated with offices or functions deemed appropriate for this study derived from website reviews. In total, 104 emails were sent by the researcher at this stage. In all cases, the researcher asked that she be informed of the number of individuals subsequently alerted by them to the questionnaire internally. Twenty-four responses were obtained to the researcher's email. Respondents indicated that they forwarded the questionnaire internally to a further 40 relevant colleagues.

Assuming the researcher reached only one individual through general email addresses, and assuming that all individuals contacted provided details to the researcher on circulation of the request internally, a total of 144 individuals received a request for participation. The number of responses received is discussed later.

III.   Requests to Registrars for Previous Recognition Decisions and Promotion of Further Participation in the Questionnaire

As indicated previously, information on recognition decisions made across Irish HEIs is not available at a national level. Such data is important in assessing the consistency of decisions, one of the aims of the current research. The data would provide context for the study, but also act as a means of initiating deeper thought by the researcher. The third step in the preliminary phase was to request data on recognition decisions at

institutional level. A review of such data would illustrate readily if and where differences occur, and perhaps illuminate or draw attention to issues requiring exploration through interviews with credential evaluators.

In an attempt to secure access to anonymised data on recognition decisions, letters were prepared, co-signed by the researcher's supervisor, and distributed to 25 registrars (or equivalent, depending on institution). Registrars at all seven universities, 13 Institutes of Technology[27] and five independent institutions[28] were contacted. Data was requested for five years inclusive (2008-2012), to include domicile of potential student seeking access to postgraduate study, qualification presented for access, the programme for which access was sought, and the decision made. The researcher offered that a report with data presented by institution type (to protect possibly sensitive data of individual institutions) would be made available to responding institutions to encourage participation.

Fourteen registrars responded to the researcher's request indicating their support for the study, and appeared willing to share available information on decisions. A number of registrars nominated a contact within the institution, with whom the researcher could liaise to discuss further the data that might be made available. However, difficulties with providing data of interest for the study were quickly pointed out. It was explained by one registrar that the data requested was typically not stored centrally. Also, in some cases, only data relating to enrolled students were recorded. Further, it does not appear to be common practice to provide rationales for recognition decisions in some institutions. A simple 'yes' or 'no' may be recorded to indicate the acceptability or otherwise of a prior qualification from outside of the State. In the end, only one dataset on previous decisions was received. The data provided in this instance included the country of birth of the applicant, the name of the programme to which the applicant wished to be admitted, and the admission decision, that is, if an offer was made. The data did not include any information on the name or origin of the qualification presented to the HEI, or any rationale for admission decisions. Thus, the researcher is unable to provide any analysis of past decisions. The fact that there appears to be no readily accessible information on past decisions, either at national or institutional levels, is a significant finding in itself. As already indicated in Chapter Three (p64), there is more

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[27] One Institute of Technology did not receive this letter. Through prior contact, it was explained to the researcher that there were few, if any, international postgraduate students.
[28] Those five institutions with the largest number of postgraduate programmes were chosen as a sample.

information available and standardisation evident regarding the recognition of foreign qualifications at undergraduate level.

Registrars were also made aware that a questionnaire for the study had been circulated weeks earlier. They were asked to distribute the questionnaire internally to help increase participation (14 responses at deadline). The researcher considered that registrars were likely to have a useful insight on how best to distribute the questionnaire, and to whom, and that their assistance would help positively influence participation. In addition, individuals acting as credential evaluators were possibly more likely to respond to a colleague's request, as opposed to an unknown researcher in most cases. The letters to each registrar were followed by an email a few days later reminding them of the request, and providing a means of easily circulating access to the online questionnaire for relevant staff. The deadline for responses to the questionnaire was extended by a further six weeks. The letter generated a renewed interest in the study. Of the 14 registrars who responded to the researcher's request, eight gave contact information on relevant colleagues who were made aware of this research study, and the means of participation. While there was some overlap in the credential evaluators identified by the researcher originally, and those identified by the registrars, an additional 12 credential evaluators received a request for participation in the questionnaire. Thus, a total of 156 potentially relevant HEI staff received an email seeking participation in the questionnaire.

Meanwhile, access to the questionnaire closed in mid-August 2013. A total of 25 credential evaluators completed the questionnaire. Although the researcher tried to target relevant HEI staff with the questionnaire as far as possible, the request was essentially in the form of a blanket email used to filter out credential evaluators. Hence, there is no meaningful response rate to report. Table 4-2 summarises the number of requests made for participation in the questionnaire.

Table 4-2: Overview of Requests for Participation in Questionnaire

Requestor	To	Number of Requests
Researcher	HEI staff / general email addresses identified through institutional website reviews	104
24 HEI staff [who received an email requesting participation from the researcher]	Internal colleagues deemed by these 24 HEI staff to be relevant for participation in the study	40
14 registrars [who received a letter and subsequent email alerting them to the questionnaire for the study]	Internal colleagues deemed relevant by these 14 registrars for participation in the study	12
TOTAL		**156**

The researcher considers that 25 responses to the questionnaire represent a poor response rate. This was a surprise to the researcher who didn't expect such difficulty identifying relevant individuals, nor hesitancy in terms of participation. Possible issues will be discussed in Chapter Five.

IV.   Unstructured Interviews with Representatives of Key HEI Stakeholders

The final step in the preliminary phase occurred in parallel to the questionnaire and requests to registrars. A number of national and international organisations were identified by the researcher as being affected by, or linked to credential evaluation at Irish HEIs. A total of 11 unstructured interviews and a focus group interview were carried out with representatives of these organisations to help the researcher understand more readily the context for credential evaluation at HEIs. In addition, a written response was received from a representative of TAICEP. Most of the individuals approached for interview were known to the researcher through her professional work. It was indicated to potential interviewees that there were no specific questions. However, the researcher provided them with the four main research questions identified

for credential evaluators, as included in the questionnaire, to offer a context for these unstructured interviews.

The interviews were conversational in style and were, on average, 30 minutes long. Each began by the researcher asking the interviewee(s) if the topic of credential evaluation was 'on the agenda' for the organisation. Table 4-3 gives an overview of the national and international stakeholder organisations involved. Individuals who participated in these interviews did so on the understanding that they would remain anonymous, and were not formally representing their respective organisations. An overview of findings from these interviews is presented with a brief analysis in the next chapter.

Table 4-3: Key HEI Stakeholders from which Representatives were Interviewed

National Stakeholders	International Stakeholders
Department of Education and Skills (DES)	Focus group interview: ENIC-NARIC Network – NARIC Advisory Board (NAB) and ENIC Bureau[1] representatives, in addition to a secretariat of the Network (Council of Europe) – Total of four individuals
Enterprise Ireland (Education in Ireland - EI)	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)
Higher Education Authority (HEA)	European Universities Association (EUA)
Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI)	
Irish Council for Overseas Students (ICOS)	
Irish Universities Association (IUA)	
Migrant Non-Governmental Organisation (Migrant NGO)	
Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)	
Union of Students in Ireland (USI) - Graduate Students' Union (university)	

[1] The NARIC Advisory Board (NAB) and ENIC Bureau each consist of three elected members, who work in collaboration to help guide activities of their respective Networks.

The preliminary phase of this research is a significant feature of the design as it allowed some methodological triangulation, and was used to clarify and refine the research questions. This preparatory work informed the researcher as to how she should proceed with the study. The main phase of the research, consisting of 14 semi-structured and two focus group interviews, is now described.

- Main Research Phase

From the outset, semi-structured interviews with credential evaluators were planned to explore their practices in-depth. The questionnaire did not generate many expressions of interest for an interview from credential evaluators. Although four respondents to the questionnaire indicated their interest in an interview, only three subsequently agreed. The researcher proceeded to conduct interviews with these three credential evaluators. Meanwhile, the researcher prompted those credential evaluators who responded to her original request for participation in the questionnaire, to indicate their interest in a possible interview. In addition, the researcher sought assistance from her professional contacts at HEIs to encourage participation in interviews. She followed her instincts and used opportunities available to seek and identify relevant participants. All credential evaluators who expressed an interest in the study were interviewed or participated in a focus group. Fourteen interviews (seven by phone – for practical reasons / upon request by participants) and two focus group interviews with credential evaluators took place over the course of ten months. An explanation for use of the latter research method is provided later. All transcripts can be found at Appendix E (Volume II p17).

The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to have the research questions already formulated (see Chapter One p14) passed to participants in advance. As interviews were scheduled, the researcher noted that participants were anxious to have questions in advance as a means of preparing themselves. This approach also helped the researcher keep a firm focus on the aims of the study. Further, loosely semi-structured interviews allowed much flexibility for the credential evaluator to speak freely in relation to his/her practice. Likewise, they allowed the researcher probe and ask questions. Interpretation and analysis of interviews occurred as data collection proceeded, resulting in the researcher becoming more sensitised to themes emerging. Also, the researcher became more reflexive on her own practice as the study advanced.

In addition to factors such as sex, age and ethnic origin (Denscombe 2003 p116), the nature of the topic for discussion may cause "interviewer effect". The in-depth

interviews conducted for this study revealed personal and sensitive data on one's role and attitudes in terms of credential evaluation practice. Upon consideration of the need to be mindful of interviewees, an attempt was made to make the interviews as informal as possible to put interviewees at their ease. Six interviews and one focus group took place at the participants' workplaces in familiar surroundings. Following an initial overview of the research, the researcher began each interview asking about the participant's role at the institution. Interviews were typically between 30 and 60 minutes each in duration. Interviews were recorded with permission to help the researcher concentrate on being attentive to the interviewee and to ask probing questions, where deemed necessary. The researcher was aware of remaining neutral and non-committal regarding statements made during the interviews, insofar as possible. It should be noted at this point, that participant 9 (see Table 4-4 below) was interviewed as a representative of a key HEI stakeholder group; in this case, a representative of the research community. This participant was previously involved in research considered relevant to this study. In the course of subsequent semi-structured interviews with credential evaluators, the researcher became aware that despite this individual not identifying herself as a credential evaluator, she is in fact involved. Valuable insights into credential evaluation practice gained from this interview led the researcher to include it in analysis of those conducted with other credential evaluators.

Two focus group interviews were also conducted, each with a duration of between 30 and 60 minutes, to accommodate credential evaluators wishing to participate in this study. Focus group members in both groups appeared to be more willing to participate in the study through a focus group rather than individual semi-structured interviews. Proceedings were digitally recorded with permission of each focus group member. The first focus group occurred by request from credential evaluators representing a single institution, while focus group 2 consisted of credential evaluators from different institutions, where the researcher took advantage of a pre-planned meeting where all four individuals were present. Focus group interviews were not initially envisaged as a data collection tool. Participants may be unwilling to expose their real views as part of a group (Barbour and Schostak 2011 p63). Also, the researcher is aware that there is competition between HEIs in attracting students, including students holding foreign qualifications. Participants in focus group 2 in particular were essentially engaged in a social process, and this may have impacted on how they expressed themselves (Brannen and Pattman 2005). However, the unique dynamic of each of these focus group

interviews, compared to the other interviews in the study, added valuable insights for this research.

Depending on the particular institution, different individuals may be involved in credential evaluation work. Table 4-4 provides a brief profile of credential evaluators who participated in interviews and focus group interviews. The type of institution at which each credential evaluator works, their role (academic or non-academic and whether or not they are located in a centralised office, for example, the international or admissions office), and duration of experience are particularly relevant factors for analysis discussed in subsequent chapters.

Table 4-4: Individual and Focus Group Semi-Structured Interviews with Credential Evaluators: Participant Profiles

Participant Number (Interviews)	Individual: Academic / Non-Academic & Location	Gender	Experience (Years)	Institution Type
1[*]	Academic (Central Office – Graduate Studies)	Male	1.5	Institute of Technology
2	Non-Academic (Central Office – Admissions)	Female	2.5	Institute of Technology
3[*]	Non-academic (Administrator in a school)	Male	5	University
4	Non-academic (Central Office - International)	Female	11	Institute of Technology
5	Academic (Head of School)	Male	10	Institute of Technology
6	Non-academic (Central Office – Non-EU Admissions)	Female	-	University

7	Academic (Head of School)	Female	23	Institute of Technology
8[*]	Academic	Female	5	Independent Institution
9	Academic (Central Office – Graduate Studies)	Female	4	University
10	Non-academic (Central Office – Graduate Studies)	Female	1	University
11	Non-academic (Central Office - International)	Female	6	Independent Institution
12	Academic	Female	4	Independent Institution
13	Non-academic (Central Office - Admissions)	Male	7	Independent Institution
14	Academic	Female	6	Independent Institution
Focus Group (FG) Number				
1	Non-academics from one institution. Central offices – International (A, B) & Graduate Studies (C)	Female (A & C) Male (B)	1A: 10 1B: 11 1C: 2	University
2	Non-academics representing four institutions. Central offices integrating admissions	All Female	2A: 7 2B: 10 2C: - 2D: 18	A: University B&C: Institutes of Technology D: Independent Institution

[*] Credential evaluators who responded to the questionnaire (preliminary research phase), and identified themselves for a possible interview for the study.

In total, participants represent four universities, six IoTs and three independent institutions. Participants 5 and 7 represent the same IoT, while participants 9, 10 and Focus Group 1 members represent the same university. Participants 11 to 14 inclusive represent the same independent institution. More than one voice from each of these institutions allows for insightful comparisons in further chapters. It should be noted that while this study focuses on HEI staff acting as credential evaluators for postgraduate access, a number of participants indicate that most of their experience is in relation to undergraduate access (Participants 2, 5, 7, 2B and 2C). Nevertheless, their experiences as described make a valuable contribution to this study.

Each of the individual and focus group interviews were transcribed *verbatim*. This was a laborious process. However, as the researcher needed to listen to the recorded conversations many times to ensure accuracy, she became very familiar with the data. Interviews were transcribed as they occurred. Thus, the researcher was immersed in analysis of the data from an early stage in the study. Resulting transcripts were sent to participants for sign-off. Following review, two participants made some minor changes and asked for certain sentences to be deleted. All participants were asked to sign an informed consent sheet which included details on the study to help ensure that they understood fully their involvement in the research; in keeping with guideline 11 (BERA 2011 p5).

The focus now moves to an explanation of how research data will be presented in further chapters. An overview of the approach to data analysis is also given.

Procedures for Data Analysis and Presentation

Data collection and analysis occurred in parallel thus, are not easily separated in terms of sequence. For ease of writing and understanding, data is presented and then analysed in two separate chapters. Chapter Five is concerned with presenting and analysing data from the preliminary research phase. Chapter Six presents and interrogates data collected from both individual and focus group interviews with credential evaluators.

The research questions and overall aims of this study, articulated and refined following the preliminary research phase, provided a starting point for analysis. However, the researcher remained acutely aware of the necessity to allow participant voices guide analysis to reduce researcher bias. The copious interview material for analysis was approached by the researcher with a focus on identifying codes to both account for, and

summarise the data. Such an approach is consistent with GTM as "grounded theorists typically invoke respondents' stories to illustrate points – rather than provide...a full narrative of an experience" (Charmaz 2006 p82). This approach is also consistent with a social constructivist research stance that recognises that there are multiple realities in terms of credential evaluators' experiences, depending on their unique life and work contexts. In addition, it reflects the pragmatist approach which acknowledges the importance of initiating action to improve credential evaluation practice through the outcomes of the research.

Grounded Theory Methodology provided a framework for the analysis of data gained through this research study. With data collection and analysis proceeding in parallel, there are repeated cycles of induction and deduction involved in this methodological approach. The preliminary research phase informed particularly the first interview, conducted through the research questions identified. Although these research questions guided all interviews, additional questions arose for the researcher as each interview was analysed, and themes began to emerge. Some interviewees asked questions about the researcher's professional practice. The researcher was keen not to predetermine the outcome of the interview, mindful of Kvale (1996) who stresses that meaning-making between the interviewer and interviewee occurs during the course of an interview. Further, Brinkmann (2007 p1135) argues that "the analysis is in principle carried out *in* the conversation" by the researcher as he/she questions and probes the interviewee. The researcher wanted credential evaluators' practices and experiences to emerge unforced insofar as possible. This research is concerned with deeper understanding of credential evaluation practice at HEIs, rather than verifying themes to generate a theory, as explained earlier. In addition, it was difficult not to be drawn into more spontaneous conversation in interviews. In some cases, the researcher offered clarification (for example, the researcher clarified the difference between the Irish and UK ENIC-NARIC centres for Participant 1) while in other cases, participants asked questions seeking help or opinions (for example, the interviews with participants 7 and 13 had to be abandoned prematurely).

Strauss and Corbin (1990) distinguish between three types of coding to probe the collected data – open, selective and axial. These types of coding are concerned with developing categories of information, connecting the categories and constructing an idea of how the categories are connected, respectively, and do not necessarily occur linearly. Making comparisons and asking questions is central to coding. As interviews

were transcribed and "initial" or open coding (Charmaz 2006 p42) conducted line by line, notes were made by the researcher, detailing any patterns emerging. Constant comparative analysis allowed the researcher to gain familiarity with the data and move from initial to "focused", or selective and axial coding (*ibid.*).

As shall be shown in Chapter Six, the CGT approach was modified. At the outset, the research pre-supposed a more coherent sense of practice for credential evaluation, as for instance there might be amongst teachers despite disagreements that might occur. As analysis proceeded, what emerged were not categories in a strict sense, but recurring key issues for credential evaluation practice at HEIs. The important point to stress is that no sufficiently clear sense of the identifiers of credential evaluation practice came from the data. Such heterogeneity might not have been such a central concern if it had been contained within a wider shared understanding of credential evaluation practice amongst practitioners. Thus, for the integrity of this research and to remain true to the research questions, and, in addition, to allow the data to 'speak', analysis progressed by focusing on the recurring key issues.

These key issues, five in total, subsequently provided a means for presenting findings of this research (Chapter Six) and possible explanations to account for the research findings. The researcher made use of the Conditional and Consequential Matrix (Strauss and Corbin 1996) to guide rather than pre-structure ongoing analysis. The matrix was particularly helpful in maintaining awareness of the need to establish connections between credential evaluation on a local level, and broader national and international developments. Indeed, Charmaz (2006 p118) states that the leading purpose of the matrix is "to help researchers to think beyond micro social structures and immediate interactions to larger social conditions and consequences". Ongoing analysis influenced subsequent data collection as explained earlier, and acted to verify emerging themes. Appendix F (Volume II p267) gives an example of coding in this research study.

Chapter Seven is dedicated to further in-depth analysis of the key findings of this research, and how the challenges faced by credential evaluators might be addressed. In particular, the lack of a clear professional identity for practitioners arises largely from the lack of a clear demarcation of credential evaluation as a coherent and complex activity – i.e. as a professional practice. It is principally for this reason that organic, evolutionary approaches, such as those signified by the Communities of Practice concept, were chosen for promoting improvements in credential evaluation as a

professional practice. While it is acknowledged that there are a number of analytical frameworks which could have been chosen to interpret and illuminate the findings, the concept of CoP was also chosen for its emphasis on social learning where a collective identity can be forged and space for reflection facilitated. This contrasts with a pre-designed form of learning. The concept of CoP is considered particularly useful to apply to the findings of this research given the complex social system and political sensitivities within which credential evaluation takes place. Of significance here will be exploring how community of practice approaches allow the kind of setting to enable the LRC to come alive in the daily work of a credential evaluator.

Conclusion

In considering a research methodology, the central focus is on how the associated research instruments and procedures can be used most successfully to answer the research questions, and which provides the most defensible warrant for explorations in the study and subsequent findings. The methodology described by the researcher helps her demonstrate the validity of findings, so that the knowledge and in-depth understanding of credential evaluation practice at HEIs might be used by both the researcher and credential evaluators at HEIs to make practice more coherent and transparent. In other words, to help standardise practice to reduce the likelihood that recognition decisions are influenced heavily by location.

This chapter has been used to provide an overview of how data collection and data analysis proceeded in a congenially concurrent way, informed by elements of CGT. The appealing aspect of the approach is that the researcher is clearly and significantly present in the field, and is involved in interpreting participants' realities in a systematic way. It was not possible to foresee direction of the research in advance, thus ongoing decisions taken by the researcher to negotiate challenges encountered are detailed here, and are based on her interpretation. Thus, the chapter acts as a guide to the evolving research. Chapter Five will now present findings and analysis of the preliminary phase of this research study.

Chapter Five

Preliminary Research Phase - Data Presentation and Analysis

Introduction

This chapter presents data originating from research instruments used in the preliminary phase of the study. Data collected from the institutional website reviews and questionnaire are presented and analysed in turn. A brief overview of findings derived from unstructured interviews with representatives of key HEI stakeholders is also provided. The importance of this phase in the research is highlighted as ongoing analysis and insights gained informed subsequent decisions on data collection. In addition, the researcher was alerted to issues of concern in credential evaluation, thereby, increasing her sensitivity for these in conducting interviews for the study.

Institutional Website Reviews

A review of institutional websites was chosen as a starting point by the researcher, based on her understanding and experience of credential evaluation activities in Irish HEIs at that time. Relevant institutions for this study (see Chapter Four p81) were identified through the institutional website reviews, conducted throughout April 2013. The website reviews contributed to the study in another four main interlinked ways, namely in:

- helping identify staff responsible for acting as foreign credential evaluators for postgraduate access for possible participation in the study;
- identifying internal structures in place within HEIs, responsible for making recognition decisions on foreign qualifications or facilitating credential evaluation activities;
- aiding understanding of credential evaluation and relevant connections within institutions;
- giving access to material available publicly on credential evaluation, and providing an opportunity for examination and analysis of such material.

These four dimensions provide a framework within which to present findings and analysis of the website reviews, prior to focusing on the questionnaire subsequently developed and circulated. Each website review was initiated by the researcher accessing the home page of the institution, with an initial focus on the admissions and

international offices' pages. A brief overview of findings will be presented by category of institution (see Appendix C in Volume II p11) as follows:

I.   University sector – comprising universities, colleges of education and university recognised colleges

II. Institutes of Technology

III. Independent institutions

IV. Other state-aided institutions

I.   University sector
     -   Universities

In respect of those individuals possibly presenting qualifications gained outside of the State to Ireland's seven universities, the university websites focus on purposeful international students as distinct from other migrants holding foreign qualifications. In all but one of the universities, there was a tab on the homepage for international students. Thus only one click was required to access targeted information, with two clicks required in the remaining instance. The ease with which information is accessed demonstrates perhaps not only careful web design, but also the interest in and significance of international students for the sector. From each homepage, potential international students are directed to the international office where the main thrust of the web-pages concern promotional material with information on location of the institution, facilities available and the 'welcome' that an international student would receive. Clear distinctions are made between EU and non-EU students, reflecting differences in the fees structure. International office staff tend to be clearly identified with an indication of their role. While it appears that the international offices have links with their respective admissions and graduate studies offices, the means by which these offices communicate and coordinate activities for international students are not particularly clear. All applications for postgraduate admission (categorised as taught or research) must be submitted online with four institutions using the Postgraduate Applications Centre (PAC)[29] facility. Potential international students are directed towards generic email addresses to make any enquiries. It is difficult to establish the connection between online submission and the individuals responsible for making recognition decisions. Thus, potential international students appear to have no direct access to those with

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[29] The PAC is a central administration unit for the receipt of applications for admission. Please see: http://www.pac.ie/.

whom they need to liaise. Further, there is no information on the internal admission process involved, except in the case of one university which provides an overview of the three different stages of approval for an application.

The institutions are clearly aiming to tailor their offering as far as possible by providing country-specific information. Specific qualification requirements for selected countries are available on two websites while another university refers to a "list of recognised non-Irish qualifications" available on request. Otherwise, there is no specific information on the recognition of foreign qualifications, other than when access requirements refer to Irish awards and 'or equivalent'. Thus, the majority of potential students presenting foreign qualifications are not informed by the websites if the qualification they hold is considered equivalent, or who will make such a decision.

Institutions are using a variety of means to promote themselves to potential students from different countries. These include the use of country flags and unique messages, the use of student ambassadors, listing of embassy contact details and global partnerships, and the provision of general information on one site in six additional languages. In addition, information on visits by the institution to other countries is provided on four websites. Other information provided for international students relates to English-language requirements, immigration and visas, pre-arrival advice and orientation details. Although there is much general detail on relevant web-pages, the complexity of recognition and admissions for international students is evident with a variety of role titles for individuals and different offices involved. International students may find many websites overwhelming, particularly if they are not native English speakers. This suggests that priority is given to the internal needs of the institution rather than the site user, a common issue on university websites as identified by Brenn-White (2013 p94). It is clear that there are gaps in information provided on admissions procedures in particular, upon review of the agreed IHEQN guidelines (IHEQN 2009 p4). In addition, the Irish Universities Quality Board's (IUQB) Public Information Project (IUQB 2011) highlighted an issue of insufficient detail, and poor presentation of information provided by Irish HEIs for international students. Findings noted that information needed to be provided in simpler language. It was suggested that prospectuses should include reference to EU and international qualifications (*ibid.* p21).

In two cases, the institutional access plan (see Chapter Three p62) was readily available; one university website mentioning both international students and migrants, while the other institution did not refer to either group. The former institution refers to two surveys conducted in 2008 with enrolled international students for the purpose of investigating their experience at the institution; the aim being to improve recruitment of non-EU students. The seemingly poor availability of these documents, in addition to the lack of detailed information about improving access for these relevant groups suggests that important connections have not been made. The recognition of foreign qualifications is central to institutional access, transfer and progression policies. Although recruitment of international students and other internationalisation activities are specifically referred to in institutional strategic plans, links are not frequently made with national and institutional access plans, or Ireland's Intercultural Education Strategy.

The heavy promotional element of the university websites is not surprising. It is hard to imagine any international student not using institutional websites as a significant source of information. Also, the Education in Ireland website provides clear links for potential international students to individual institutional sites. The recognition of prior foreign qualifications and learning as part of the admissions process is of particular importance in this study. Deeper consideration is required by each HEI as to how a potential international student engages with the institutional website, and how the individual is supported in their communication with the institution prior to enrolment. It is noted that Part 1 of the ESG, produced by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), emphasises the responsibility of HEIs to provide specific information in a clear and accessible format publicly (ENQA 2009 p19). These quality assurance guidelines and those of the IHEQN will be complemented, and no doubt significantly strengthened by the Code of Practice when established for the IEM (see Chapter One p26). The IEM is sure to become a central marketing tool for HEIs upon its planned launch in 2016. However the IEM, where granted by QQI, needs to be complemented by a clear and informative website, to promote the institution and to facilitate the recruitment of international students.

- Colleges of Education

There are seven colleges of education, each associated with different universities. In general, the websites of these institutions have little or no information specifically

aimed at international students. This is not a surprise given the Irish language requirements for teaching. Two websites mention the Erasmus programme, while one of these also hosts an Education in Ireland video promoting Ireland as a destination of choice for international students. Another website includes a brochure referring to non-EU fees. There was an exception, with one college of education having an international student guide available online, together with information on partnership programmes with universities abroad, specially designed orientation programmes, and an international student society. No specific information is available concerning the recognition of foreign qualifications; the websites simply refer to an Irish award or equivalent for access. One institution specifies an entry requirement for a postgraduate programme of "a good honours degree or equivalent" which is likely to cause confusion, as there is no definition available as to what this means.

- University Recognised Colleges

Three of four university recognised colleges are relevant for this study. Two institutions briefly mention international students and categorise them as EU and Non-EU. One of these institutions indicates that applicants from the EU will be considered on the same basis as Irish residents, presumably referring to the fees structure. The website also indicates that applications from outside the EU will be considered on an individual basis, with a link to the Irish Council for Overseas Students (ICOS) website for further information. Another institution makes no reference to international students, while the remaining institution provides information on a number of campuses abroad.

II. Institutes of Technology

As with the universities, websites of the 14 IoTs promote their international web-pages upfront, with only one click required to access information for international students in nine cases, and two clicks required on the remaining websites. In contrast to the university websites, the international pages of the IoTs, with the notable exception of the considerably larger Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), are basic and references to international students occur mainly in the context of undergraduate admissions. Again, websites clearly differentiate between EU and non-EU applicants, with only one website mentioning ethnic minorities. These websites reflect the dominance of the university sector in terms of international student numbers. However, in general, there is little evidence of promotional activity targeting an international student audience on the IoT websites. The websites are not as 'glossy' as those of the universities and focus

more on current procedures. In fact, the researcher questions the target audience for information given – potential international students or internal staff.

All IoT websites refer to 'Science Without Borders', a Brazilian student mobility programme[30] demonstrating the importance of such an initiative for institutions. Well-developed information on international activities is lacking although two websites have brochures in different languages available. Two IoT websites also indicate international links, and a further two websites use Education in Ireland material and link to their student ambassador blogs. The DIT website is particularly well developed from the point of view of international students. Clear guidelines are available for making an application. Information is organised by country and recognition decisions for many international school qualifications is provided. In addition, there is a link to a portal for agents, possibly indicating a higher volume of international students than other IoTs, which is not surprising given its relative size.

More specifically, for postgraduate international students, it is difficult to identify individuals involved in postgraduate access in most cases from the IoT websites. This can be partly explained from a comment on one website which states that most postgraduate students at the institution come from their own cohort of undergraduate students. However, in comparison with the universities, there is much less development of postgraduate education at IoTs. For example, there was only one reference to a graduate study office amongst IoT websites. Little or no guidelines are given as to how foreign qualifications are recognised. In one instance, the IHEQN guidelines are mentioned.

III.   Independent Institutions

The volume and detail of information provided for potential students of the independent HEIs reflects the size of the institution. Information on entry requirements on the 12 websites ranged from a vague statement such as "normal entry requirements" on a website of an institution offering two postgraduate programmes, to a larger institution emphasising their international agents who offer a "unique and personalised service" for learners to find the right course. The latter institution also incentivises students to introduce a non-EU friend to the institution by offering up to 500 euro if the individual subsequently enrols. A further two institutions were identified as being amongst the

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[30] Further information available on: http://www.eurireland.ie/related-international-co-operation/brazil-science-without-borders-programme.1946.html.

largest in this category in terms of student numbers. One of these institutions had information for potential students in ten different languages in an effort to promote their programmes. These larger institutions emphasised their involvement in the Education in Ireland brand (see Chapter One p19) and provided individual staff contact details online. In general, there was little information available on recognition or the process involved. However, one institution did refer to the 'NARIC International Comparison System' indicating simultaneously an awareness and lack of understanding on the ENIC-NARIC Network.

IV.   Other state-aided institutions

Of the seven institutions in this category, only two websites could be considered to be relatively well developed and informative concerning promotion of their programmes to potential international students, and the mechanisms through which they can be admitted. Four of the five remaining websites make a fleeting reference to international students.

Institutional Website Review – A Summary

The importance of websites as perhaps an institution's most powerful communication and promotional resource for internationalisation activities cannot be underestimated. As indicated previously, the Education in Ireland website is used as an important gateway to promote individual institutional websites. Fierce competitiveness in the promotion of international education has prompted the re-development of a similar website in the UK indicating the importance of the provision of high quality information online (British Council 2013). Despite competition for international students and Ireland's International Education and Higher Education Strategies, there is a dearth of clear and accessible information on credential evaluation practice. Institutions are very likely to feel pressure to remedy this situation upon the launch of the IEM and the revised ESG. The revised draft version includes a standard relating to "student admission, progression, recognition and certification" (Bologna Process 2014 p10) as discussed in Chapter Three (p66).

Overall, there is little sense of credential evaluation being considered by institutions as a distinct step in the admissions process. Neither is it acknowledged that other individuals, as distinct from purposeful international students, may present their foreign qualifications for access. General qualification requirements for access to a particular

programme appear to be typically the extent of information available relating to recognition. Internal links and structures are not always explicit. International offices appear to be generally involved in promotion activities, but also associated with making recognition decisions in some instances.

Questionnaire

A total of 25 credential evaluators participated in the questionnaire. As explained in Chapter Four (p79), the main aim for using this instrument was to help identify HEI staff responsible for acting as foreign credential evaluators for postgraduate access, with a view towards participation in an interview. The questionnaire also aimed to gather contextual insight for the study.

The questionnaire can be accessed at Appendix D (Volume II p13). Data obtained through the questionnaire is presented and analysed here. It should be noted that for questions where open comments were invited from respondents, analysis here includes significant detail on individual responses in addition to main points. This approach was taken so as to help sensitise the researcher to issues for credential evaluators that may arise during the main phase of the research.

The type of HEI at which a respondent works was the subject of the first question, with responses detailed in Figure 5-1. A similar number of responses were obtained from the university sector and IoTs, despite international student concentration in the former sector. Independent institutions are under-represented albeit in the context of a small sample. The influence on credential evaluation of the type of institution at which a respondent works will be shown further on.

Figure 5-1: Type of Higher Education Institution at which Respondents Work
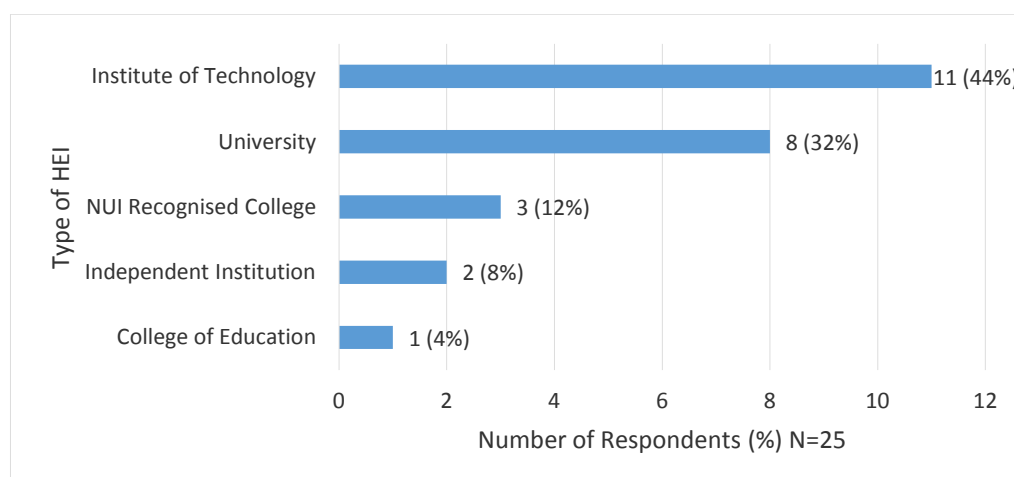
Question 2 asked respondents to describe themselves in terms of their principal role at the institution, bearing in mind that the researcher is not aware of an official title of 'credential evaluator'. A number of options were given followed by an opportunity to choose 'Other'. Figure 5-2 gives an overview of the principal roles of respondents.

Figure 5-2: Principal Roles of Respondents
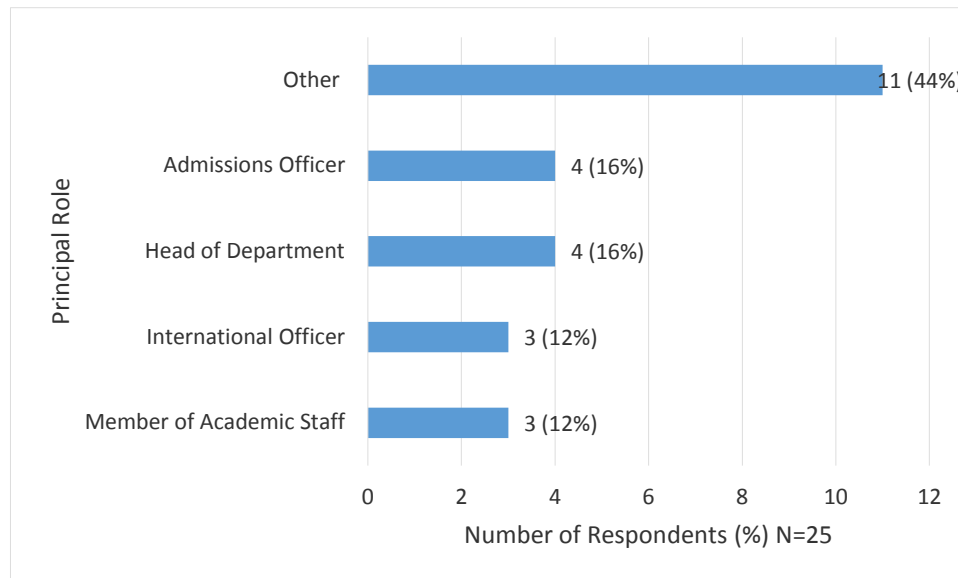
The majority of respondents surprisingly chose 'other', despite alternative roles listed in the questionnaire being typically associated with credential evaluation (informed by the website reviews). In the 'Other' category, respondents described their roles through titles. The diversity of titles acts to highlight the reasons for difficulty experienced by the researcher in identifying relevant HEI staff for the study (see Chapter Four p84). Responses were as follows:

- Technically Admissions Officer, but given the title of Executive Administrator
- Non-EU Admissions Officer
- Research Officer
- Graduate Research School Coordinator
- Postgraduate Administrator
- School Administrator
- Administrative staff
- Partnerships & Student Services
- Head of School
- Dean of Graduate Studies
- Registrar

Respondents' principal roles can be categorised crudely as academic and non-academic; the former category consisting of heads of department, members of academic staff, head of school, dean of graduate studies and registrar, giving a total of ten responses, while 15 responses originated from non-academic staff. Questions 4 to 8 inclusive can be usefully analysed using this distinction (also seen to be relevant in Chapter Six), while three relevant categories of HEI are used from this point - University sector, IoTs and Independent institutions.

Question 3 explored the possibility that fields of study may influence credential evaluation practice. The majority of respondents are involved in credential evaluation across a number of fields. However, Figure 5-3 provides an overview of responses by principal role, type of HEI and type of programme. The options given for the latter in the questionnaire (see Appendix D in Volume II p13) are reduced to taught (options one and three) and research for analysis here.

Figure 5-3 shows that both academic and non-academic staff are involved in credential evaluation for access to both taught and research postgraduate programmes. In this sample, ten (83 per cent) credential evaluators in the university sector were non-academic staff. The corresponding figure for IoTs is five (45 per cent). These findings possibly indicate a certain degree of centralisation of foreign credential evaluation activity within HEIs. Interestingly, respondents 11, 12, 13, 23 and 25 describe themselves as admissions officers, while respondents 1, 2 and 24 are international officers. These roles tend to be involved in credential evaluation for a greater number of fields of study, a finding the researcher would expect. Meanwhile, respondents 14 and 15 are administrators in individual schools, involved in credential evaluation in one field only. The two academics from independent institutions who responded are also involved in credential evaluation for one field only. In addition, the two academics who report involvement in credential evaluation for the highest number of fields act as a dean of graduate studies (Respondent 5) and head of department (Respondent 9).

Figure 5-3: Respondent Involvement in Foreign Credential Evaluation by Type of HEI, Principal Role of Credential Evaluator, Type of Programme, and Number of Fields of Study

Type of HEI	Principal Role	Respondent Identification (N=25)	Type of Programme Taught (T) / Research (R)	No. of Fields of Study
University sector	Academic	Respondent 9	T	6
		Respondent 18	T & R	1
	Non-Academic	Respondent 11	T	6
		Respondent 12	T	7
		Respondent 13	T	1
		Respondent 14	T	1
		Respondent 15	T	1
		Respondent 16	T & R	2
		Respondent 17	T & R	7
		Respondent 23	T	9
		Respondent 24	T & R	4
		Respondent 25	T	5
Institutes of Technology	Academic	Respondent 4	T	4
		Respondent 5	R	7
		Respondent 6	R	5
		Respondent 8	T	3
		Respondent 19	T & R	1
		Respondent 22	R	1
	Non-Academic	Respondent 1	T	6
		Respondent 2	T	6
		Respondent 7	T & R	6
		Respondent 20	R	7
		Respondent 21	R	4
Independent Institutions	Academic	Respondent 3	T	1
		Respondent 10	T	1

Respondents were then asked to indicate the level of their awareness of the LRC as a key legal text for recognition activities. Figures 5-4 and 5-5 show responses to this question, broken down by type of HEI and principal role of respondent, respectively.

Figure 5-4: Awareness of the LRC by Type of HEI
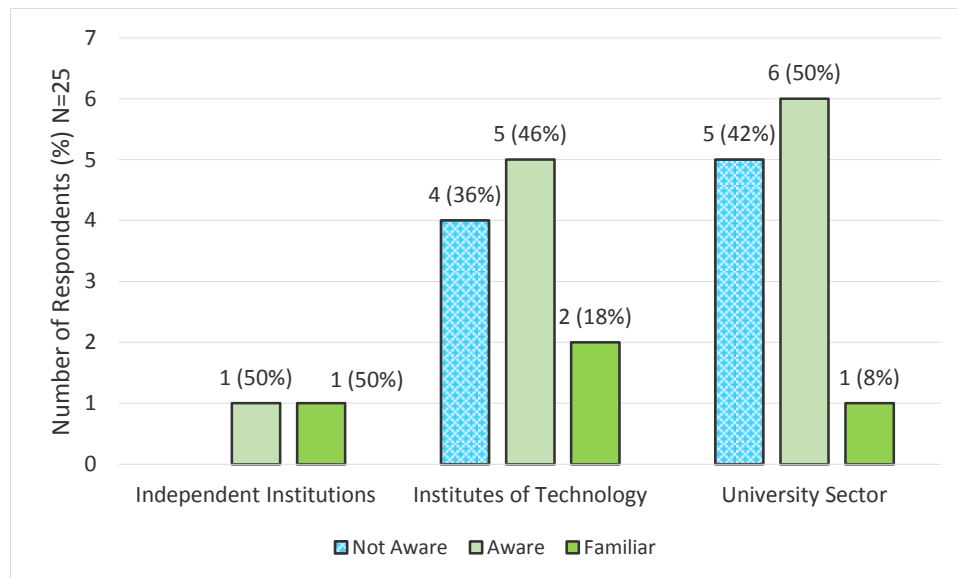
Figure 5-5: Awareness of the LRC by Principal Role of Respondent
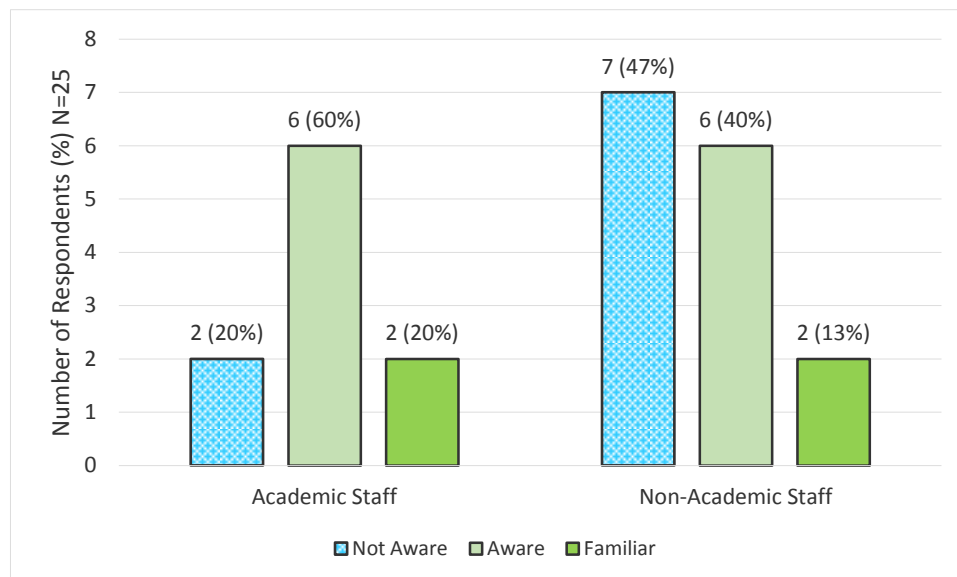
Respondents from IoTs and the university sector are almost equally as likely not to be aware of the LRC as they are to be aware (Figure 5-4). Figure 5-5 clarifies further the position by showing that academic staff are more likely to be aware of the LRC, with 60 per cent indicating awareness at least. This figure corresponds to that of Sursock and Smidt (2010 p63), where 51 per cent of academic staff in European universities were "very or reasonably aware" of the LRC and related procedures, an increase on the figure

of 31 per cent reported in 2003. Of particular note here is that 47 per cent of non-academic staff were not even aware of the LRC, but yet engaged in credential evaluation activity.

The importance of the concept of substantial difference for credential evaluation was discussed previously. Figures 5-6 and 5-7 provide an overview of responses relating to awareness of participants of this concept, again by type of HEI and principal role of respondent, respectively.

Figure 5-6: Awareness of Concept of Substantial Difference by Type of HEI
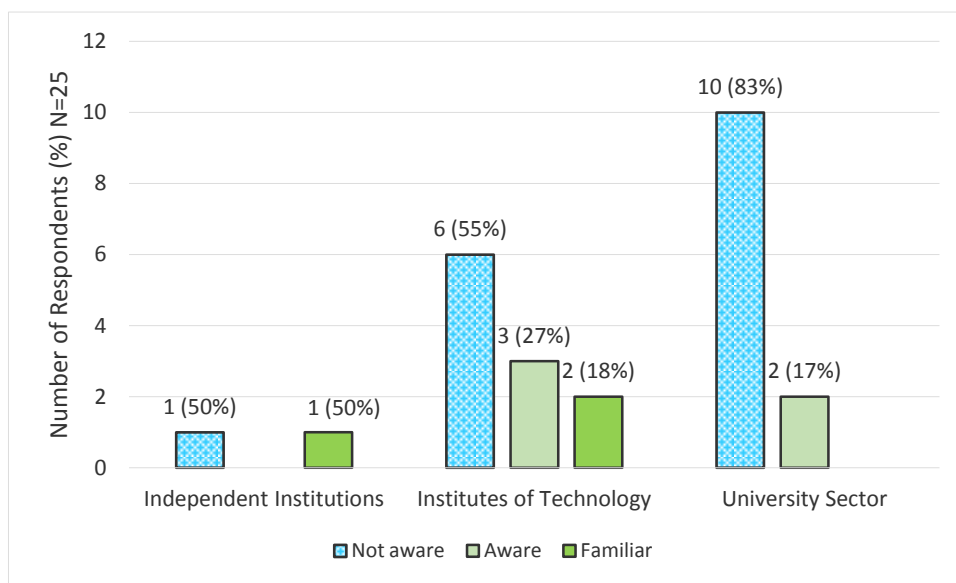

Figure 5-7: Awareness of Concept of Substantial Difference by Principal Role of Respondent
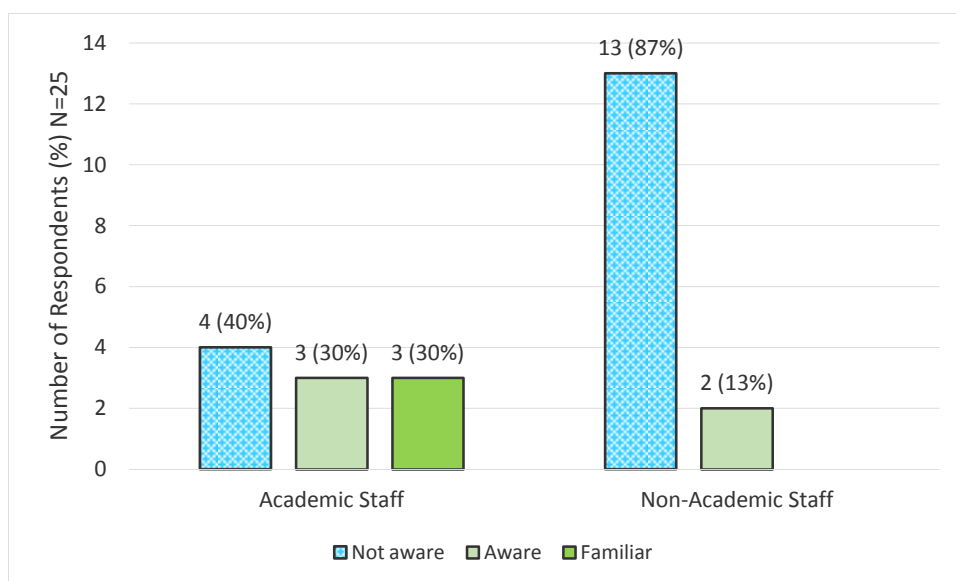
There is a sharp difference between awareness of the LRC, as shown in analysis of question 4, and awareness of the concept of substantial difference indicated through responses to question 5. Almost 70 per cent of respondents are not aware of the concept of substantial difference, with 83 per cent of participants from the university sector not aware. Given the volume of international students in this sector, this finding is surprising. There is a noticeable difference in the level of awareness of the concept when principal role is considered. Eighty-seven per cent of non-academic staff report 'not aware', while the corresponding figure for academic staff is 40 per cent. While it is important that substantial difference as a core concept for credential evaluation is known by practitioners, not being aware equally does not necessarily mean that the principles espoused by the LRC are not implemented in practice, a finding discussed further later.

Questions 4 and 5 can be used as a test for consistency of response. For example, the researcher would expect that if a respondent was familiar with the LRC, they would be at least aware of the concept of substantial difference. One respondent, however indicated familiarity with the LRC but wasn't aware of substantial difference, thus highlighting a discrepancy.

Figures 5-8 and 5-9 are used to display responses to questions 6, 7 and 8 by type of HEI and principal role, respectively. Analysis of responses to these questions will coincide with analysis on question 9, where participants are invited to respond to the research questions developed for this study (see Chapter One p14).

Figure 5-8: Promotion and Use of the LRC and Contact with the Irish ENIC-NARIC Centre – by Type of HEI
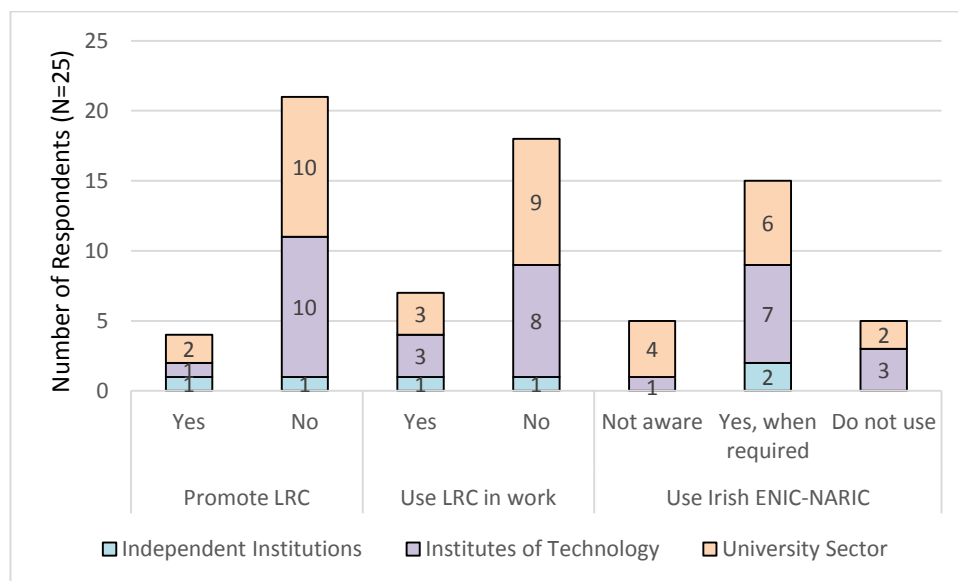
Figure 5-9: Promotion and Use of the LRC and Contact with the Irish ENIC-NARIC Centre – by Principal Role
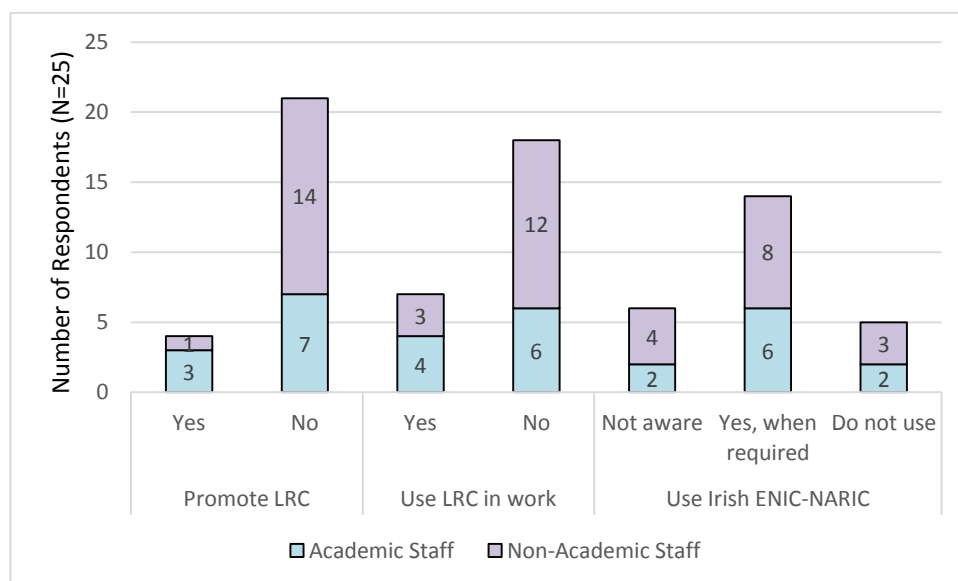
Question 6 related to the promotion of the LRC and subsidiary texts within an institution. It is shown that most respondents do not feel that these texts are promoted internally (Figure 5-8), with non-academic staff more likely to give this response (Figure 5-9). Question 6 included a text box, allowing respondents an opportunity to comment and nine responses were received. Interestingly, two academic staff (heads of departments in an IoT and university, respectively) commented that although the LRC might not be promoted itself, the principles contained in it, for example, equality of

treatment for all applicants most certainly are. This point is supported by a university administrator who commented that such principles are "received wisdom", suggesting that they guide credential evaluation even in the absence of promoting the LRC in its own right. This comment also suggests that promotion of LRC principles is implicit in using UK NARIC as the "major resource for comparison evaluation". These findings support further observations discussed in Chapter Six. Three non-academic staff indicated that the LRC may be promoted at more senior levels, with one respondent commenting that "it has never been highlighted as important at my level". The latter comment brings to the fore a tension exposed in this research as to where responsibility and expertise lies in terms of credential evaluation. Further comments of significance relating to question 6 are those of respondents describing themselves as being familiar with the LRC. An admissions officer indicates that the LRC "has never been discussed". Another non-academic proposes that not only have few heard of the Convention, but those who have, "have little understanding of its implications". Another respondent indicates no awareness of the LRC or substantial difference and asks if the Convention applies to non-EU qualifications.

Question 7 asked respondents to indicate whether they used the LRC and the concept of substantial difference in their work. Only seven respondents (four academic) reported that they used the LRC to guide their credential evaluation work. A further nine respondents (seven non-academic) do not use the LRC in their work but report being unaware of the Convention. Of these nine, four respondents commented on the values important to them in conducting credential evaluation in answering question 9. These included flexibility, fairness, transparency, honesty and integrity; all principles associated with the LRC. A further two of these nine respondents indicated that they use UK NARIC and another respondent, QR. A question arises as to the need for awareness of the LRC by credential evaluators at HEIs if the expectation is that the ENIC-NARIC centres have already considered these principles. Indeed, the respondent who reported using the QR service explains his confidence in this "evaluating authority" and his reliance "entirely" on its evaluations. This comment again raises the need for clarification on roles and responsibilities. It also raises a question as to the use of institutional autonomy. Both of these issues will be discussed further in Chapters Six and Seven. A further nine respondents (five non-academic) reported not using the LRC in their work, despite at least awareness of the LRC. Two of these nine respondents

made reference to the importance for them of an "ethical value system", and "openness, transparency and equality", respectively.

Four comments were made by respondents to question 7. Interestingly, one respondent (non-academic) indicated that he/she is not involved in evaluating EU qualifications, thereby suggesting that the LRC is not of concern, despite reporting not being aware of the LRC. A further non-academic assumed that the LRC was already considered, as he/she was simply following guidelines outlined by the postgraduate admissions office. Another non-academic respondent indicated that he would immediately make an admissions tutor and the graduate and international offices aware of a situation where substantial difference might be an issue. However, this respondent highlighted an important issue – his definition of 'substantial' may be different from that contained in the LRC. This response raises a question as to the means by which a common understanding or sense of what constitutes a substantial difference can be agreed. The last comment was made by an academic who pointed out the usefulness of the questionnaire in building awareness of "the need to familiarise oneself fully with the Convention and refer to it in credential evaluation activities".

If and how the Irish ENIC-NARIC centre might be used as a resource for credential evaluation at HEIs was the subject of question 8. Six respondents (four academic) indicated not being aware of QR, while a further five do not use it. Lack of awareness of QR, particularly in the university sector, is a concern for the researcher due to the level of recognition activity here. One respondent who does not use QR curiously indicates in question 9 that "more formal assistance is required", and that "standardised policies and a shared network of information" is preferred. This respondent also indicates that practice in this area "involves knowledge passed on from person to person", and that "formal procedures should be encouraged". However, the researcher is left wondering why this individual has not liaised with QR. Another respondent suggests a different approach to meeting their needs, and calls for more comparability information for qualifications to be available online from QR. The researcher argues that the latter approach ignores rich learning to be gained through collaboration. Meanwhile, the other 14 respondents report some contact with QR, although there is confusion identified in two cases where respondents mention the UK rather than Irish ENIC-NARIC centre. In total, seven respondents make reference to their use of UK NARIC. Interestingly, one respondent who claims to use UK NARIC, places an emphasis on "knowledge, experience and re-evaluation that comes with experience", thereby, highlighting the

dynamic nature of recognition and the importance of practical experience. It is argued by the researcher that this experience needs to be captured to help credential evaluators keep "abreast of international developments" in the area, an important element of practice for one respondent.

How QR is utilised varies. Two respondents regularly use the centre with one credential evaluator referring to staff there as "colleagues", which is welcome. A further respondent used QR where qualifications were presented from "markets we are not familiar with". Another respondent regularly promoted awareness of the centre through professional networks and to prospective students. Other supports for credential evaluation included peers, admissions tutors, and in two instances, heads of department. A further two respondents mentioned international offices as a support.

Question 9 was open-ended, and asked respondents to comment on their work in terms of the four main research questions. These questions were not separated for respondents' comments as the researcher suspected that it would be easier for respondents to answer in this format. Questions covered the headings of A. Role; B. Values; C. Processes and D. Policy.

A. Role: Question 9 invited comment on what respondents perceived as the role of a credential evaluator and their priorities. The latter covered the spectrum of possibility, with one respondent indicating a priority to "maintain a high level of admissions" to programmes for which they are responsible. This priority could be viewed as a major tension in credential evaluation as a priority of keeping a class full may be at odds with affording all applicants fair recognition of their previous qualifications. On the other hand, another respondent stated their priority as "always the student".

B. Values: As indicated for question 7, only seven respondents (four academic) reported that they used the LRC to guide their credential evaluation work. Rigour, objectivity, consistency and accessibility were indicated as important values. The values of flexibility, fairness, transparency, honesty and integrity were also mentioned by credential evaluators. Of particular note for this research was the importance of "cultural awareness" for one respondent, while another made reference to treating a "domestic" application the same as an international one, and the need to avoid "individualisation of the decision-making process".

These comments suggest that such issues are of concern in credential evaluation practice.

    C. Processes: Only one respondent gave a relatively detailed description of the process in place for foreign credential evaluation, mentioning the significance of researching grading structures for qualifications in the country of origin and English language competencies of the potential student. A further respondent (academic) also referred to language attainment and mentioned the "domain relevance of the degree" and motivation of the student as being part of their recognition process. Another respondent (academic) refers to "academic professional insight" as part of the process. In addition, two respondents make reference to possible discussions that might take place amongst colleagues as to the suitability or eligibility of applicants for admission to a particular programme.

    D. Policy: Question 9 asked respondents to comment on policies that impact on their work in credential evaluation. The Bologna Process and recognition of prior learning (RPL), and access, transfer and progression (ATP) policies were each mentioned twice as was internationalisation. Also referred to were immigration policy and procedures of the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB), in addition to various internal policies and regulations on recruitment and selection of students.

In general, there were few additional comments made by respondents when invited to do so in the questionnaire. Responses to the open-ended question 9 were very brief, with five respondents choosing not to answer the question. This was not surprising, and highlights the instrument as unsuitable as a means of gathering in-depth qualitative data. However, comments made did serve to sensitise the researcher, making her aware of particular issues which she probed in subsequent interviews and focus group interviews with credential evaluators.

Finally, question 10 asked credential evaluators to identify themselves for a possible interview for the study. Four credential evaluators indicated their interest and left their contact details for the researcher.

Unstructured Interviews with Representatives of Key HEI Stakeholders

A brief overview of main findings from this step in the preliminary research phase is now provided. It is acknowledged that insights gained do provide an additional

dimension of understanding for the researcher. Investigating, in analytical detail, the views of such representatives on credential evaluation issues would be a valuable complement to the current study. Nevertheless, it lies beyond the scope of this study.

The organisations listed in Chapter Four (p85) were identified by the researcher as being affected by, or linked to the recognition of foreign qualifications at Irish HEIs. The unstructured interviews and focus group interview carried out helped the researcher understand more readily the context for credential evaluation at HEIs.

In terms of national stakeholders, there are considerable differences as to representatives' awareness and understanding of credential evaluation at HEIs. On the one hand, while interviewees of the DES and EI clearly indicate that responsibility lies with HEIs, life would be easier if credential evaluation practice was transparent and standardised - the DES receive ongoing queries in relation to the recognition of qualifications and parliamentary questions can arise, while the development of international agreements would be facilitated for the EI interviewee. On the other hand, foreign credential evaluation, particularly at undergraduate level, is very much a day to day challenge which has been brought to the attention of IOTI, in terms of allocating points to school leaving qualifications from around the world. The IOTI interviewee did acknowledge that while there is increased cooperation amongst HEIs in this work, increased collaboration is necessary and assistance from QR would be welcome, particularly in trying to keep abreast of changes in education and training and qualifications systems. The importance of government funded programmes such as the Brazilian programme – 'Science Without Borders' was highlighted by the IOTI interviewee, as the development of institutional links is considered more important than targeting individual international students. Government scholarships were also mentioned by the IUA interviewee, indicating that initial eligibility screening is typically completed by the sending country, thus, the issue of credential evaluation does not arise (a point also made by the QQI interviewee). However, he also acknowledged that universities do need to know how to evaluate, and keep up to date with, foreign qualifications for individual mobile students. The IUA interviewee explained that while foreign credential evaluation is not on the agenda of the organisation *per se,* it is related to two particular 'hot' topics – internationalisation and graduate education, which is essentially international in nature. The importance of reputation and institutional links for both these agenda items were noted by the interviewee.

Interviewees from the HEA and ICOS were appreciative of the researcher questioning the links between the field of foreign credential evaluation, and the work of their organisations. The HEA interviewee accepted that there is a lack of connection between institutional access plans and the recognition of foreign qualifications for migrants, in particular. The ICOS interviewee reported few queries to the organisation, or known issues in terms of foreign credential evaluation at Irish HEIs. However, use of UK NARIC, and indeed QR, was mentioned in the context of research work conducted for the purpose of verification of programmes and institutions suitable for scholarships awarded by Irish Aid[31], and processed by ICOS.

The Bologna Process was referred to by the QQI interviewee as a potential aid for foreign credential evaluation practice. However, he also commented that Bologna countries do not "necessarily [have] huge confidence in three year Bachelor programmes. It's very hard to change the culture of a nation", and suggested that credential evaluators will make recognition decisions based on their past experiences resulting in *ad-hoc* and unsystematic practice. As decisions may sometimes be based on "gut-feeling", credential evaluators may be hesitant in speaking about their individual practice as "then you're into kind of the selection of people rather than credential evaluation". However, he did point to the increasingly professional nature of graduate recruitment. Of particular note are his comments relating to quality assurance (QA). Prior to QA mechanisms being in place, decisions to take on additional students from a certain country or institution were perhaps based on previous experience with actual students. Currently, performance at undergraduate level based on entry with a school leaving qualification may be used as a guide for performance at postgraduate level, particularly where there is a dearth of information on the qualification system in question.

Interviewees from the Migrant NGO and USI provided different perspectives on the recognition of foreign qualifications at HEIs. The Migrant NGO interviewee was aware of issues in credential evaluation practice at HEIs anecdotally through his personal life, as opposed to his work. He was, however, close to the broader integration debate and was of the opinion that many migrants cannot access jobs commensurate with their experience and qualifications. Presenting a foreign qualification is a significant hurdle. In particular, he mentioned the importance of "information on how to access information". "Creative" migrants will make their way around the system but the

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[31] Irish Aid is the government's programme for overseas development. Please see: www.irishaid.ie.

"weak" will not. The idea of cultural capital is also clear in the response of the USI interviewee. Foreign credential evaluation is on the periphery of the work of USI, as the organisation works with students already admitted to the institution as opposed to potential students. The USI interviewee was concerned about insufficient emphasis placed on helping international students acclimatise and adapt to life and college in Ireland. English was cited as a major issue. Even though students need to demonstrate a certain level of English language attainment for admission, their English often "doesn't translate into academic English". Together with cultural differences, difficulties with English can result in issues with plagiarism. It is noted by the USI interviewee that most of the orientation events organised by the USI Graduate Students' Union are attended by international students, as opposed to Irish students.

Perspectives on credential evaluation practice at HEIs were sought from four international stakeholder organisations; those three noted in Table 4-3 (p85) in addition to TAICEP. It was acknowledged by the four interviewees of the ENIC-NARIC network, that a proper understanding of credential evaluation practice at HEIs is required within the Network. However, the CoE interviewee did refer to the different relationships that ENIC-NARIC centres have with national HEIs, depending on whether or not they provide legally binding recognition advice. He further observed that the recent financial crisis has led to tensions in European HEIs – do they recruit more academics or recruit those with specialised skills to develop "proper recognition centres?" Two members of the ENIC Bureau indicated a lack of interaction with HEIs nationally. The first interviewee felt that it was "too early to have a clear strategy for cooperation" with HEIs nationally. The other interviewee noticed an increase in the numbers of HEIs interested in seeking "support for capacity building" from the national centre, to drive their internationalisation agendas in terms of increasing international student numbers.

Meanwhile, the ENQA interviewee expressed caution on the perceived ability of QA to solve all problems in relation to the recognition of foreign qualifications. She acknowledged that the Bologna Process is looking to connect more visibly QA mechanisms and the recognition of foreign qualifications. However, she argued that the current ESG does already support credential evaluation activities in the sense of creating a culture of trust. The interviewee from the EUA spoke about his work on professional recognition which is interesting, but somewhat outside of the scope of this research study.

A written response from the TAICEP representative was particularly interesting for the researcher. The organisation is in its infancy, having held its inaugural symposium in late 2013. The organisation was essentially set up to professionalise the field of foreign credential evaluation with the "hope that it will provide sound, consistent, transparent, and defensible methodologies" while also offering training and networking opportunities and research. The TAICEP representative emphasised the importance of a consistent methodology in credential evaluation, to ensure fairness for both potential students and the institution "even if it runs counter to bilateral agreements or political pressure". The TAICEP representative also advocated for the clear separation of admission and credential evaluation. They are not the same thing. He gave the example of a student presenting a three year Bachelor of Commerce from India who "shouldn't be told he doesn't have a bachelor's degree equivalency and is thus denied admission to graduate level studies. However, he can be told that his course work completed previously is not adequate preparation for graduate admission in his desired field of study at this institution". Further, the TAICEP representative referred to the influence of other institutions on the decisions made in another as a "herd approach".

Many representatives, when initially contacted by the researcher, questioned how their work related to foreign credential evaluation practice at HEIs and to this current study. However, it is clear from the brief overview of findings above, that most organisations have a relatively substantial interest, and can benefit from, improvements in credential evaluation practice at HEIs.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the findings from the preliminary research phase of this study. The importance of this phase of the research cannot be underestimated. It has allowed the researcher to engage in reflection on her own professional practice in earnest. The initial step of reviewing the websites of relevant institutions proved a valuable exercise. Although credential evaluation is a key first step in the admissions procedure, there is no recognition for this work despite the challenges faced by credential evaluators which will be presented in Chapter Six. In general, institutional websites are concerned with promotion of their programmes. The means by which a potential student subsequently engages with an institution regarding recognition of their foreign qualification is not clear. There is little precise information on credential evaluation, how this takes place or who does the work, despite IHEQN guidelines and

recommendations through the Bologna Process, as discussed in Chapter Three. The questionnaire and interviews with representatives of HEI stakeholders have contributed much to the study. These instruments provide context for the main research phase and have alerted the researcher to issues requiring deeper investigation. The data obtained supports the rich data collected through interviews and focus group interviews with credential evaluators. Findings from these qualitative research instruments are the focus of the next chapter where an initial analysis is also presented.

Chapter Six

Main Research Phase: Credential Evaluator Voices – Uncovering Practice at Irish Higher Education Institutions

Introduction

The purpose of the current chapter is to present the voices of those individuals involved in credential evaluation at HEIs. These voices were captured through the 14 semi-structured and two focus group interviews (three and four participants, respectively) conducted in the main phase of the research. All transcripts can be accessed in Appendix E (Volume II p17). An analysis of this data is also undertaken in the next chapter. Providing a representative overview of credential evaluator voices was challenging for two main reasons. Firstly, the interviews and focus group interviews yielded much rich, elaborate data. Secondly, there are a diverse group of individuals working in different types of institution acting as credential evaluators. Further, it is acknowledged that interviews and focus group interviews are distinct in terms of dynamic. For this reason, selected quotes are identified as per the participants' profiles in Chapter Four (p88), providing readers with additional information to aid understanding of context.

In advance of presenting and reviewing the findings, a necessary change in the approach to analysis originally envisaged by the researcher is detailed.

Methodological Shift

One might have been expecting a GTM approach to yield conceptual categories, through which recurring patterns in the practices, attitudes and professional identity of credential evaluators would be expressed. However, fairly soon into analysis of the data, it became clear that this was not going to be the case. What became evident was the disparity in the data. Grounded theory was not going to fulfil the role originally envisaged by the researcher. The data gathered is heterogeneous data about a practice which is not fully fledged. The incoherencies found in the understanding of the practice itself by practitioners will be taken up at the beginning of Chapter Seven. Yet, some similar kinds of undiscovered issues for credential evaluation were emerging across the interviews, rather than a picture of standardised practice. These issues, emerging across HEIs, or even within institutions, play a similar role as categories might have done for

GTM in a more pure sense (see Chapter Four p75). So, the researcher, still using the methodological orientation and inspiration provided by CGT, sought to illuminate not so much regular patterns, but issues that need to be addressed before such a practice can become more established as a practice in its own right.

Data from the interviews and focus group interviews are combined, with quotations chosen arranged insofar as possible, around the five key discoveries that emerged regarding the practices of credential evaluators through this research. These five are:

I. Discrepancies in approach to credential evaluation in higher education institutions;
II. Benefits and difficulties in using UK NARIC as an authority in credential evaluation;
III. Differing levels of professional support for credential evaluation within and across higher education institutions;
IV. Understanding credential evaluation practice through connections with existing policies and activities;
V. Tensions between the needs of the individual applicant, the credential evaluator and the higher education institution.

The key findings overlap and build on each other to give a picture of the practices of credential evaluators at HEIs. In the analysis that follows here, the four main research questions are borne in mind and in particular the question of values, which illuminates practice, will be stressed throughout. Different individual and institutional approaches to credential evaluation form part of the first key finding to be discussed. An insight is also gained into the variety of structures in place at institutions within which this work takes place.

Discrepancies in Approach to Credential Evaluation in Higher Education Institutions

Interviews and focus groups began by asking participants to speak about their role as it relates to the academic recognition of foreign qualifications. Individuals invariably began by explaining how they contributed to admissions procedures at their respective institutions. This is no surprise given that from their point of view, the main purpose of recognition is concerned with the individual holder of a qualification gaining admission to a particular programme of study. Additional staff may be involved for the specific

purpose of awarding scholarships (Participants 9, 10, 1C) and through their work in developing institutional links (Participant 11). It is of note that no participants made reference to the LRC except where probed by the researcher. Only participant 8 displayed an understanding, acknowledging the convention as being in the background as a responsibility of the institution where the "ethos...is around access as a right". This suggests that certain values are promoted within the institution in question. Other participants (5, 2A, 2C) clearly separated access from admission without reference to the LRC. Participant 5 commented that "another level of analysis" is required following receipt of recognition advice from QR. Participants' responsibilities in the area of credential evaluation were not always clear from their own perspective. Indeed, responsibility for implementing the LRC was shifted away from the institution to QR by participant 1:

> You can use your Lisbons and all this kind of stuff and we [referring to institution] expect you to have all your dots joined up and all of that stuff done.

Further, participant 1 was particularly hesitant, and had difficulty articulating his role and responsibilities in respect of foreign qualifications presented to the institution. He admitted that the process was a "bit hit 'n' miss...without anything being specifically written down". Participants 2 and 5 also indicated that procedures are not written down, with participant 2 subsequently suggesting that perhaps "it's in our quality manual, but I would have to go and check that". The explicit linking of quality assurance with credential evaluation conveys the value placed on providing a quality service for this participant.

Applications for postgraduate admission are typically received online. Generally, parchments and transcripts relating to previous qualifications are required, together with evidence of proficiency in English where relevant. While the mechanics of where an application goes internally, referred to as the "paper perspective" by participant 5 might be clear to participants, responsibility for credential evaluation is not. The type of programme (taught versus research) and origin of the applicant typically influences the admission arrangements in place. For example, all applications for research programmes only are processed through the graduate studies office (Participant 1), while applications for all postgraduate programmes from non-EU applicants only must pass through the international office (Focus Group 1). In general, all participants (insofar as their work relates to postgraduate admission) appear to be left to their own devices in terms of

developing their own series of steps, resources and supports for their credential evaluation practice. The research findings suggest a certain degree of isolation for practitioners, and a *laissez-faire* approach by institutions which potentially impacts negatively on the values espoused in practice. Participant 9 concludes that "it's probably more informal than it should be" and notes that where additional information is required on a qualification, staff "are told something to the effect of 'there's somebody in UCD that might be able to help you on that' or something like that. OK? (laughs)".

At institutions, there are individuals at all levels involved in foreign credential evaluation; from administrators to academics. These individuals have different job titles and generally spend different proportions of time on credential evaluation activity, depending on other responsibilities. For example, credential evaluation for non-EU applicants is a full-time job for participant 6, a non-academic, as opposed to a side-line activity for participant 1, an academic and participant 10 (non-academic). As there is no formal role of credential evaluator, there doesn't appear to be a precise job description or guidance available on specific tasks in most HEIs. This situation frequently results in confusion over roles, responsibilities, and if and where help and resources can be accessed. An example is provided by participant 1 where colleagues "would often" approach him for help; an informal add-on role despite his own uncertainty as already described. Participant 9 points out another complication in that individuals involved in credential evaluation are a "transitioning group". Those acting as programme coordinators, who may be academics or non-academics, can change annually. Thus, those responsible for credential evaluation are potentially continually changing, bringing with them their own unique background perspectives and values.

An increase in the volume of foreign qualifications presented has led to an expansion of already diverse and busy roles to support the recognition of such qualifications (Participants 2, 3). A "pressure with numbers" (Participant 9) results in less time available to properly research foreign qualifications and education systems. Participants 1, 2 and 10 describe the necessity to balance the effort of credential evaluation with the information provided by the applicant and time available. Thus, while they may value conducting a thorough analysis of foreign qualifications presented, circumstances do not always allow it. Participant 1 is forced to prioritise:

> ...there comes a point when you have to say, look, how much time do I spend on considering an application from wherever it might be, because

it can take a lot of my time and you know I have to manage my time as well.

The different roles played by credential evaluators have an influence on their interpretations of professional responsibilities. Roles depicted cover a full spectrum of possibility – from information-taker to active credential evaluator, although the extent to which participants could be regarded as true information-takers is debatable. All participants, with the exception of 12 and 14, say they avail of information from a third party such as UK NARIC or QR. Participant 1 in particular emphasises the "expertise" of the latter service, and contends that "it's like going to the library. If you don't know something, just get the book and you're the book!" Participant 1 views credential evaluation as the responsibility of this third party on the basis that the institution itself does not have the necessary expertise, and because "there is a proper legal basis for your structure". This thinking demonstrates a clear misunderstanding of the responsibilities of HEIs as competent recognition authorities. In addition, internal knowledge is not considered. In contrast, participants 2 and 8 consider it a responsibility to develop their assessment skills and processes for foreign credential evaluation, to promote fairness and transparency in decisions made. Meanwhile, participants 3 and 6, both non-academics, explain their responsibilities in this area extend to making decisions on admission to taught programmes. Further, participants 5, 7, 8 and 14 (academics) consider credential evaluation their responsibility.

Participant 3 is involved in credential evaluation at the level of a school within a university, while all other non-academics in the study work in central offices. It emerged that some non-academic staff have roles more closely resembling that of information-taker, and not credential evaluator. This observation relates to their responsibilities in (a) gathering information and documentation for others to subsequently assess, and/or (b) implementing set criteria for taught postgraduate programmes (Participants 3, 4, 6). Nonetheless, findings show that both academic and non-academics are heavily involved in making recognition decisions. Individuals' responsibilities and authority for making decisions are blurred, and can cause frustration in the absence of clarity on specific roles:

> It [application for advanced entry] went to our Admissions. One of our admin people, Grade 4, decided that...they can't get advanced entry...I of course blew the fuse...how dare a Grade 4 tell us what we should or what we should not be accepting?...surely that is up to the Head of Department to decide – the qualified person, not the admin person? (Participant 7).

This quote suggests that ownership of credential evaluation and associated knowledge is sometimes contested. Also, it is noted that participants 13 (non-academic) and 14 (academic), who work at the same institution, each consider credential evaluation their responsibility. This finding perhaps reflects a difference in understanding of what credential evaluation entails.

While institutions may have staff based abroad involved in promotion and recruitment activities (Participants 13, 2A, 2D), individuals external to the institution may also be involved in credential evaluation, thereby adding to complexity in this area. Although qualification requirements for each programme are provided, participant 2C suggests that agents to date appear to have operated with little or no oversight from the institution, as "we [central office integrating admissions] don't have sight of the assessment at all". Other participants in focus group 2 agreed that there are particular concerns regarding the role of agents, and the standard of students recruited, indicating again the interest of participants in a quality approach to credential evaluation Participant 2D indicated a more prominent role for academic staff in a "streamlined" and "evolving" approach. Here, academic staff are travelling abroad to interview potential students to help ensure the recruitment of suitable students.

General academic recognition of qualifications is described as "necessary but not sufficient" (Participant 1) for admission. Thus, it is difficult to separate credential evaluation for access from the complexities of selection, with the former intimately embedded in the admissions procedures of an institution. The most visible structures within institutions for credential evaluation are the admissions, international and graduate studies / research offices, where present. There are often complex interactions between these central offices, individual academics and other staff meaning that the process by which qualifications are recognised is not immediately clear in the majority of institutions represented in this study. Responsibility is dispersed in most institutions, suggesting little real centralisation of credential evaluation activities. Anomalies and associated transparency difficulties were quickly pointed out. Participant 2A points out that all foreign qualifications are assessed by the admissions office, with the international office having "sight of non-EU qualifications...only for non-EU postgrad taught programmes". These applications would only reach the admissions office for "an independent assessment" where a decision not to offer a place is made. Meanwhile, participant 1B does not inspire confidence in internal processes in declaring that the international office is "kind of responsible for non-EU international students". Another

example of internal confusion is provided by participant 9, revealing that spot checks conducted by a central office

> have often found things not as well done as we would like them to be...there has been a case when we looked where the department made an offer without the transcript of the student being uploaded on PAC [Postgraduate Applications Centre]. So how could you make an offer if you haven't got a transcript? Now, that is the degree of disorder that is in place.

In general, credential evaluation at HEIs for postgraduate study is not viewed as a discrete element of work within the admissions process. Thus, the definition of recognition in the LRC (see Chapter One p16) may be somewhat redundant in the context of practice at HEIs. Further, institutional structures in most institutions do not necessarily facilitate efficiency and quality in credential evaluation, as the lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities sometimes causes confusion and tension for staff. Despite an array of approaches to credential evaluation by individuals and institutions, a constant partner for the majority of participants is UK NARIC.

Benefits and Difficulties in Using UK NARIC as an Authority in Credential Evaluation

With the exception of three, all institutions represented employ the services of UK NARIC. Participant 2 explained that funding cuts had resulted in loss of subscription, a cause for concern. UK NARIC is described as resource "number one" (Participant 1A), "the gospel" (Participant 1B), "the Bible" (Participant 13) and even the "main admissions database" (Participant 6). A cursory investigation might suggest that information on academic recognition is simply taken from this third party directly and used. Participant 4 describes a scenario where the international office essentially acts as a conduit for such information for the postgraduate research office, despite the fact that the latter has the same access to the UK NARIC service:

> ...I would take the NARIC equivalency statement. You know, you can just print them off pretty handy.

This apparent duplication of effort further emphasises a lack of clarity on roles internally, and also indicates perhaps, that such offices are expecting or seeking professional support for foreign credential evaluation. Interestingly, participant 9 explains that for credential evaluation, "we simply have to pay a fee into UK NARIC, and that's what the university does, and that's the support that it has". This quote

suggests no alternative to UK NARIC, and overlooks possible internal or national expertise.

The convoluted and evolving nature of credential evaluation soon became visible. The extent to which information and advice from UK NARIC is used depends on the individual credential evaluator and circumstances. An important factor in the recognition achieved by a qualification is the credential evaluator's familiarity with the particular qualification, or education system in question. It may be that the credential evaluator has personal experience of the particular country, or perhaps has travelled there. Previous experience of assessing a qualification in terms of establishing a precedent is also important (Participants 1, 3, 12, 14):

> I have come through the X system myself. I have a very good understanding of what were the original Ordinary National Diplomas...and my argument is that these qualifications are at a much, much higher level than our first year programme (Participant 7).
>
> I am very familiar with the Indian system. I have travelled there, and I suppose countries where you have carried out that evaluation a number of times, it becomes much easier so I kinda have my own little database built up (Participant 4).

Thus, the potential of a credential evaluator, with his/her own particular values, to heavily influence the recognition afforded to a qualification is demonstrated, and depends on interpretation of information (Participants 3, 6, 9) and "individual peoples' knowledge" (Participant 1C).

While qualification entry requirements in terms of specific academic levels are referred to by the majority of participants, the concept does not appear to be as useful for postgraduate access as perhaps it is for undergraduate access. Again, the issue of access versus admission arises. How qualification entry requirements are used in actual practice is questionable for postgraduate study, as there are different complicating factors. In addition to a detailed review of content within a qualification (Participants 5, 7, 8 14), professional experience of the potential learner (Participants 5, 6, 12, 14), assessment criteria (Participant 14) and the currency of older qualifications (Participants 5, 6) may also be used in making a recognition decision for admission. Further, interviews with applicants are common for postgraduate study. Detailed analysis of a student's background, as well as progress through the Irish programme, is a key mechanism used in making subsequent decisions on qualifications deemed suitable for

admission (Participants 6, 7, 14). Institutional rankings are another resource used (Participants 6, 10, 14):

> We would have a lot of experience in certain markets, and we would have determined our own entry requirements for those markets so they're a lot easier really. You know what you're looking for (Participant 1A).

> …I was starting out, and trying to make sense of why maybe some students weren't doing as well as others, and was it linked to where they came from or the institution they came from (Participant 12).

These findings may help explain the lack of detail on many institutional websites in relation to credential evaluation and entry requirements as discussed in Chapter Five.

UK NARIC is particularly helpful in offering guidance where institutions have not had the opportunity to build up their own knowledge or capacity (Participants 1, 4, 6, 1A, 1B). The decision to follow UK NARIC can be somewhat begrudging, given its reputation for being harsh on qualifications in some instances (Participants 6, 1B), but it is considered necessary where a dearth of information occurs (Participants 1A, 1B). From prior experience, participant 1B explains his interpretation of the position of many universities in the UK regarding UK NARIC:

> ...the view from a lot of those universities with UK NARIC was that it was a bit severe at times. So some said OK you don't have to be that strict… others said well, we don't know better so we are going to follow what NARIC says. So...unless you know otherwise, its kinda like the gospel unless you have proof...It was usually at the beginning of new markets...so where the knowledge base was quite low, people would be using it but as people gained experience, they said well actually...so you know what NARIC is saying is generally not true or it can be...so just gaining that local knowledge can give you the power to decide if that was actually equivalent or not.

The complexity of elements contributing to the recognition of foreign qualifications makes it difficult to ascertain exact use and clear understanding of the services offered, or indeed the credibility of UK NARIC through the eyes of a credential evaluator. Benefits of using the service include its use as a reference point (Participants 3, 9), allowing an "initial sift" of applications (Participant 10) and the comprehensive nature of the database (Participants 12, 1A). Additional offerings such as an internal support person (participants 2, 2A) and training opportunities (participants 2, 1A) were identified as particularly useful resources. These services presumably facilitate credential evaluators in using the information and advice provided in their own contexts (Participants 5, 8). However, UK NARIC can be inappropriately used as a device to

defend decisions not to make offers of places to applicants, thus relinquishing responsibility (Participants 4, 6, 1A):

> ...we can give them a copy of what we have from UK NARIC regarding their qualification or Irish NARIC or wherever we got it, so we can obviously give them proof (Participant 1A).

Despite the presence of QR, NARIC is synonymous with UK NARIC (Participants 2, 9, 10). Participants displayed different levels of awareness of the Irish centre, from familiarity with the service (Participants 1, 4, 5), to no awareness at all (Participants 3, 9, 10). It was discovered that participants representing IoTs are more likely to liaise with QR than participants from other institutions. This finding suggests less experience in foreign credential evaluation for postgraduate study at IoTs, and is supported by analysis of institutional websites in Chapter Five. Indeed, participants 4, 5 and 2C explain that their respective institutions ask certain applicants to obtain recognition advice from QQI as part of their application procedure. It was further discovered that in situations where a credential evaluator is not satisfied with advice from UK NARIC, or is presented with conflicting advice from these offices, advice from QR is often taken:

> I do tend to go with the Irish one because at the end of the day, it's the Irish one you know [laughs]. I know you have done the work in translating it directly into our own system, and as close and all as we are to the British system, obviously there are going to be some differences (Participant 1A).

> ...where I find something and I am not happy with what I'm getting back from NARIC in the UK, I would link in for advice with yourselves...I had some just doubt in my mind, and when I looked at it with yourselves and got the advice, your advice was taken (Participant 2A).

So curiously, while participant 1B describes UK NARIC as the "international standard", there appears to be no clear rationale for participants 1A and 2A taking advice from one office over another, or why a decision might be taken to explore a qualification further, other than perhaps a hunch. Thus, while most participants make reference to fairness and transparency as values of importance in their work, it appears difficult to always reconcile these values with those present in actual practice.

Meanwhile, participants 3, 1A and 2A acknowledge the difficulties faced by UK NARIC in keeping abreast of constant changes in qualifications and education systems. Where information is questioned, participant 2A appreciates that UK NARIC "would very often be upfront and say actually that's a country we don't have a lot of

information on or we need to pass it elsewhere". However, participant 9 suggests that advice given on certain qualifications may reveal problematic preconceived ideas:

> I don't know how long it is or since when accreditation actually was kind of built in formally into NARIC [UK NARIC]...if its reviewed all the time but there were certainly some African countries and African Universities...they weren't properly recognised...there are those kind of if you like global unevenness's reflected in the qualifications system in NARIC.

Despite situations described where the advice of UK NARIC is not taken, or only taken where no alternative exists, the lack of additional specific information, particularly on grading is considered a weakness (Participants 1A, 1B). Participant 9 refers to UK NARIC as "technical support", signalling a limitation of UK NARIC for credential evaluators. These findings suggest that the role UK NARIC can play in facilitating the recognition of foreign qualifications at HEIs is not understood clearly by all participants. Support from practitioner colleagues is often necessary to situate advice in context. Participant 6 observes that advice from UK NARIC "will only bring you so far" and emphasises the importance of colleagues' help:

> …if you are looking to set requirements for a country that you haven't looked at before, it is really useful to consult with the other universities who may have come across those.

The findings reveal that UK NARIC is used somewhat like a crutch and security blanket; a useful reference and convenient back-up for credential evaluation where there is a lack of information available. Subscription to the service is taken as justified for most institutions based on these findings, although the service can be used inappropriately. Familiarity of the credential evaluator with the qualification, their experience, and that of colleagues play a significantly influential role in credential evaluation practice. The use of *ad-hoc* resources such as institutional rankings also plays a part. There is little consistency evident in use of the information provided by UK NARIC – a transparency issue for both credential evaluators, and individuals holding foreign qualifications.

The next section will give an insight into the degree to which credential evaluation is professionalised in Irish HEIs and the level of support available to practitioners.

Differing Levels of Professional Support for Credential Evaluation Within and Across Higher Education Institutions

Credential evaluation is deceptively difficult and "sticky" (Participant 2), with significant staff resources employed. Recognition is not "black and white" (Participants 7, 9, 1C). A grey area exists where "a judgement" needs to be made (Participant 2). Participant 9 explains that credential evaluation is

> really complicated. It's not as straightforward as it appears and people on the front line do feel the pressure of doing it.

Not only are the numbers of foreign qualifications presented for assessment increasing (Participants 3, 9), decisions need to be taken "*mañana* [literal meaning: very early in the morning]. They have to be done quickly, because if you don't get the student, they can go somewhere else" (Participant 2). Thus, the pressure of internationalisation, discussed in the next section, is evident.

It is acknowledged that subjectivity and interpretation is part of the job (Participants 2, 3, 4, 6, 9, 10). Credential evaluators are no strangers to "guesswork" (Participant 2) and can find themselves in an uncomfortable place professionally, "flying in the dark" (Participant 1B) and "working in the margins" (Participant 9). As credential evaluation is not an "exact science" (Participant 1B), it is surprising that there is not extensive contact amongst structures and colleagues within and between HEIs, given the complexities involved. For example, an admissions office can range from being involved to varying degrees *in* credential evaluation with academic departments (participants 2, 2A), to a "go-getter" (Participant 14), ensuring all relevant documents are made available for individual academics to assess qualifications. Further, some practitioners can be hesitant in seeking advice directly from other institutions (Participant 10), only doing so when "very stuck" (Participant 1A). Ironically, many credential evaluators feel that there is immense benefit to be gained in speaking to others about their practice, as "it's a very different perspective to reading policies, and reading what good practice is" (Participant 8). Participants 2 and 5 remark on the importance of learning 'on the job' with participant 2 asking; "how would you learn to evaluate things other than sitting by Nellie?" However, participant 9 bemoans the lack of "quality training" for credential evaluators, resulting in "administrators...using lay people's speech and lay people's approach" in practice. She calls for centralisation of credential evaluation to help professionalise these activities. Meanwhile, participant 2A

reports the existence of a centralised system in her university, and the availability of "trained experts...within the international office".

The necessity for developing credential evaluation procedures was quickly noted by participants 1 and 5, instigated by participation in the study; albeit only for the purposes of an individual school in the case of participant 5:

> ...is that documented? – No. Is that in my head? – Yes. Should we document it? – Yes. As a new head of school is that something I'm probably going to do after talking to you? – Yes. That I'll put down a kind of a flowchart – guidelines in terms of how we should address this from a school so that we are consistent about it.

A lack of documentation may not concern more experienced individuals. For example, credential evaluation represents "routine" work for participant 14 who has approximately five years' experience. Further, participant 4 with 13 years' experience explains that "you kind of engage in the steps in a sort of robotic mode". They are confident that they have a support network in place, and know how and where to seek assistance. It is interesting, though, that the latter participant, despite considerable experience, would assume that "once you see Diploma in the title [of a foreign qualification], you know it's not equivalent [to an Irish Honours Bachelor Degree]". Such a generalised statement is not appropriate and highlights two issues: 1, the dearth of continuous questioning in credential evaluation practice and 2, inconsistency in understanding between concept, policy and practice.

In the case of Participant 5, a "steer" may be requested from either the admissions or international offices, or the registrar as "they might be more familiar [with a certain qualification]". Participants 3 and 12 also make reference to support being available from colleagues when it is sought. However, a lack of support adds to the sense of fear amongst some practitioners who are relatively new to credential evaluation, and are required to make decisions, often in isolation. Participant 2, with two and a half years' experience spoke of being

> terrified of international applications in general...I'm very new to this and I was very timid…You think 'oh, if I get this wrong' but there's so much subjectivity and I actually didn't know who to go to ask because you're new.

Participant 1 (one and a half years' experience) also suggests a lack of internal support, by emphasising a number of times his dependency and reliance on QR. Meanwhile, Participant 1B, with 11 years' experience, implies little internal support for academics

in assessing certain foreign qualifications. Interaction between his office (international), responsible for assessing qualifications of non-EU students, and individual departments who assess EU qualifications, is severely lacking. Opportunities for cross-communication do not appear to be in place:

> EU students are supposed to be treated the same as domestic students, but there is a gap there that we need to fill where if you're German and applying for a Masters degree here at X, it's kind of reliant on the individual academic assessing that qualification in the department to piece together to assess the German qualification. There isn't really any staff to assist much in that process, so there is a weakness there...we don't know how much they know [about credential evaluation]. We don't actually know if they know anything about it, or if they are just accepting everybody [laughs] (Participant 1B).

In general, across the institutions represented, credential evaluators are not routinely involved in sharing information or actively promoting best practice to any great extent. Many practitioners are working in relative isolation. Another useful example is provided by participant 7, with over 20 years' experience, who feels aggrieved that she is not allowed make her own recognition decisions. The institution, she feels, is not taking into account her experience, is too rigid in recognition practice and is not "looking at the grey area", leaving her in the "wilderness". However, it should be noted that participants 1, 3 and 4 refer to boards or committees, which can consist of both academic and non-academic staff, who are involved in credential evaluation and admission for postgraduate research degrees.

A lack of professional identity and confidence may explain why participants 3, 6 and 10 appear to undervalue their own experience. The latter participant declares that she is "no expert. This is just my feeling on how things work". Gaining experience and exposure to foreign qualifications and education systems over time helps alleviate anxieties about this work. Practitioners learn where support might be available, and may form links, albeit informal, to try and help them in their everyday work (Participants 4, 6, 11). Participant 4 provides an example of the approach:

> I wasn't overly familiar with that system, but then colleagues from X who had been active in the U.S. for a number of years, gave me a little crash course over a cup of coffee [smiles] (Participant 4).

The extensive cooperation in place across institutions in respect of credential evaluation for undergraduate access is mentioned by participants 2, 9 and 2A. There is no similar approach for postgraduate study, despite PAC being a significant formal structure.

Participant 2A emphasises that discussions on credential evaluation have "never" taken place within the national PAC user group. However, participant 1 points out a critical difference between undergraduate and taught Master programmes on the one hand, and postgraduate research programmes on the other hand. The latter "are not cohort-based. So every individual applicant is separate from everybody else...every one is individualised". Nevertheless, participant 2C recognises that opportunities for colleagues to learn from each other are being missed:

> ...you are looking at a parchment from Bangladesh or somewhere you have never seen before and it's a photocopy, and you're wondering, so if I knew that some other institute always dealt with them and they were happy with them, that they had a track record or something. That would be useful.

This sense of missed opportunity is also suggested by participants 2, 9 and 10. Meanwhile, participants 7, 8 and 9 advocate the exploration of a national approach to credential evaluation. A coordinating role for QQI is hinted by participants 1, 2, 7 and 10.

The increasing volume of foreign qualifications to be assessed (Participants 3, 9), a higher risk of fraudulent documents (Participants 2, 9), difficulties with translations (Participants 9, 14, 1C), and dynamic ever-changing qualifications and education systems (Participant 2), are all factors that signal the need for collegial support, within and across institutions. The lack of clarity on responsibilities and ownership is the root problem behind a lack of interaction within institutions. For example, participant 2 questions where responsibility lies for gathering relevant information as qualifications and education systems change. Further, participant 9 indicates that while discussions have taken place within the institution on centralising credential evaluation, this has not occurred as "departments won't let administrators assess academic qualifications…it is a bit of a disorderly space at the minute". Reluctance to engage on foreign credential evaluation across institutions appears to hinge on intense competition for international students (Participants 6, 9, 10, 2A). The fact that central structures, such as international offices, may have different responsibilities across institutions is also proposed as a barrier to increased cooperation (Participants 2A, 2D). However, as already shown, there is a growing understanding of the need for action and a partnership approach to make credential evaluation as "clear-cut as we possibly can" (Participant 2). Although there may not be agreement amongst institutions in terms of the recruitment of international students, credential evaluation for postgraduate access is an "area that we

should target for cooperation and consistency...we have to totally separate the marketing and recruitment from the credential evaluation" (Participant 2B). This point is supported by participant 9 who feels that competition amongst the institutions needs to be set aside, and credential evaluation conducted centrally for "oversight". Indeed, participant 2 points out a willingness to be subject to external quality assurance in terms of her practice; viewing such an arrangement as a support mechanism:

> …if you came in one day and said I am going to audit how you evaluate stuff, and you went 'yeah that's right', I'd be delighted that I am on the right track.

Most credential evaluators, regardless of their level of experience, are not supported in their role, at least not in any cohesive or formal way. Also, a number of practitioners recognise the need, and have the appetite for, a more formalised approach to credential evaluation across institutions. Cooperation for undergraduate access has not inspired the development of engagement for postgraduate study, with competition for international students a significant constraining factor.

The following section will focus on linking credential evaluation with other policies and activities on a local, national and international level. In particular, the impact of these activities on credential evaluation practice will be demonstrated.

Understanding Credential Evaluation Practice through Connections with Existing Policies and Activities

When asked about policies in general that impact on their credential evaluation work, participants were somewhat hesitant in responding. Participants 6 and 2B could not think of any, and others questioned what the researcher meant (Participants 10, 11, 14, 2C). Participant 1B was slightly amused, saying that "there is no policy [laughs]". Participant 1A added that "there is no real national policy bar what is written in our Irish version of ENIC-NARIC, their guidance. We don't really have anything else". The last comment emphasises the dearth of understanding concerning the role of QR, and overlooks institutional autonomy. Although not immediately associated with credential evaluation by participants, it is clear that various policies and activities at institutional, national and international level are significant influences on their everyday work. Individuals' perceptions also play a significant but more hidden role. As connections with such policies are made, the complexity of the emerging field of credential evaluation becomes more visible.

The NFQ is widely used as a mechanism to describe recognition afforded to a foreign qualification, with its levels referred to explicitly by 12 participants, and in the focus groups. Indeed, the NFQ is considered a "gold standard" (Participant 1) and "legally solid framework", against which the quality of qualifications can be confidently judged internationally. Participant 1 elaborates that given the linkages established by the NQAI to the Bologna Framework and EQF, a responsibility to use the information for credential evaluation is conferred:

> ...if all the ground work has been done by you guys...I feel that it is incumbent on me to use that. I don't think I can use the 'Oh I don't have time' argument in that situation (Participant 1).

The Bologna Process is considered a useful tool for credential evaluation by participants 11 and 4, with the latter claiming that "it's easier to have a consistent approach...with the Bologna Framework". However, this implied trust in QFs is not shared by all, with participants 3 and 1C remarking that implementation is not complete. This can sometimes lead to "patchy or sporadic changes" (Participant 3) in a national education system. Further, participant 9 explains that

> you are worried when it doesn't all line up...I suppose Bologna is working in that they are getting to know what is happening in other countries, but not everybody is accepting of the non-traditional kind of routes to the same degree as we are in Ireland.

Only participant 3 refers to the importance of following developments in the Bologna Process. However, none of the participants refer to how they might influence the development of QFs or the Bologna Process; perhaps suggesting that policy developments are a step removed from some credential evaluators and their practice.

The ethos of an institution has an impact on how policies such as RPL are implemented in practice by staff (Participants 1, 5, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14). Participant 5 explains that "our whole learning philosophy is a parity of esteem between academic knowledge and practical wisdom". There are differences in the importance attached to prior formal qualifications, as distinct from professional experience, by credential evaluators, both within and between institutions. Participant 12 refers to the impact of lifelong learning on her approach to credential evaluation, while participant 6 reveals that

> for some programmes, you know, their [applicant] degree may not carry as much weight as for other programmes, and the course leader may look at the applications from a more holistic focus, looking at their work experience and that, and I will be aware of those programmes.

Variations in practice raises issues for standardisation within an institution and nationally, as well as for applicants.

Internationalisation activities are quickly identified as a major influence on credential evaluation practice. The national policy on international education is essentially dismissed by participant 2A as being too high-level. Insufficient detail on exact markets to be targeted by different institutions exacerbates competition amongst them on the ground, even though if organised better, participant 11 maintains "there is a piece of pie for everybody". Participant 9 states that the "strategy in most universities today is to double the number of international students… just to maintain themselves as non-profit organisations". These targets impact directly on credential evaluators through increased workload (Participants 1, 3, 9). The pressure of the work is described by participant 2:

> …if we have a drive to get say more international students in...and I desperately need to get more in, and somebody's under pressure - 'have you checked that? Have you checked that? Have you checked that?', and you're going 'I don't know how to check it', and you are the person whose job that is; where do you go?

There is also pressure on institutions. Participant 9 considers that national policy on funding through the Irish Research Council (IRC) is "definitely putting the institutions in two places at one" by not funding international students.

Institutional internationalisation strategies constitute the building of relationships with institutions in target countries, to explore and develop collaborative opportunities (Participants 1, 10, 11, 14). Participant 1 explains that this approach is preferred "rather than a kind of a scattergun approach...the solo mover, the individual, is not something that we really push". From the point of view of a credential evaluator, such relationships result in prescribed qualification requirements, and contacts established for support (Participants 11, 14, 1B, 2A). There is increasing work involved in internationalisation. The practical response, in some cases, has been to consider shortcuts and innovations to enable staff to subsume additional work into their roles. For example, participant 5 recalled how his institution questioned the need for interviewing certain postgraduate students, but later found that investing this time was essential in admitting suitable students. Participant 9 admits that "we eased off surveillance of transcripts" as, with online registration (essential due to volume), only spot checks, rather than systematic checking, are possible on documentation submitted.

Externally-funded mobility programmes such as 'Science without Borders' for Brazilian students are also an important target for institutions (Participants 1, 11). Many HEIs are currently involved in this programme, as shown by the web review analysis (see Chapter Five p102). Students travelling to Ireland on these programmes typically have their qualifications assessed by the sending country, thus, credential evaluation is not required by the Irish institution. A further approach to internationalisation was detailed by participant 1B, where a foundation programme to target students from specific countries has been developed by a number of HEIs in collaboration. Quality assurance is the main driver of this development as government funders "distrust" third parties offering such bridging programmes. Such a development increases revenue for the institution, while ensuring that students are adequately prepared for specific programmes.

A number of credential evaluators spoke of the link between internationalisation and immigration policies. Time is of the essence in the battle to compete and secure international students. Applications need to be processed quickly. Longer visa processing times can hamper a credential evaluator in securing students, a situation outside of their control (Participants 4, 6). The connection between credential evaluation and economic migration may not be explicit initially, as explained by Participant 2:

> …it's to do with immigration and lots of people getting in with bogus qualifications, and evidence and getting on to programmes, and there are a lot of bogus colleges set up just for human trafficking and bringing people in, and they're [GNIB] trying to stop it. So, it's a much wider thing than to me, it was just have a look at somebody – have they got the right qualification? Get on the course and off you go.

Participant 14 also raises this issue, while participant 1 reports a responsibility to help implement national immigration policy as the institution

> will not be thanked by An Garda Siochána or by the Department of Justice if it becomes apparent that X or any institution is providing a soft route of entry to the country. They, in a sense, delegate some of that responsibility to us, but they expect us to do it properly.

Despite competition amongst institutions, the importance and necessity of having a national direction and brand through Education in Ireland is acknowledged, due to international competition for students (Participants 4, 11). The latter participant emphasised the importance of the brand to communicate that the private institution at which she works is not "stand-alone". An example of institutional collaboration to maintain quality standards was shared by participant 1B. Institutions involved insisted

on students with a school leaving qualification from Oman, to complete a foundation programme prior to admission:

> …the seven universities went back to the Omani government and said you know 'No. We agree that it's not equivalent' [Omani school leaving certificate not comparable to the Irish leaving certificate]…it kinda cheapens the qualification if even one institution is accepting students that don't meet the official entry requirements (Participant 1B).

It was further noted by participant 4 that work is ongoing through EI on a national level, to promote "joined up thinking" from government departments, such as Justice and Tourism, in promoting Ireland as a destination for education.

In summary, there are many internal and external policies impacting on credential evaluation practice at HEIs. While connections with activities on QFs are more visible for example, others such as immigration are not so apparent.

Tensions Between the Needs of the Individual Applicant, the Credential Evaluator and the Higher Education Institution

Individual applicants to HEIs want to use their foreign qualification for admission to a particular programme of study. Credential evaluators are required to make decisions, often under time pressure, on the suitability of foreign qualifications presented for admission to a particular programme and/or to access funding. Meanwhile, as already discussed, institutional and national policy is clear in terms of increasing international student numbers. A number of tensions are highlighted through this research resulting from the different needs or aims of these parties.

Where a lack of clarity exists within institutions in relation to processes, roles and responsibilities for credential evaluation, there are direct consequences for potential students and credential evaluators. Institutional websites, in general, need to be considerably improved (see Chapter Five p103), to increase the transparency of credential evaluation and the admissions processes for potential applicants, and arguably for HEI staff themselves. Participants 4 and 2A gave examples of where individuals seeking access to postgraduate research programmes had already engaged extensively with the research office or supervisor for admission. Subsequently, the international and admissions offices were involved, and rejected the applications based on recognition of the applicants' previous qualifications. These examples highlight the issue of ownership of different stages of the admission process, and also demonstrate

that individual applicants can receive conflicting messages. An indirect consequence for the institution is that available staff resources are not effectively used.

The majority of participants report that few, if any, applicants appeal recognition decisions. Indeed, participant 1 never considered that an applicant would appeal. It is not clear if applicants are generally satisfied with recognition decisions. Few appeals on credential evaluation could reflect the power differential between credential evaluators and applicants. The lack of clear information on an appeals mechanism is also a possible contributory factor. Where an applicant questions an admission decision, the standard first response for participant 6 appears to be that the minimum requirements were not met. She explains that it is only if applicants "really push it" that further information is given. This practice is justified by this practitioner on the basis that information on the comparability of a foreign qualification to a level on the NFQ "does tend to cause a little bit of confusion. If they are from another country, they don't know what this is and it can just make everything worse". The researcher wonders if this practice is actually for the benefit of the institution rather than the applicant, bearing in mind that the burden of proof lies with the credential evaluator under the LRC. If the final decision-maker is difficult to identify, the applicant has no direct contact. Participant 4 offers that the institution does not "advertise" an appeals process, which is in direct conflict with the LRC. This finding reflects analysis of the website reviews in Chapter Five. Participants 1, 2 and 10 emphasise that the onus is on the student to supply them with all information required to assess their qualification. The researcher considers that those presenting foreign qualifications for assessment may be more prone to making incomplete applications where guidelines are unclear, particularly if there is also a language barrier. It is also noted that questions from an applicant may be curtailed by producing credential evaluation advice from either QR or UK NARIC. Participant 4 explains that "once we provide them with the NARIC statement that usually ends it", and participant 1A considers that such advice is "proof" for the applicant that they do not meet entry requirements. However, some credential evaluators did refer to welcoming additional information from applicants to enable them review applications (Participants 10, 1A, 1B).

Use of UK NARIC by credential evaluators is typically neither straightforward nor consistent. Indeed, it is not as simple as just "working a system" (Participant 9). In some cases, the advice of UK NARIC is used, in others not. Applicants are potentially unsure of how decisions are made, and by whom. It is unclear if they may have grounds for a

grievance against the institution. For example, participant 4 explains that her institution generally follows UK NARIC advice, but not always. She explains that "in our system, we actually don't accept three year Bachelor degrees from abroad for entry to Master of Business". Management at HEIs perhaps assume that support for credential evaluation in the form of a subscription to UK NARIC is adequate, which has been shown through this research not to be the case. It is noted that inconsistencies in practice exist as experiential learning may (Participants 5, 6, 12, 14), or may not be (Participants 4, 9), taken into account for admitting international students. However, participants 4 and 6 stress that where a negative admission decision is made, they do try to offer the applicant a programme they regard as suitable "because you are mapping out a pathway to postgraduate studies eventually within the Irish system" (Participant 4).

Credential evaluation can be disproportionately influenced by misconceptions or by previous experiences rather than tools available, indicating both the need for increased networking amongst credential evaluators, and the vulnerability of applicants. Indeed, credential evaluators may be unaware that certain biases are influencing their work. Values can be operating tacitly under the surface:

> I would be aware that the cultural values have come into it quite a bit....USA colleges are kinda getting better recognition in Ireland sometimes. You would have more verbal recognition in the culture of academia than for example an African college that could have been established 200 years and genuinely at university level as opposed to college level…There is more occurrence of fraud in producing qualifications...This then often reflects other prejudices that are there in the society. They might watch one type of application a lot more and check. They might say 'I'm going to check all the African transcripts' for example. The U.S. ones can just slip in looking good but they could be equally likely to be the wrong ones…which may or may not go against real African students on the ground (Participant 9).

> …Europe, it's really like everything pretty much is above board, same with North America. But say let's say Indian students, there's lots of forgery, you know, having to double and triple check applications (Participant 11).

The vulnerability of credential evaluators is also highlighted in this research. Many are working under time pressure. Most credential evaluators are conscious of the importance of fairness in admitting only suitable students, for the benefit of all parties involved (Participants 2, 3, 6, 8, 14, 1A, 1C, 2A). However, a tension arises as HEIs do not appear to be increasing staff resources, or offering formal assistance for credential evaluation. Thus, the values actually avowed by credential evaluators are not always

evident in practice. Participant 10 suggests that "if it is very time consuming and difficult to assess a student, then it makes you less likely to assess the student". Issues with forgeries and translations were highlighted (Participants 1, 2, 9, 11, 1C). Applications from certain countries can draw more attention to the issue of authenticity than others (Participants 9, 11). Credential evaluators work with the information they have to hand in many cases, which can be very little (Participants 1, 2, 4, 10, 14, 1B). The lack of easily accessible information on qualifications and education systems may be a disadvantage for applicants from certain countries, particularly where international communication networks may not be as strong (Participants 1, 2, 1B).

Credential evaluation is described by participant 9 as taking place in a complex "intercultural...unworked out space". Participant 14 explains further the difficulties:

> We have transcripts that are not even in English...You know, some transcripts are very light, it might just say the module name and the credits – so what do we decide? It is very hard to decide what level the student is at.

English language proficiency was mentioned by the majority of credential evaluators as a particularly important aspect of their work. Participant 1 explains that

> ...their ability to speak the language is very very important. I mean, you can judge them to an extent even on the email they send. If the language is all over the place, you say to yourself – are we going to be hand-holding those candidates trying to get them to write proper English?

In addition, participant 14 refers to academic content issues arising from different uses of vocabulary across countries. This increases the complexity of credential evaluation work, and subsequent communication with the applicant:

> ...the module is a bit misleading. It says strategy and in France, strategy is very different to what we call strategy here in Ireland...I know you've done a level 9, but it's not done at level 9 within our programme. It's a different type of module.

Therefore, applicants may have grounds for disappointment as opposed to grounds for grievance, regarding a credential evaluator's decision.

The need for pastoral care of applicants appeared to be felt most strongly by participants representing independent institutions (Participants 8, 11, 12, 14). Participant 14 comments on being "motherly" to applicants, and explains that in some cases, not admitting the individual is the best thing to do. Participant 2D reports that structures and

processes in place for credential evaluation are currently subject to review as "students are coming through at a certain level and then not getting out the other end".

It appears that some credential evaluators can justify more easily giving negative decisions, and not investing time in applications for applicants from certain host countries (Participants 1, 4). Participant 4 further explains that

> an applicant for a Masters or a PhD from India may have already applied to a UK or an American university, so they have some feedback already. So, if you are giving them a negative response, it's not a huge surprise to them.

Ireland may not be the first choice destination for potential students (Participants 1, 4, 10). Participant 1 suggests that applicants may know little about the programme they are applying for, as with particular "countries of origin, you tend to get an element of academic tourism. People swinging applications out everywhere and anywhere" (Participant 1). The apparent lack of genuine interest works against the potential learner, as Participant 1 indicates that he may not be as "diligent" regarding some applications as he is for others.

The recognition of foreign qualifications has been shown to be a time-consuming and individualised task in most cases. Although credential evaluators might be conscious of the need for fair treatment of all applicants, circumstances give rise to actions that can result in poor outcomes for applicants, credential evaluators, and institutions themselves.

Conclusion

The recognition of foreign qualifications in Irish HEIs occurs within a complex local, national and international environment. A number of complexities have been discussed which influence credential evaluation activities directly, some of which may not be explicit to individual credential evaluators. Within institutions, factors such as a lack of experience, a dearth of guidance and training, and the absence of written procedures can act as barriers to clarity on roles and responsibilities for credential evaluation at HEIs. However, there are key points to be made to conclude this chapter. Firstly, as the research proceeded, it was discovered that practice in credential evaluation is not as far advanced as one might expect it to be. Practice is not conceptualised in the same way by all participants. The kinds of comments that participants are making reveal that there isn't a shared values base as one might find in medicine or nursing, for example, where

there is an understanding of what practice entails; something that makes possible a professional code of practice. Secondly, the lack of a professional identity for credential evaluators at HEIs is a prominent factor connecting the five key issues discovered through this research. Credential evaluation is not generally regarded as being distinct from the admissions process of an institution. Thus, the concept can be misunderstood and appears to have different meanings amongst participants. Thirdly, the social aspect of credential evaluation, as opposed to the technical angle, needs attention in terms of influence on decisions made.

The following chapter explores the merits of "community of practice" approaches (Wenger 1998) in addressing the kinds of issues identified in this current chapter. In doing this, it also takes a deeper look at the notion of practice itself because to develop a CoP, particularly in a field that is not yet clearly emerged, clarity is required as to what distinguishes a practice from something which is not. A practice, in this professional sense of the word, is something to which the term 'practitioner' can legitimately apply. Chapter Seven aims to uncover a range of ideas that may hold significant practical promise in tackling these issues.

Chapter Seven

How Might Community of Practice Approaches Help Improve Credential Evaluation at Higher Education Institutions?

Introduction

This chapter makes a case for encouraging the development of professional community of practice approaches as means of addressing the main issues identified for credential evaluation through this research. To explore the promise of such approaches in meeting the kinds of challenges identified in the last two chapters, the distinctive characteristics of a CoP as described by Wenger (1998), and his learning design framework (LDF) are used (*ibid.* p239). The researcher also draws on relevant literature to examine the suitability of CoP approaches in contributing to the development and enhancement of credential evaluation practice, particularly in terms of securing a foundation for credential evaluators to envision and formulate a professional identity.

The notion of practice and Wenger's concept of a CoP is initially introduced with an explanation of why this analytical framework was chosen, following which the LDF and its elements are explained. Subsequently, each of the following five key intricately linked issues will be analysed through this lens.

I.   Discrepancies in approach to credential evaluation in higher education institutions

II. Benefits and difficulties in using UK NARIC as an authority in credential evaluation

III. Differing levels of professional support for credential evaluation within and across higher education institutions

IV. Understanding credential evaluation practice through connections with existing policies and activities

V. Tensions between the needs of the individual applicant, the credential evaluator and the higher education institution

The Notion of Practice: Wenger's Community of Practice and Learning Design Framework (LDF)

Findings presented and reviewed in the previous chapters clearly indicate the importance of support and continual experiential learning for practitioners in the recognition of foreign qualifications for postgraduate access. A variety of terms is used to describe the learning environment where individuals come together to share their knowledge and experiences. Whatever the term used, be it "communities of practice" (Wenger 1998), "knowledge communities" (Craig 1995), or "networked communities" (Jackson and Temperley 2007), the philosophy of collective learning connects all. The initial term is used for the purpose of this study and is defined by Wenger (2006 p1) as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly". In this way, members of a CoP "deepen their knowledge and expertise" (Wenger *et al.* 2002 p4) while they work.

In mapping the findings of this study to a theoretical framework, there are a number of theories of learning that could have been employed. These include Mezirow's (1990) theory of transformative learning and Freire's (1974) critical pedagogy. In view, however, of the findings emerging and considering the practical aims of this research study, the concept of CoP was considered the most appropriate analytical framework to review the findings and to provide a promising pathway for credential evaluation to develop through professional learning. This particular theoretical lens was chosen to help illuminate credential evaluation as an emergent practice with complex relationships and intensive, constantly evolving boundaries. It also speaks to the central importance of identifying with the work of credential evaluation as a practitioner and with the emphasis placed on the importance of peer learning in this study, as a means of progressing practice. Further, the CoP framework is especially applicable as a tool for analysis in this instance, given its significant potential for enabling collective learning to progress credential evaluation practice within the complex social structures existing in the higher education landscape. As in the development of all professional practices, complex political sensitivities between practitioners would need to be negotiated, often over a prolonged period of time.

Reference to a CoP in this chapter is meant in the sense of CoP approaches rather than the development of a single CoP for credential evaluation given that multiple realities exist for credential evaluation practice even within one HEI. Some of these realities

might be national in scope; others more local. Accordingly, Wenger's conceptualisation of CoP has been adapted and developed for the purposes of this study. This is done by understanding the CoP concept itself in the light of Alasdair MacIntyre's notable definition of the notion of practice; also in the light of Joseph Dunne's related explorations of the notion of practice in educational settings. In particular, MacIntyre emphasises that a practice comprises a community, identity and history and describes a practice as being

> any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized…with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systemically extended (1985 p187).

Dunne further elaborates on the idea of practice by making an explicit link between a practice and practitioners:

> A practice is a coherent and invariably quite complex set of activities and tasks that has evolved cooperatively and cumulatively over time. It is alive in the community who are its insiders (i.e. its genuine practitioners), and it stays alive only so long as they sustain a commitment to creatively develop and extend it (2005 p152-3).

The concept of a CoP has evolved significantly over time. Here it is important to stress the further dimensions involved in the development of the concept, particularly those highlighted by authors like MacIntyre and Dunne: the historical dimension, the social-community dimension, the conflicts of interpretation on the goals and scope of practice and not least the emergence and enhancement of a sense of professional identity. These are present in the work of Wenger, but in a somewhat looser way. In the work of Lave and Wenger for instance, the initial focus was on providing a fresh perspective on the notion of apprenticeship, and how individuals forge a professional identity by learning 'on the job', given that "learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991 p31). Attention then turned to the capacity of a CoP to act as a mechanism for self-development through engagement with others in groups (Wenger 1998). More recently, the CoP as an organisational tool for managing knowledge (Wenger *et al*. 2002) has been the focus, suggesting a certain degree of formalisation. For the purposes of this analysis then, the concept of CoP as espoused by Wenger (1998) is supported by the work of MacIntyre (1985) and Dunne (2005) as a true practitioner cannot rely solely on codified knowledge in conducting credential evaluation. The notion of a CoP approach here is connected to recognition of credential evaluation as a professional practice in its own right to allow practitioners to forge an

identity for themselves through the sharing of insights and experiences. In this way, collective learning can progress practice over time. In fact, much of what is itself called codified knowledge develops in this way from practice.

A CoP is concerned with "enabling effective practice" (Marken and Dickinson 2013 p301). This is a key point considering the overall aim of this research. Wenger (1998 p73) offers three aspects of practice that, when combined, act as a cohesive force in a community:

1.   Mutual engagement - members are actively involved in helping each other and in circulating information
2.   Joint enterprise - members are committed to working towards a common goal
3.   Shared repertoire - members collectively adopt or produce resources for use in practice

In addition to identifying the above three aspects of practice, Wenger's account explains three characteristics of a *community* of practice, namely community, domain (in this case, a shared interest in credential evaluation) and practice (Wenger 2006). All three need to be present and active in a coherent way for a CoP to exist.

Wenger's learning "architecture" (1998 p230) identifies the inherent building blocks needed to allow the development of a CoP as an effective social learning environment. Four dimensions or "dualities" (*ibid.* p231) are described which represent the key matters of contention for the design of learning, the "fundamental issues of meaning, time, space and power". These challenges are clearly identified in Chapter Six for credential evaluators at HEIs. Wenger's LDF includes three modes of belonging – engagement, imagination and alignment and each relates to the formation of professional identity through learning. Thus, further investigation of the LDF is considered useful for the current research study. Figure 7.1 below gives a graphical overview of the LDF, while a brief introduction to its elements in the context of credential evaluation follows.

Figure 7.1 Wenger's Learning Design Framework
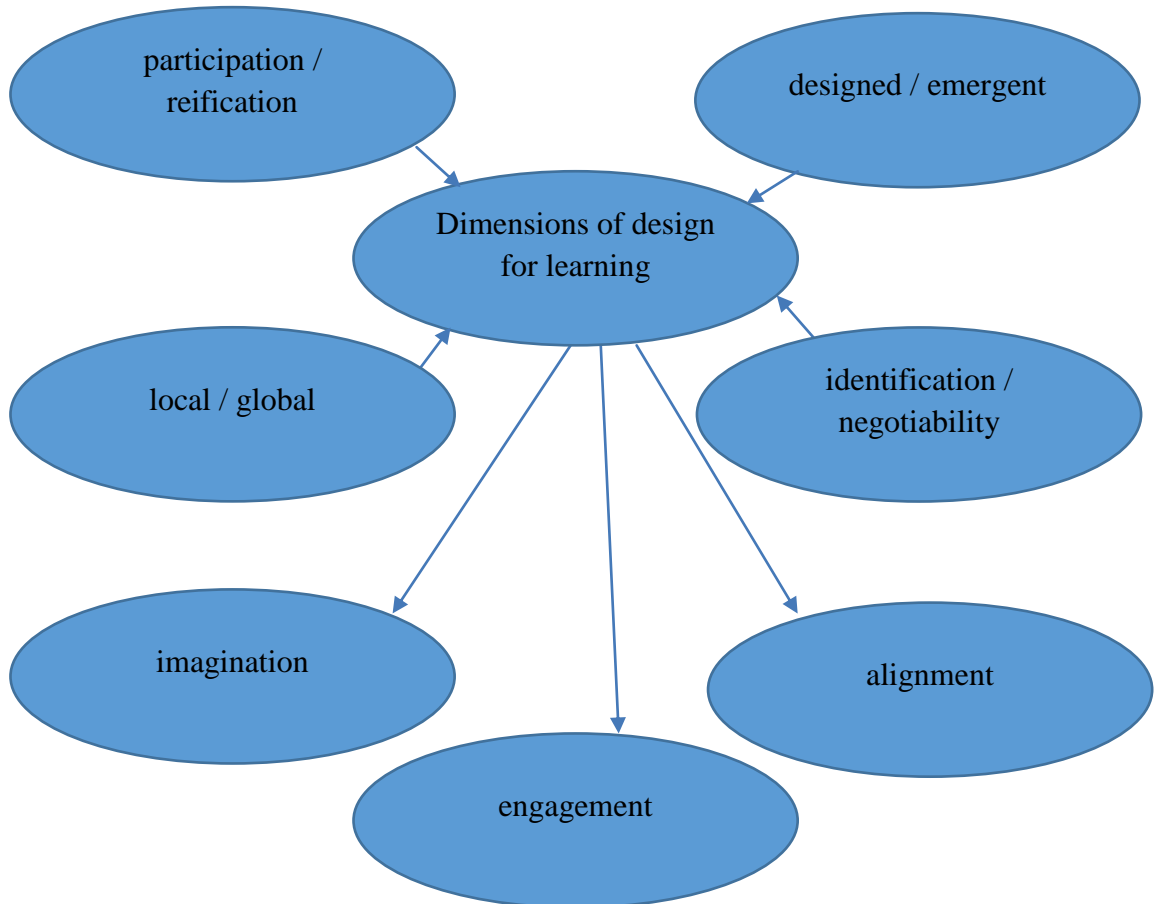
The first dimension of Wenger's framework, namely the participation / reification duality, refers to how learning for an individual occurs through actively taking part on the one hand, and on the other, the degree to which reification occurs; that is, the production of items through which meaning is assigned. For example, representatives of a number of ENIC-NARIC centres led the development of a best practice manual for credential evaluators in HEIs with arguably minimal input from the latter (see Chapter Two p43). The second dimension, the designed / emergent duality, relates to the extent to which practice is prescribed on the one hand as opposed to allowing ongoing learning and experience impact on subsequent practice on the other. This research suggests the availability of little or no documentation on credential evaluation processes within HEIs. While UK NARIC is extensively used, practitioners place a high value on their experiential learning and that of colleagues in making recognition decisions. The third dimension, the local / global duality, concerns the necessity for learning to be relevant and applicable locally while additionally, acknowledging broader learning and

connections. A significant example here is the LRC. Although an international legally binding text, the principles enshrined must be embedded locally to fulfil its purpose. The fourth and final dimension, the identification / negotiability duality, describes the intensity to which individuals engage in learning on the one hand, and the ability to take ownership of that learning by making their own contributions to it on the other. In this study, although some non-academics may be involved in credential evaluation work, the majority are unable to negotiate practice to any great extent as they have no authority for decisions made. In addition, their contribution may not be fully realised by academics, or arguably, the broader institution.

In addition to these four dualities, the LDF also includes the three following components:

1.   Engagement (working together and building interest and dedication to activities and others) – in this case, for the fair recognition of foreign qualifications

2.   Imagination (opportunities to reflect on the present and how it came about while being open to new opportunities) – credential evaluators need to acknowledge their practice and how it has evolved in order to make changes for its improvement

3.   Alignment (understanding how the CoP contributes and impacts on other work outside) – for example, considering how the activities of QR might be relevant to credential evaluation at HEIs.

Together with the dimensions already mentioned, these components underpin the development of a CoP. Informed by Wenger's insights and the research findings, it would be useful to develop and promote the platform planned for HEIs through the EAR-HEI project (see Chapter Two p43) as a peer learning, rather than a training platform. The EAR-HEI manual could form the basis for initial directed engagement amongst practitioners at HEIs and the ENIC-NARIC network. Such engagement could help develop practice by negotiating the constituency of credential evaluation and the meaning of best practice, and how it can be applied in the context of an individual credential evaluator's work.

The ideas above have been introduced in a preliminary way to illustrate the relevance of the LDF elements, and how they may be applied to the field of credential evaluation at Irish HEIs. These ideas will be explored in more detail later.

In a CoP, Wenger explains that "learning is the engine of practice, and practice is the history of that learning" (Wenger 1998 p96), There is a need to look at how learning can be facilitated at HEIs to improve credential evaluation practice, bearing in mind that the dualities identified by Wenger are not choices as such. Their value lies in understanding how to combine them most usefully to improve practice in credential evaluation by addressing "the tension inherent in their interaction" (*ibid.* p231).

It would be reasonable to presume that the concept of a CoP would be easily embraced within HEIs, given their orientation for cultivating and imparting knowledge, and the growing emphasis placed on peer learning for students. However, particular challenges for academia such as the "increasingly 'corporate university' setting" (Nagy and Burch 2009 p228) and diminution in collegiality (Green *et al.* 2013) impede the development and success of a CoP. Thus, it is important to illustrate how a CoP approach may be useful for credential evaluators to meet the demands and challenges of practice. Although a CoP cannot be formalised or "mandated" (Merriam *et al.* 2003 p172), there is a possibility for credential evaluators to be drawn to each other through the "social energy of their learning" (Wenger 1998 p96) and a CoP "nurtured" (Nagy and Burch 2009 p240). The incentive for initial engagement needs to be the ability of the CoP to engage credential evaluators in learning of relevance to them and which is not viewed as being additional to their work. For practitioners with little experience, the availability of help to resolve urgent issues on their desks is an important motivation. Individuals decide how they will participate in a community (Billett 2004), with the "'fit' or resonance" (Handley *et al.* 2006 p645) of learning opportunities an important aspect of engagement. As commitment and understanding grow through identification and negotiation, a CoP has the potential to improve credential evaluation practice.

The focus now turns to each of the five key findings and how the associated issues could benefit from the conscious development of CoP approaches on local, institutional and national levels.

Discrepancies in Approach to Credential Evaluation in Higher Education Institutions

The evidence reviewed in the previous chapters show that there isn't as yet among credential evaluators in Ireland, a coherent sense of a shared understanding: of the domain, of the community, of the practice. There is no formal job title of credential evaluator in HEIs. The work goes with the territory of a range of different roles and

structures in a HEI. Although Wenger (1998 p113) asserts that "practice is the source of its own boundary", there is no clear demarcation for credential evaluators between credential evaluation as a domain in its own right and the overall admissions process of an institution in which it is an integral part. Again, Wenger's work is enriched here by insights provided by MacIntyre and by Dunne. In particular, the need to identify the 'internal goods' of a practice focuses attention on the importance of distinguishing what goals are central to a practice, what goals are subsidiary, what goals lie outside the practice, and not least, what goals may be harmful to the practice.

The community of credential evaluators is complex and extensive, with both academics and non-academics involved. Further, these individuals occupy a variety of central offices and individual schools and departments, all autonomous in their own way. With processes for credential evaluation generally not documented, it is no surprise that ownership of credential evaluation and responsibilities are contested in this complex space. A CoP is an organic workplace structure through which credential evaluation activities could be claimed by practitioners and practice developed through "constellations of interconnected practices" (Wenger 1998 p126). These constellations would then, theoretically, have a certain level of connection, providing "channels for sharing information and ideas efficiently and insightfully" (Wenger *et al.* 2002 p152) to help define boundaries and reduce overlap in functions. However, the traditional hierarchical structure of a HEI has the potential to hamper the participation of non-academics, in particular, in a CoP. Where a CoP exists (possibly unacknowledged), it can allow members some freedom to "transcend" (Seaman 2008 p269) formal structures and hierarchies in place, to concentrate on improving the practice, including the work of identifying and prioritising the goals that define and distinguish the practice itself." This research shows that some aspects of current practice can facilitate the development of a CoP. For example, participant 4 refers to a research committee, comprised of both academic and non-academic staff, charged with admission to research programmes.

Community and practice may frequently collide as credential evaluation is only emerging as a professional field in its own right. Participants 7 and 14 (both academics) emphasise their expertise and authority in making recognition decisions over colleagues, in what they regard as administrative roles. In addition, Participant 9 explains that some academics resist losing control for admission to their programmes when a suggestion is made to centralise credential evaluation activity. This resistance is most likely caused by a misunderstanding of credential evaluation for access (the right

to be considered for admission), rather than admission to a particular programme. Thus, proposals for change could be perceived by academics as an attack on their professional role, with a corresponding loss in status and power. These reactions by academics are, in some ways surprising, as non-academics are already extensively involved in credential evaluation practice, and hold significant power. This appears to escape attention. Non-academic participants 3, 4, and 6 spoke of their roles in determining eligibility in the first instance when an application for admission is made, essentially controlling those applications put forward to academics for consideration. In some cases, responsibility for admission to taught postgraduate programmes is delegated from the academic department (Participant 1B). No common understanding of what credential evaluation entails is the leading issue to be resolved. A CoP could possibly help through developing an understanding of the vocabulary used in practice for example.

The contribution of academic and non-academic staff to credential evaluation could be debated through a CoP approach to enable "mutual engagement" (Wenger 1998 p73) to be achieved. All members of a potential CoP must negotiate their identity – homogeneity is not required. Learning is "not just the acquisition of memories, habits, and skills, but the formation of an identity" (*ibid.* p96). The roles of academics and non-academics are considered to be different within an institution, with the latter viewed as a support structure for academics. Academics may have mainly "overlapping forms of competence" (Wenger 1998 p76) in that they are subject experts in their discipline and could assess programme content. On the other hand, non-academics could offer "complementary contributions" (*ibid.* p76) as part of a CoP. These latter participants have developed research competencies, and possess valuable experience through the necessity to resolve everyday credential evaluation problems.

Interestingly, this research shows that both academics and non-academics are experiencing marginalisation in terms of credential evaluation practice. The greater authority of academics in terms of decision-making in most instances is a significant contributory factor to this marginalisation for non-academics. Academics should communicate readily to non-academics the rationale for admission decisions made, to tap into the potential of the latter to support their work. In other words, non-academics need to be recognised by academics as legitimate contributors to final admission decisions as "being included in what matters is a requirement for being engaged in a community's practice" (Wenger 1998 p74). Meanwhile, the professional identity of

traditional academics is in crisis as HEIs increasingly embrace a business model for operation (Whitchurch 2008, 2009). A resultant "fragmentation of the academic constituency" (Hellström 2004 p511) is causing uncertainty and confusion for some academics, potentially leading to the exhibition of protectionist behaviour. It is necessary for academics and for institutional management personnel to consider the different aspects of an academic's role and how it has evolved, and to look anew at ground they might share with non-academics. Academics must acknowledge the expertise others possess and which they don't have. Establishing a new or changing professional identity in relation to their practice for both academics and non-academics is impeded by a lack of guidance within institutions on roles and responsibilities pertaining to foreign credential evaluation. Institutional management could instigate the development of a CoP as an incidental outcome of established or newly developed fora to deliberate on high priority items. For example, changes to the ESG (see Chapter Three p67), and the impending introduction of the IEM (see Chapter One p26) can potentially ignite discussion on the recognition of foreign qualifications.

It could be argued that those actually acting as credential evaluators are the non-academics in many cases, with selection decisions made by academics. This research shows that there is no commonly shared understanding of the concept of 'recognition', making it difficult for those acting as credential evaluators to identify more fully with this role, and to build a corresponding professional identity. Participants in this study spoke not only about qualifications, but broader factors of relevance for admission such as English language attainment and student motivation. At once, current practice is and is not taking place "in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning" (Wenger 1998 p47) to what credential evaluators do. Individual credential evaluators need to get the job done as they see best, but many are in an uncomfortable space. In addition, the means by which it is done is not necessarily known or understood by other stakeholders. A CoP approach offers considerable promise in potentially reducing fragmentation in practice by facilitating the community of credential evaluators to share

> implicit relations, tacit conventions, subtle cues, untold rules of thumb, recognizable intuitions, specific perceptions, well-tuned sensitivities, embodied understandings, underlying assumptions, and shared world views (*ibid.* p47).

Fostering a CoP could help in identifying and establishing credential evaluation as a professional field of practice in its own right. Over time, a typical role description for a credential evaluator, and a professional code of practice which embraces a core set of

principles and values could be developed and understood, taking care not to 'fix' professional identity so as to curb possible engagement and innovation. Here again, MacIntyre's reflections highlight a key issue: if a practice does not have such a core set of values that capture its 'internal goods' (whether or not contained in a professional code of practice), then it lacks something that gives any practice its coherence and orientation. In addition, responsibilities and an outline of how the various relevant institutional structures should interact would enhance cooperation and trust through increased clarity for practitioners. However, individuals must be open to learning for a CoP to function effectively. In other words, members must be "receptive to situational affordances" (Warhurst 2008 p465). A CoP will not resolve power issues but could enhance visibility and bring them to light, resulting in the potential for improved practice.

The complexity of the structures and roles involved in credential evaluation actually lends itself to a CoP approach as there are both sufficient commonalities and tensions to sustain engagement, imagination and alignment. In other words, individuals with various roles across different institutions would have an opportunity to contribute to credential evaluation practice, bearing in mind their respective circumstances. Credential evaluators will also be involved in other CoPs and networks through work activities, the benefit being that potentially, "knowledge travels naturally across the landscape" (Wenger 1998 p252). Nagy and Burch (2009 p227) explain that a CoP "allows a blend of shared interest, application of the interest to practice and infusion of a community or social presence that is a feature of the voluntary interactions between members of CoPs". The potential for learning through a CoP may be enhanced as credential evaluators with diverse roles struggle to have their knowledge legitimised.

Findings from this current research suggest little documentation on procedures for credential evaluation, save "look at UK NARIC" (Participant 9) perhaps. This situation represents a significant opportunity for fostering and gaining benefit from a CoP. A CoP could provide a framework for credential evaluation practice to emerge. Discussion will now centre on the second key finding which concerns the use of UK NARIC at HEIs.

Benefits and Difficulties in Using UK NARIC as an Authority in Credential Evaluation

To foster a CoP for foreign credential evaluation, you must have a community and a practice. That is, there is a community of skilled workers who identify that they are

involved in similar work and that there is a series of tasks which, when taken together, make up a distinct kind of practice. The actual existence of a potential community of credential evaluators could be disputed - institutions subscribe to UK NARIC. The job of credential evaluation could be said to be done. The current research study has discovered that this service represents only one piece of the puzzle in terms of credential evaluator practice. Credential evaluation involves more than taking information directly from UK NARIC. It is also more than merely a technical exercise. Decision-making for a credential evaluator involves a range of higher-order qualities, including discernment, analysis and judgement. In some cases, decisions made take for granted a complex knowledge of qualifications and assessment methods (Participants 11, 14), in addition to past experiences such as retention rates for students (Participants 7, 12, 13, 14).

UK NARIC is used essentially as a default resource by many credential evaluators with a 'pick'n'mix' attitude prevalent. The online database and helpdesk facility is used frequently as a means of overcoming gaps in professional support internally. However, access to UK NARIC also acts to close off opportunities for engagement and innovation where the service is used for blunt compliance (Participant 1), or to shift accountability for decisions (Participants 4, 1A). Accessing information through UK NARIC can act as perhaps a useful starting point for assessing a foreign qualification, but knowing how to use and apply that information in context is the key. A CoP can help, given its role in "explicating locally existing tacit knowledge and…creating new relevant, practical knowledge that is also recognized as a legitimate knowledge source" (Enthoven and de Bruijn 2010 p89). Institutions must actively take responsibility for credential evaluation to enable any improvement in practice. A CoP has the capacity to provide a source of safe support through the distribution of responsibility across the community (Anderson 2008). This approach is capable of engaging credential evaluators in identifying the appropriate role of UK NARIC, while promoting the value and relevance of practitioner experiences in the development and enhancement of practice.

The ENIC-NARIC network (see Chapter Three p51) is a valuable example of a CoP for HEIs. However, the Network, encompassing the UK and Irish centres, is predominantly concerned with information provision to competent recognition authorities such as HEIs, whose authority to make recognition decisions must be respected. Much of the reification publicly available for credential evaluation has been completed outside of HEIs, for example the EAR-HEI manual. This concurs with Wenger's view that "a very

large portion of the reification involved in work practices" (1998 p60) happens outside of a community of workers. Thus, a CoP can potentially help credential evaluators negotiate the local meaning of international best practice for themselves. Only then can a resource such as the EAR-HEI manual be accepted for use in HEIs, as "reification must be re-appropriated into a local process in order to become meaningful" (Wenger 1998 p60). The ENIC-NARIC network may only perceive that it possesses a comprehensive understanding of the pertinent issues for credential evaluation at HEIs. Wenger usefully explains that "we project our meanings into the world and then we perceive them as existing in the world, having a reality of their own" (1998 p58). The ENIC-NARIC network can only ever facilitate the learning of credential evaluators at HEIs as "no community can fully design the learning of another" (Wenger 1998 p234). However, it is also true to say that "no community can fully design its own learning" (*ibid.* p234), so a symbiotic relationship is a necessity. While Irish HEIs clearly have a close relationship with UK NARIC, their relationship with QR could be argued to be more valuable in terms of learning opportunities. Qualifications Recognition is often consulted for difficult cases and advice given precedence over that from UK NARIC (Focus Group 1, Focus Group 2). Indeed, many credential evaluators were interested in learning how QR might be of assistance to them in practice. Thus, they were welcoming of "a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives"; one of the seven principles for cultivating a CoP as detailed by Wenger *et al.* (2002 p51).

This study shows weak signs of awareness of the LRC amongst credential evaluators and certainly, the key concept of substantial difference could not be described as a "household word" (Council of Europe 2014 p7). Deeper engagement of credential evaluators with each other and with the ENIC-NARIC network is required to promote convergence in understanding and interpretation. It is important that colloquial meanings of the concept of substantial difference are exposed and challenged. For example, individual practitioners may consider a difference of one year duration in a degree programme to be a substantial difference, reflecting their own values. However, this is not technically a substantial difference in the specialised practice that is credential evaluation. Higher education institutions need to encourage the development of a more strategic approach to credential evaluation: to interpret, adopt and internalise principles of the LRC, echoing an argument made by Ecclestone (2001 p301) in relation to assessment practices within HEIs. She argues that assessment criteria alone "cannot generate common interpretations of the required level and standard of work". Likewise,

the principles of the LRC need to come alive for practitioners within a culture of acceptance, where diverse education systems and qualifications are recognised and welcomed (see Chapter Three p47), in order to be implemented effectively (Bergan 2004). As a legal instrument, the LRC does not work if perceived as a stick and imposed rigidly (see experience of the ENIC-NARIC network – Chapter Three p53), but could offer a secure foundation for the development of a CoP for credential evaluation. A CoP approach could help to increase the visibility of the legal basis for credential evaluation, while engaging practitioners and institutional management in developing a common understanding of a competent authority's responsibilities.

There are sound foundations for cultivating a CoP at HEIs. A number of credential evaluators demonstrate an accurate understanding of how UK NARIC can help them in their role. As experienced practitioners, they are comfortable taking ownership of practice (Participants 4, 7, 14,1A). Credential evaluators are not necessarily slavishly following advice from UK NARIC, and are exercising institutional autonomy while building their own professional identities. However, it is noted that no credential evaluator questioned why advice from the UK and Irish ENIC-NARIC centres might be different. The scope for increased engagement, imagination and alignment could be improved with the development of a CoP. As UK NARIC is extensively used by Irish HEIs, the service does potentially provide a basis for increased engagement amongst practitioners. It was acknowledged by participants 3, 1A and 2A that there are subtle differences between the UK and Irish systems that require negotiation. Indeed, even the short period of a focus group interview allowed space for productive reflection. Participant 2A commented that she had only just realised that the lack of interaction amongst HEIs for foreign credential evaluation at postgraduate level represents a "gap" that UK NARIC cannot fill. So, while UK NARIC could represent designed learning, there is significant potential for a re-design of practice to emerge through continuous learning in a CoP.

Use of UK NARIC does not provide an adequate understanding for what credential evaluation encompasses within an institution, and may actually act to mask how individualised practice is. The means by which a CoP could enhance professional practice through the fostering of a culture of support amongst colleagues is now explored.

Differing Levels of Professional Support for Credential Evaluation Within and Across Higher Education Institutions

Opportunities sometimes present themselves for credential evaluators to network with other practitioners such as at EI events (Participants 4, 11), or at meetings of the IUA (Participants 6, 10). Individuals have established informal alliances to help them in their work – to have someone to turn to, often as a last resort if outside their own institution (Participants 8, 1A). Such sporadic interaction, described by many credential evaluators in this study, can ignite deeper engagement. Wenger (1998 p4) asserts that a CoP exists where there is more than just a common interest and occasional exchange or "chat" (Participant 6). A CoP involves a "more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities" (italics in original). It comprises sharing of "expertise, competence, learning, activities, discussions, information, tools, stories, experiences, and a knowledge base" (Seaman 2008 p270). It also "creates, organizes, revises and passes on knowledge among the members of the community" (*ibid.* p271). Thus, a CoP has the capacity to offer a means of strategically developing credential evaluation practice through sustained interaction and questioning amongst credential evaluators. The seedlings for a "potential" CoP (Wenger 1998 p228) are already present in that the majority of participants expressed an interest in reaching out to others involved in credential evaluation.

This research supports Kelloway and Barling's definition of knowledge work as a "discretionary behaviour focused on the use of knowledge" (2000 p292). Learning from other credential evaluators can be somewhat erratic, rather than expressly viewed as a necessary continuous activity. The "great social energy" (Wenger 1998 p193) of credential evaluators who champion this work at undergraduate level could be harnessed to inspire colleagues at postgraduate level to engage more strategically and critically in their practice. Further, such individuals can provide "intellectual and social leadership" (Wenger and Snyder 2000 p3) within a CoP to promote reflection, exploration and innovation through the community.

The familiarity of credential evaluation for HEI staff in their own contexts make appeals for improvement by external bodies such as the European Commission and Council of Europe difficult. The starting point for each credential evaluator is different, for example, in terms of their professional identity and duration of experience. It is not

simply a matter of looking to improve the practices of those already involved, but also of providing a mechanism for those new to credential evaluation to learn from experienced individuals. Lave and Wenger's (1991 p29) concept of "legitimate peripheral participation" describes the process by which "newcomers become old-timers" (*ibid.* p29). On a simple level: as individuals become more experienced, they osmotically move closer to the core of the CoP, increasing participation by sharing their competences with others. A CoP has the capacity to provide a level of professional self–assurance for practitioners; to empower them and perhaps allow them become more comfortable with ambiguity, while capturing tacit knowledge for the institution. However, the concept of peripheral participation is complex. There is an advantage to those new to credential evaluation in not identifying too much with the work. While they are learning from other, more experienced practitioners who choose to engage, "non-participation is an enabling aspect of their participation because full participation is not a goal to begin with" (Wenger 1998 p166).

More experienced credential evaluators may be so busy or ingrained in their own work (Participants 7, 14) that they potentially occupy a "marginal position" (Wenger 1998 p166). These credential evaluators may identify too much with the work and become a function of it, which blinds them to future opportunities for learning or enhancing practice. For example, that the Bachelor of Commerce degree from India does not compare to the Irish Honours Bachelor of Commerce degree is mentioned by participants 4, 6 and 14, with no explanation of why. A CoP has the potential to facilitate a healthy tension between credential evaluators of different levels of experience. Those with less experience potentially enjoy a safer environment to ask practical questions and challenge understandings. Meanwhile, more experienced credential evaluators have an opportunity to open their minds and interrogate and broaden their knowledge through interaction with others. Thus, tacit knowledge can be 'saved' and transferred amongst credential evaluators. Eliminating the need to fully 'reinvent the wheel' locally increases efficiency, which could offer space for imagining innovation in practice (Blackmore and Blackwell 2006).

Effective professional development for all credential evaluators, regardless of role or experience, is a possibility through a CoP approach if there is a balance between those with experience and those new to practice. Wenger claims that

> by keeping the tension between experience and competence alive, communities of practice create a dynamic form of continuity that preserves knowledge while keeping it current (1998 p252).

While training offered by UK NARIC is welcomed by a number of credential evaluators in this study, the value of learning from colleagues in similar circumstances appears to be strong. As participant 2 commented – "how would you learn to evaluate things other than sitting by Nellie?" demonstrating the necessity of learning through apprenticeship at work. Interestingly, Green *et al.* (2013) emphasise the superior ability of a CoP over formal training programmes to meet the professional development needs of academics. In addition, Green *et al.* illustrate how participation in the CoP changed members. While more experienced members "told stories of *praxis*, of personally transformative CPD [continuing professional development] that involved them in collective action in the wider-socio-cultural context of teaching" (*ibid.* p247), those new to the CoP demonstrated a "more individualistic and pragmatic approach focused on professional survival". Likewise, this research shows that credential evaluators, particularly those with less experience (participants 1, 2, 10), were anxious to solve immediate problems on their desks. These credential evaluators with less experience can quickly dismiss the validity of their knowledge and experience as evidenced through the following quote:

> I'm no expert. This is just my feeling on how things work you know... if you want the official way it is supposed to be done, then it is the international office that you would go to (Participant 10).

Ironically, learning leading to the improvement of credential evaluation practice is likely to be driven by those credential evaluators new to practice, as "on the edge is where learning is most vital, most urgent, and creative (Heaney 1995 p7). Learning through interaction with each other can help move all credential evaluators towards informed practice. Heaney offers an interesting insight for this study, suggesting that "the dynamic and at times chaotic energy" on the periphery is "where the frenzy of transformative learning is more likely to occur" (*ibid.* p3). Through a CoP, credential evaluators can "learn from talk...[to]...learn to talk" (Green *et al.* 2013 p261). So, a CoP potentially offers an effective mechanism of bringing credential evaluators together with a renewed sense of identity to work towards improving practice over time, by enabling the essentials of practice and what is expected of a practitioner to emerge in the first instance. Membership of a CoP fosters trust and can potentially enable credential evaluators step outside of their comfort zone, to take action and test new ideas.

The idea of apprenticeship, with apprentice and master credential evaluators, is useful but somewhat problematic. Although there is no literal core of a CoP, Merriam *et al.* (2003 p172) make the pivotal point that the centre is "defined by participation and commitment, rather than expertise and mastery". The vision of an ideal practitioner within the context of an Irish HEI needs to be negotiated. In turn, all credential evaluators, regardless of their experience, require an open mind to explore and comprehend how ongoing changes and influences impact on their practice in moving towards this ideal as "full practitioners" (Lave and Wenger 1991 p95). The latter also argue that "mastery resides not in the master but in the organization of the community of practice of which the master is a part" (*ibid.* p95), corroborating the necessity for continuous learning and development. Enabling credential evaluators to share ownership of meaning is fundamental to improving practice, and can possibly be achieved through a CoP approach.

Membership of a CoP has the potential to transform everyday learning and experiences for credential evaluators by revising their "mental models" (Bramming 2007 p49) defined as "deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations...that influence how we understand the world and how we take action" (*ibid.* p49). Acquiring the skills necessary for fair recognition of foreign qualifications is different to traditional "academic learning" (Trevitt 1998 p495) and involves a switch from "'content' to 'process'" (*ibid.* p495). A CoP provides a framework which supports the processing of applications by promoting and embedding a standard means of approaching credential evaluation. Even though each application is different, they can be negotiated through similar steps. The compelling argument by Munby *et al.* (2003 p98) on the ability of the "metacognitive functions of routines" to assist in learning at the workplace has specific application in this study. Credential evaluation occurs within the broader routine of admission. While individual credential evaluators have established their own routine or series of tasks to recognise a foreign qualification, "habitual routines"

> ...exist when a group repeatedly exhibits a functionally similar pattern of behavior in a given stimulus situation without explicitly selecting it over alternative ways of behaving (Gerswick and Hackman 1990 p60, cited in Munby *et al.* 2003).

Thus, common routines have the potential of improving practice through increased standardisation as credential evaluators, although working in different contexts, would choose to behave similarly. Munby *et al.* (2003) usefully connect the idea of using

routines for learning at work to the concept of legitimate peripheral participation, claiming that

> novices can begin to learn a complex routine by participating in one small subroutine, because participation provides a vantage point for observing and understanding the events that initiate, sustain, and terminate the larger routine (p102).

At the same time, Bennis (1989) argues that too much routine breeds familiarity and can smother creative non-routine work. The diverse nature of credential evaluation itself and the community of practitioners can help counteract this danger.

A CoP approach could help in reducing isolation for credential evaluators at HEIs, particularly those new to practice. Many credential evaluators in this study alluded to the significant effort of keeping pace with developments such as changes in qualifications and education systems worldwide. Both individual practitioners and institutions need to understand that the professional socialisation process is "dynamic, interactive and lifelong" (Trede *et al.* 2012 p370), and that the nature of a CoP supports this. Time is of the essence and a CoP has the potential of avoiding duplication of effort. For the institution, a CoP offers a means of supporting professional development of staff. Such a development could encourage staff to make links and transfer information and knowledge amongst communities and internal structures.

This section discussed the possible benefits of a CoP in providing support for credential evaluators, regardless of experience. The ideas put forward will be extended, as the focus shifts now to an analysis of how a CoP can be used to help negotiate challenges outside of the control of individual credential evaluators.

Understanding Credential Evaluation Practice through Connections with Existing Policies and Activities

Credential evaluation does not occur in a vacuum, and individual credential evaluators need to get the job done under time pressure. Increasing emphasis on the internationalisation agenda, and demands for accountability in particular, means that the need for constant negotiation of the impact of tools, policies and skills for credential evaluation at HEIs is even more pronounced and urgent. Wenger (1998 p47) convincingly explains that CoPs represent the "prime context in which we can work out common sense through mutual engagement". Thus, a CoP is a mechanism through which credential evaluation practice can be developed in the midst of considerable

change for institutions. For example, a CoP can potentially help to align the needs of practice and the values of practitioners with outside influences. Of relevance here is Swan's (2008 p277) question on QA in higher education:

> What are we designing? Is it to be a system of Quality Improvement, or a system of accountability?

The political importance of credential evaluation in allowing learners access to continuing educational opportunities is frequently in tension with the increased marketisation of education. This study shows that although the majority of credential evaluators indicate a concern for the needs of the potential student, an undercurrent of "economic globalisation" (Moutsios 2010 p127) exists. The degree to which credential evaluators are aware of this influence differs. Many have become normalised to the discourse which is permeating practice; trickling down from international bodies such as the OECD and the EU. Moutsios argues that there is a difference between education politics, which concerns questioning the philosophy of education on the one hand, and policy-making on the other hand, which must be highlighted. He claims that the latter is being internationalised, leading to an "increasingly global endorsement of a specific perception of what education should be about" (*ibid.* p121). He also laments the loss of education politics in the development of educational policy, with the ensuing transfer of power:

> ...social progress, identified more than ever before with economic competitiveness, is becoming a global policy-making project, managed, coordinated and measured through/by transnational institutions...Politics then is being eliminated by the dominance of policy-making...As a consequence, education politics as the activity of teachers /academics, learners and parents to question and reflect on the purpose, the contents and the pedagogic mode of learning, is superseded by transnational policy-making, which aims primarily at generating the cognitive and human resources required by the labour markets (Moutsios 2010 p123-127).

The ability of many credential evaluators to meaningfully influence policy developments of relevance to their practice is seriously questionable. They appear to have little voice, with many not expressly aware of or familiar with related policy. The situation is not helped by the fact that an institution's solution to evaluation of foreign qualifications appears to stop at a subscription to the UK NARIC service. This approach is largely bypassing the knowledge and skills of staff who should be viewed as an institution's inestimable resource. Ironically, the Bologna Process and other European

initiatives in education are argued by Nagy and Burch (2009 p232), drawing on Schapper and Mayson (2004), to be responsible for the "relegation of academics to the role of a process labourer". The evidence from the current research does not fully support this observation in the context of credential evaluation. Many credential evaluators indicate the usefulness of the Bologna Process and tools, but clearly negotiate their meaning for themselves. Meanwhile, the EQF is largely ignored by credential evaluators. If this reaction is a "response to design" (Wenger 1998 p233) rather than an issue of awareness, it needs to be captured by credential evaluators and fed back to policy-makers. A CoP has the potential to be harnessed to fulfil this role by facilitating the management of boundaries between communities as Wenger *et al.* (2002 p153) observe that "radically new insights and developments often arise" here.

The social aspect of credential evaluation practice must be acknowledged, as it is more than a technical process that can be prescribed. The social sense of technical tools requires engagement amongst practitioners, and between practitioners and policy-makers, to allow best practice to emerge. The development of a CoP has the potential to claim power for practitioners. Wenger insists that CoPs can

> take responsibility for the preservation of old competencies and the development of new ones, for the continued relevance of artifacts, stories, and routines, for the renewal of concepts and techniques, and for the fine tuning of enterprises to new circumstances (1998 p252).

More specifically, the increasing emphasis of policy-makers on a neo-liberalist agenda has led to a change in the understanding of what it means to be an academic. This is as a consequence of

> the shift of universities from collegial autonomous institutions with government funding, to managerial business style operations with flexible delivery and a need to earn revenue in a competitive environment (Nagy and Burch 2009 p229).

This redefinition is impacting negatively on the organisation of credential evaluation work within institutions, and the power that credential evaluators have to collectively effect change in practice. While foreign credential evaluation should be viewed as an important aspect of internationalisation, the latter tends to be dominated by competition for recruitment of international students. So, while many credential evaluators in this study note increased collaboration between institutions nationally and internationally (a response to managerialism reported by Lewis *et al.* 2005), institutional support for collegiality internally appears to be taking a back seat. Roberts explains that

> workers increasingly operate in an individualistic world of weak ties where resources are frequently obtained through personal networks and individual relationships rather than through organisational communities (2006 p635).

The implications for the role of an academic of an increased market focus within institutions are well documented (Hellström 2004; Poon 2006). Such implications are illustrated in this research and succinctly communicated by Nagy and Burch:

> Change in universities...represents a contested environment where professional autonomy and the need for accountability has diminished both time available and willingness to engage in collegiality (2009 p230).

Credential evaluation is no longer a niche activity but a mainstream one, where academics and others play a central role. The role of academics in credential evaluation has been blurred with the existence of what Whitchurch (2009 p407) refers to as "blended professionals". Whitchurch (2010 p627) argues that these professional staff in particular are caught in balancing activities for "public good...[and]... more commercially oriented enterprise". Market forces have created a certain obscurity for credential evaluators – academics, blended professionals and administrators – as there is no clear demarcation of their role in relation to practice. As emphasis is placed on increasing numbers of international students - a key performance indicator for public institutions (HEA 2013) - it is not surprising that credential evaluation is not viewed as a distinct element of the admissions process. Ironically, as the work of a credential evaluator increases in volume and becomes more complex, there is sometimes less support amongst colleagues for this activity. There is evidence that academics may be attempting to 'protect' their work and expertise (Participants 7, 9, 14, 1B). These behaviours portray what Hellström (2004 p511) refers to as "a bi-lateralization of information sharing" (an aversion to sharing information and knowledge) and "deprofessionalization" of the work of an academic.

While relationships amongst staff within and between institutions can be contentious and non-trusting due to competition for students, this research shows that problem-solving is triggering a community to come together. Problems and tensions created through internationalisation, for example, are initiating engagement. A delicate balance between academics and non-academics is described by participant 11 to create a "win-win" for everyone. Meanwhile, institutions are coming together to set entry requirements for unfamiliar markets (Participants 2, 4, 10, 1A, 1B, 2A). The value

derived may whet the appetite of practitioners to sustain and develop in-depth collaboration for the realisation of longer-term benefits.

A CoP for credential evaluation has the potential of building the capacity of practitioners through a renewed sense of collegiality. This research has clearly shown that credential evaluators are willing to engage with colleagues, internally and externally. However, outside influences and the apparent low value placed on this work within institutions have diminished the potential to engage with scarce resources, particularly time being a pertinent issue. Credential evaluators could benefit from a CoP as it would allow them to be informally organised to negotiate their practice in response to continuous developments such as the implementation of recognition tools and internationalisation. Indeed, in terms of the latter for example, there are particular pertinent questions which credential evaluators must be aware of such as: if Ireland is aggressively pursuing international students as a policy imperative, what are the direct implications on their work? Are some practitioners perhaps being pressured into lowering the academic standard required for access to various programmes, thus, potentially leading to conflict with others who resist? It is recognised by a number of credential evaluators that there is strength in unity and while there are hierarchies in place that need to be respected, staff working within the different autonomous structures at institutions need to work together to improve credential evaluation practice. Indeed, Tapper and Palfreyman suggest that

> collegiality is teamwork that functions best if individuals act collegially to construct an agreed consensus as to what needs to be done and how it should be done, as opposed to working through a line management structure to implement imposed ends and means (2000 p197).

There is some evidence that credential evaluators realise the necessity and importance of change, albeit sometimes at a relatively local level (Participants 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 2B), to improve credential evaluation practice. A CoP has the potential to identify the necessary learning needs to give rise to changes in practice required to form the basis for a dynamic and changing "learning curriculum" (Lave and Wenger 1991 p97). Indeed, closer interaction at the "parochial" (Nagy and Burch 2009 p234) level of individual faculties, departments and schools can help precipitate broader engagement both internally and externally through the active building of trust relationships.

The preceding analysis shows how existing policies and activities within institutions are increasingly driven by funding considerations, which in turn impacts significantly on

credential evaluation practice. It is neither acceptable nor prudent for credential evaluators not to be aware of the various influences on their work. A CoP could help increase awareness and align the interests of credential evaluation to the broader field. It is argued that a CoP represents an instrument through which power can be repositioned back towards practitioners through an increased sense of collegiality. In the last section, a CoP approach is suggested as a means of helping illuminate and balance tensions present between the needs of credential evaluators, individual applicants and the larger institution.

Tensions between the Needs of the Individual Applicant, the Credential Evaluator and the Higher Education Institution

While increasing transparency in credential evaluation is demanded and expected, it is not an exact science and value judgements are made daily by credential evaluators. This means that the rationale for a decision made is not always easy to explain. Processes cannot be made fully explicit, and may become even less explicit with increased experience of the credential evaluator. Ecclestone notes that as lecturers gain assessment experience, they "become more intuitive and less deliberative, and less well able to articulate the tacit knowledge on which much of their decision making has come to depend" (2001 p305). Further, Shay describes assessment as a "socially situated interpretive act" (2005 p663); an analogous view regarding credential evaluation practice is argued here. Similar to Orr (2010 p5), when exploring the assessment of fine art, credential evaluators in this research "try to merge [their] own experience with the objectivity of the criteria". It is argued here that the informed judgement needed for credential evaluation is attained only through extensive experience and collaboration amongst practitioners. This "connoisseurship" (*ibid.* p5) can be supported through a CoP approach, as Orr argues that acceptable standards in practice arise from the community through practice. If criteria or processes for credential evaluation are overly prescribed, the imagination of credential evaluators will be severely impacted, thereby stifling essential innovative practice. However, at the same time, a lack of transparency is not in the best interests of any party in promoting accountability. For example, participants 1, 4 and 1A make reference to credential evaluation being "straightforward" in some instances. This outlook may curtail or even halt engagement amongst practitioners. A CoP provides an opportunity to foster engagement and discussion amongst credential evaluators on how best to communicate the decision-making process to relevant audiences, while also providing a mechanism for tacit knowledge to emerge.

Thus, this knowledge could be made available for scrutiny, for and by individual credential evaluators themselves, and other practitioners. Prejudices can interfere with a practice unless made explicit. Until such time as credential evaluators are given the opportunity to explore their presuppositions, biases may be unacknowledged.

Credential evaluators are caught between internationalisation, with a focus on international student recruitment on the one hand, and a duty of care towards potential students on the other. The tension arises due to the failure of institutions to recognise credential evaluation as a professional field in its own right, independent of admission, with space and time required by practitioners to develop practice. Credential evaluators have a critical role to play in the recruitment of *suitable* students, which appears to be overlooked in the 'busyness' of attracting international students. Attention has been focused only relatively recently on the practical impact of internationalisation on HEI staff (Dewey and Duff 2009; Tange 2010; O'Reilly *et al.* 2013). This is surprising given that "it is usually at the individual, institutional level that the real process of internationalization is taking place" Knight (2004 p6-7). A CoP has the potential of situating credential evaluation as an international activity that is "systematised and embedded" in HEIs rather than "casuistic" (Teichler 2004 p9). Thus, there would be time devoted to the activity, thereby, encouraging a culture of engagement in, and reflection on, credential evaluation practice.

Even where credential evaluators are not necessarily aware of the principles of the LRC, they are generally mindful of having a duty of care towards applicants. However, the agency of a credential evaluator to act accordingly is often bound by contextual factors. Those of particular relevance here include insufficient time, the general lack of ability to identify and access practitioner colleagues, and competition for international students. A CoP approach has the ability to highlight the "stickiness" (Warhurst 2008 p466) of credential evaluation practice. It could offer a means of moving from accepted rhetoric to its implementation in reality by exposing the difference between "espoused theories" and "theories-in-use" (Argyris and Schon 1974 p174). Credential evaluators need space to reflect on their practice, which Boud and Walker (1993 p75) argue, occurs in the "midst of action". This research has provided examples of where personal biases or "'taken for granted' understandings" (Ecclestone 2001 p302) impact on practice. As discussed in Chapter Six, practitioners' voices did suggest their obvious commitment to justice but simultaneously displayed how biased they themselves can be, often unknown

to themselves. A number of credential evaluators made reference to practice influenced heavily by their unique backgrounds and indeed familiarity with certain countries and their qualifications, with no scrutiny as to the rationale. This further adds weight to arguments made by Raffe (2015) on the importance of social rather than technical aspects of a qualification (discussed in Chapter Three). A CoP has the potential to allow greater interaction amongst credential evaluators to help unpack these understandings and to have them changed if necessary. Indeed, a CoP is useful to distinguish between what Wolf (1995) refers to as "unjustified prejudice" and "justified interpretation". A CoP could prompt experienced credential evaluators in particular to actively reflect on their practice which may be ingrained.

Practical Means of Encouraging the Development of CoPs to Advance Credential Evaluation Practice

Wenger (1998 p132) warns that CoPs should not be "romanticized". They have the potential to "reproduce counterproductive patterns, injustices, prejudices, racism, sexism, and abuses of all kinds". Such dangers can be reduced considerably however if emphasis is placed on those processes of articulation and research-informed debate through which the goals and values central to a practice are refined and developed. There are daunting challenges ahead for credential evaluation and they need to be addressed. Given that credential evaluation is only now emerging as a professional field, there is an opportunity for institutional management to help guide its development and make available required resources. There will be challenges and setbacks, but experience with access offices for example shows that new ground can be broken. Twenty years ago, the idea of an access programme at a university would have been unthinkable. As noted throughout this chapter, there are already signs of engagement amongst credential evaluators, or at least a willingness to engage which are being encouraged through prevailing conditions and circumstances such as time pressures on staff and the impending introduction of the IEM. In addition, structures already in place such as the ENIC-NARIC network and working groups established through the IUA can be harnessed to facilitate the professional development of practitioners and to produce, for example, guidance on the typical activities of a credential evaluator across Irish HEIs. Inclusion of credential evaluation activity in internal quality assurance documentation would be a significant advance. It is acknowledged that the initial steps here might be small, but are significant in progressing coherence in practice. However, leadership from institutional management, in terms of validating credential evaluation

as a central and worthy activity, is required in "shepherding...evolution" (Wenger *et al*. 2002 p51) of a CoP to develop credential evaluation practice

Conclusion

In this chapter the researcher has argued that a CoP approach, enhanced by insights from the research of MacIntyre and Dunne, offers a promising pathway to help tackle the five key issues identified for credential evaluation. The strengths of a CoP approach to help meet these challenges are explored in the unique context of HEIs. The researcher proposes that favourable conditions exist currently for institutions to encourage and support the incubation of a CoP. At the same time, it is acknowledged that a CoP is not a panacea and some limitations are noted. Finally, Chapter Eight concludes the thesis by summarising the findings and analysis.

Chapter Eight

Key Messages, Recommendations and Reflections

Introduction

The answer to the question posed in the title namely, are there substantial differences in practices for recognising foreign qualifications at Irish HEIs, is a resounding 'yes'. There are substantial differences in credential evaluation practice amongst practitioners at HEIs. This answer, however, is not necessarily based on the concept of substantial difference as per the LRC. There are substantial differences in the assumptions, priorities, experiences and circumstances of credential evaluators in this study, for example, leading to colloquial meanings that can impact negatively on their practice to the detriment of all stakeholders, including themselves. While it is understood that diversity in practice to accommodate local application is necessary and can be positive, the key issues identified through this research need to be addressed urgently. It is an opportune time for credential evaluators to be supported in HEIs to build bridges with each other, internal and external stakeholders and potential students.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the researcher's motivation for embarking on this study and clarifies again the scope and aims of the research. In the second part of the chapter, the four main research questions are revisited and succinct comments made on each from a CoP perspective. In addition, the five key issues that emerged in the analysis are reviewed. Recommendations arising out of each for action to help improve credential evaluation practice are offered in the context of the broader aims of this research. Thirdly, the contribution this study makes to the field of credential evaluation is then discussed, limitations of the current study are identified, and areas where future research may be warranted are considered. Finally, in part four, the researcher reflects on her expedition through this research.

The Beginning

From the outset, the researcher considered that credential evaluation was a worthy field of investigation. As a practitioner within the ENIC-NARIC network, she felt somewhat disconcerted with being increasingly involved in projects relating to promoting best practice in recognition activities at HEIs, with no detailed knowledge or experience of practice in that context. Indeed, with the benefit of a number of years' experience, it was

increasingly apparent that few colleagues within the Network were sufficiently aware of practice at HEIs in their respective countries, despite being involved in promoting best practice through principles of the LRC. A gap in knowledge was revealed. In addition to the applicability of the research more broadly, the personal need for space and reflexivity on her practice was a major motivation for the study.

There are many aspects of credential evaluation that deserve exploration. Nonetheless, the daily practice and perspectives of credential evaluators at HEIs always struck the researcher as being a neglected and overlooked angle for examination. The researcher holds that prioritising personal accounts of practice is both valuable and vital, as she attempts to connect professionally with credential evaluators at HEIs. The researcher considers that knowledge on practice is required urgently, for example, to consider the impact of inclusion of recognition activities in internal and external QA arrangements through the ESG (see Chapter Three p67), and to inform proceedings of the Bologna pathfinder group on automatic recognition (see Chapter Three p58).

The main aims of the study, identified initially in Chapter One (p13-14) were:

1. To explore institutional practice at Irish HEIs relating to the recognition of foreign qualifications with a focus on access to postgraduate study;
2. To identify staff members acting as credential evaluators at HEIs for postgraduate access, and allow them an opportunity to reflect on their professional practice, and have their voices heard in the wider context of recognition activities and developments;
3. To gain a picture of the consistency of recognition decisions made for the purpose of postgraduate access across Irish HEIs;
4. To enhance awareness and understanding of factors impacting on recognition at HEIs;
5. To demonstrate to individual credential evaluators and HEIs the importance of maximising consistency and transparency in recognition and related practices in achieving their aims and fulfilling obligations;
6. To illuminate connections between credential evaluation and an array of both national and international developments and initiatives;
7. To help inform policy development to enhance best practice in credential evaluation;

8. To provide the researcher with a mechanism for reflection on her own practice while facilitating her understanding of credential evaluation at HEIs.

The following paragraphs offer key messages and recommendations derived from the study in light of the preceding aims.

Revisiting the Main Research Questions & Recommendations

The main research questions allowed the researcher to effectively explore the practices of individual credential evaluators at HEIs (Aims 1 and 2). Following analysis of the data, one key message related to each of these questions is now offered, in addition to a brief observation on how the cultivation of a CoP could help to improve credential evaluation practice.

- Role: What do credential evaluators feel their role entails and what are their priorities when assessing foreign qualifications?

> **Credential evaluators' roles and priorities concern student admission with credential evaluation, in itself, not typically recognised as a professional activity**

A CoP has the potential to uncover credential evaluation as a professional practice in its own right; a discrete activity with associated expertise within the broader admissions process. As a professional activity, institutions and credential evaluators themselves would recognise the necessity for adequate time and space to develop practice within the field.

- Values: What values are important to credential evaluators when assessing foreign qualifications?

> **Values considered important in the assessment of foreign qualifications, such as transparency and fairness, are not necessarily evident in practice**

Nurturing a CoP approach to credential evaluation has the potential to advocate and bolster the principles espoused by the LRC. Secondly, interaction with other practitioners can act as a mechanism for unveiling unknown and hidden assumptions so that these might have an opportunity to be tackled, possibly through the development of a Code of Practice Thirdly, a CoP approach can help credential

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evaluators consider, and to become comfortable with, pursuing the delicate balance required between the transparency of recognition decisions on the one hand, and informed judgment on the other hand.

- Processes: What resources, tools and procedures are used in credential evaluation?

Credential evaluation procedures are generally not documented in detail, but UK NARIC is widely used, with colleagues a significant but underutilised resource

The widespread use and acceptance of UK NARIC (albeit not standardised), has the potential to act as a platform for initiating active engagement amongst practitioners. A CoP could help in developing a status for, and common understanding of, the credential evaluator role. In addition, a CoP can offer a means of clarifying the contribution made by UK NARIC as a stakeholder to practice at HEIs. Further, a CoP is a mechanism through which credential evaluators can bid for legitimacy of their experiences amongst practitioner colleagues.

- Policy: What policies impact on the work of a credential evaluator and how?

Internationalisation policy is the dominant and compelling (sometimes invisible) force behind credential evaluation practice

The response to internationalisation, manifested through credential evaluation practice, has the potential to emerge through a CoP approach as boundaries between communities are not static. Likewise, the ability of individual practitioners (particularly academics who often possess more authority than non-academics) to make connections with, and influence relevant developments at institutional, national and international levels may be enhanced through a CoP.

Based on these key messages presented, one principal over-arching message can be derived from this research:

The field of credential evaluation exists as a reality but is in the early stages of development as a professional practice in its own right at Irish HEIs

A summary of the key issues for credential evaluation identified in Chapter Six is now given to demonstrate how the broader aims of this research have been met. A number of recommendations are made based on the issues identified, bearing in mind the principal message from this research. The following recommendations are made with a view towards consciously encouraging CoP approaches locally to support systems and structures already in place relating to credential evaluation as an initial effort to progress practice. Local CoPs then have the potential to influence related CoPs in a more complex social structure to achieve greater coherence in and recognition for credential evaluation practice.

I.   Discrepancies in approach to credential evaluation in higher education institutions

This research exhibits the complexity of credential evaluation. Both academics and non-academics, with diverse roles within different autonomous structures at HEIs, identify to some extent with the work. The difficulties and confusions disclosed through the research stem mainly from a failure to acknowledge credential evaluation as a significant discrete aspect of admission with associated procedures and boundaries.

Recommendation: Credential evaluation must be illuminated within the admissions process by exploring and embedding an understanding of what credential evaluation entails. Only then is there an opportunity for the practice and its requirements to be recognised in its own right.

Recommendation: Staff roles and responsibilities of the different structures within HEIs as they relate to foreign credential evaluation activities need to be discussed and documented insofar as possible. This would allow credential evaluators the potential to construct a professional identity in relation to the work.

Recommendation: Leadership is needed at institutional management level, perhaps organised under the auspices of national representative bodies, to actively encourage collaboration and best practice in credential evaluation, and to identify and provide adequate resources.

II.   Benefits and difficulties in using UK NARIC as an authority

Widespread subscription to the services of UK NARIC suggests at once a need for assistance for credential evaluation and an endorsement of expertise available outside of institutions. However, this research quickly unearths the limitations of this service. UK NARIC is a useful resource, but cannot replace the role of credential evaluators within HEIs. It is because of occurrences like this that credential evaluation begins to emerge as a practice in its own right, though not widely acknowledged as such. Ironically, the prominence of UK NARIC on the credential evaluation scene might help to becloud this problem.

Recommendation: Institutions need to acknowledge that subscription to UK NARIC does not adequately fulfil their obligations as a competent recognition authority, and need to act to recognise and harness the skills and experiences of staff.

Recommendation: Institutions need to consider how the Irish and UK centres (possibly working together more closely through agreed projects), and indeed the wider ENIC-NARIC network, could be leveraged for their benefit as a resource for credential evaluation.

III. Differing levels of professional support within and across higher education institutions

The product of credential evaluation is shown through this research to be an admission decision in most instances, and is the main basis for engagement amongst colleagues for postgraduate access. There is a lot of learning taking place for most credential evaluators in this study through practice. However, such learning tends to be used to satisfy current questions and issues on their desks, rather than taking a strategic or collegial view of credential evaluation practice. The fact that admissions, as opposed to recognition decisions, generally appear to be recorded is evidence that credential evaluation practice is not typically recognised in its own right (see Chapter Four p84). However, expertise in credential evaluation is dispersed widely throughout the HEI, and credential evaluators access support mainly through informal channels.

Recommendation: Institutions need to acknowledge that credential evaluation work is an increasingly integral characteristic of many roles, but not one that should be simply 'stuck on' with no due regard to meaning or implications.

Recommendation: Institutions need to endorse the necessity for professional development opportunities for credential evaluators. Expertise internally and across

HEIs needs to be harnessed for this purpose through a mechanism for supporting dialogue amongst practitioners.

Recommendation: Recognition decisions need to be routinely recorded at HEIs, while statistics on applicants presenting with foreign qualifications need to be available within the institution.

IV.   Understanding credential evaluation practice through connections with existing policies and activities

Credential evaluation has an explicit political dimension which is not openly expressed by most credential evaluators. Indeed, it is argued here that credential evaluation represents a 'missing' element of internationalisation strategies at local and national levels. The majority of credential evaluators are reacting to internationalisation rather than actively seeking to address its impact on practice. Also, the usefulness of recognition tools in the HEI context requires exploration. The benefits of increased collaboration in credential evaluation potentially include efficiency and a prevailing culture of accommodation. Thus, benefits are accrued by credential evaluators themselves, the institution, the broader higher education sector and the country as a whole.

Recommendation: The topical issue of internationalisation needs to be harnessed by institutional management and credential evaluators themselves to stimulate debate and highlight issues around the recognition of foreign qualifications, in order to elevate its status.

Recommendation: There is a necessity for institutional management to take time to actively consider how internal and external policies and initiatives can influence credential evaluation, and proactively encourage the exploitation of existing resources and assistance in practice.

V.   Tensions between the needs of the individual applicant, the credential evaluator and the institution

Tensions between the parties involved in credential evaluation are inevitable, but must be brought to light and subsequently managed. The availability of documentation on processes for credential evaluation, and mechanisms through which parties can seek to overcome these tensions in practice are essential.

Recommendation: It is necessary for institutional websites to provide detail on credential evaluation procedures and the appeals mechanism.

Recommendation: Credential evaluators need to use the principles of the LRC to guide assessments of foreign qualifications, with an understanding that there is no black or white answer. A certain level of ambiguity is tolerated.

All aims of this study were met with the exception of gaining a picture of the consistency of recognition decisions across institutions (Aim 3). Despite goodwill expressed by representatives of a number of institutions to the request for past recognition decisions, the fact that they were unable to furnish the data sought (see Chapter Four p85) is a significant finding in itself, and contributes towards the key messages and recommendations presented.

This Research Study – Contributions, Limitations & Possible Further Research

- Contributions of this Research Study to Credential Evaluation Practice

This research has contributed to developing an in-depth understanding of credential evaluation practice at Irish HEIs. As an everyday activity within HEIs, it is not a standardised picture of practice that one might expect. This research has uncovered foreign credential evaluation as an emerging practice at HEIs. Although these findings are not necessarily generalisable as insights are context specific, this research contributes warrantable findings and recommendations to help bring greater coherence into a field which isn't as organised as it might be. By identifying the dominant issues currently in credential evaluation, the research opens practice to critique with a view towards its improvement. Recommendations are aimed at leading towards more transparency and standardisation in practice.

For credential evaluators, this research will make them more aware of their own identity and perhaps initiate action to identify more strongly with this work. This research also offers credential evaluators an opportunity to understanding more deeply the issues they are involved with, in an effort to enhance their capacity to act fairly when assessing a foreign qualification. In addition, this research hopes to contribute towards making credential evaluation a stronger feature in the professional lives of HEI staff and their stakeholders. The insights offered through this research can help to share a greater understanding of the roles of credential evaluators at Irish HEIs, and to instigate action towards enhancing the capabilities of practitioners for the benefit of all stakeholders.

- Limitations of this Research Study

The researcher now makes reference to a number of limitations of this research which are important to note:

1. The Researcher

The researcher acknowledges in the first instance her ongoing influence on the design, implementation and analysis of the research study, in addition to key messages extracted and recommendations made. Indeed, the role of unknown actors who wrote material subsequently analysed through website reviews is also acknowledged.

2. Theoretical

A number of theoretical stances could have been adopted. For instance, from a justice perspective, one might have taken a critical theory approach such as that of Bourdieu (1977). The attractiveness of a GT approach in the first instance was that it would allow previously unvoiced perspectives to emerge, as discussed in Chapter Four p73.

It is acknowledged that this research was undertaken with no conceptual framework *a priori.* As the analysis proceeded, Wenger's (1998) concept of CoP was explored as a potentially promising approach to the enhancement of credential evaluation practice. In particular, Wenger's learning design framework (*ibid.* p239) was used as a conceptual tool for considering learning in a HEI setting, and the development of a professional identity as a process of social participation.

3. Methodological

The difficulty in gaining agreement from individuals acting as credential evaluators to participate in interviews has already been discussed. While such hesitation can be regarded as a key finding, it places a limitation on this study as theoretical sampling was not available to the researcher. For example, only one academic from a university context participated in an interview. In addition, it is noted that a number of credential evaluators who participated in the study were predominantly involved in undergraduate admission.

The richness of data collected meant that the researcher made choices as to the quotes included in this work. Many avenues for potential exploration were raised, but only key issues could be included to remain within the scope of this thesis.

- Possibilities for Future Research

This research study has suggested many directions for further inquiry.

1. How a more critically-informed understanding of the situated nature of practice might help to identify unacknowledged biases in the professional actions of practitioners emerges from this study as a key area for further research. In this regard, the work of Polanyi (1967) on "tacit knowing" and Bourdieu's investigations of "habitus" (2000) are worth mentioning in particular.

2. An action research study where credential evaluators are brought together to participate in new initiatives and discuss practice would complement the current study, by helping to understand how a CoP approach could work in practice.

3. The professional development needs of credential evaluators require further exploration. This would require research on two fronts – empirical and philosophical-analytical, each one complementing the other.

4. A particularly important aspect for consideration is the perspective(s) of those managing resources within an institution. Are they willing to recognise credential evaluation as an emergent professional field in globalised higher education and allow space and time to develop it?

5. As alluded to briefly in this study, the perspectives of key HEI stakeholders on credential evaluation practice is worthy of detailed attention.

Researcher Reflections

This research represents a long journey of discovery for the researcher. What might appear initially as subtle differences in the meaning of credential evaluation for the researcher, as a practitioner, and colleagues at HEIs, resulted in these parties speaking a somewhat different language to each other. At HEIs, credential evaluation on a practical level is largely viewed through the lens of admission. At QR and the larger ENIC-NARIC network, it is largely viewed through an access lens. This difference in understanding is believed to contribute significantly to the relatively small scale interaction between HEIs and QR. This fact has led to "uncomfortable reflexivity" (Pillow 2003 p193) for the researcher as she didn't understand fully the context within which colleagues in HEIs were working. She was advocating policies and best practice in the absence of colleagues' voices. Bourdieu (2000) points out that one can become so ingrained in their own practice, it becomes the reality:

> The agent engaged in practice knows the world...too well, without objectifying distance, take it for granted, precisely because he is caught up in it, bound up with it; he inhabits it like a garment....he feels at home in the world because the world is also in him, in the form of the habitus (p142).

This research has allowed new and surprising voices to emerge. With the benefit of hindsight, an explanation for the turns and twists in this research study is provided. Although the website reviews gave a hint, the hesitancy of practitioners to agree to interviews was a telling sign of a difficulty with practice. Professionals at HEIs were unsure of their practice in many cases and didn't necessarily want to exhibit this. However, there is common ground on which the researcher and credential evaluators at HEIs can build. The researcher is heartened by a number of participants who took the opportunity afforded by this research to reflect on their own practice. For example, participant 2 was prompted to question if credential evaluation was included in the institution's quality manual. Participant 2B agreed with other focus group participants that competition for postgraduate students represents a barrier for closer cooperation amongst institutions in credential evaluation. However, she was also inspired to separate the general academic recognition of foreign qualifications for access from wider admissions procedures. Meanwhile, participant 5 was prompted to document an overview of the credential evaluation process, and to provide guidelines for the benefit of achieving consistency within the school.

The researcher is privileged to have gained a rich insider perspective on foreign credential evaluation at Irish HEIs. With a renewed sense of understanding as to how she can facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications at HEIs, the researcher's professional work has the potential of being progressively more focused and discerning. A number of specific observations are now possible through reflection by the researcher on her professional practice. In the first instance, the researcher suggests that the LRC definition of recognition (see Chapter One p16) does not find widespread acceptance within HEIs. The word 'access' is problematic in a practical sense for the work of credential evaluators at HEIs. The LRC definition may even be rendered somewhat meaningless in many cases. It is suggested here that a more meaningful definition of recognition for HEIs is that used by Rauhvargers. For Rauhvargers, recognition is defined as

> the assessment of a foreign qualification with a view of finding ways for its application for further studies and/or employment in the host country (2004 p333).

This definition emphasises a proactive 'making it work' approach to credential evaluation which is the main message of the LRC. The researcher wonders if reference to the LRC would add positively to Rauhvarger's definition. The LRC needs to be more alive in the practice of credential evaluation, rather than a set of principles to which credential evaluators refer. In other words, the ideal test of acceptability is where no reference needs to be made to the LRC at all, as the values espoused would be inherent and evident in practice.

Before this research, the formal centralisation of credential evaluation activities within a designated office at each HEI would have been supported by the researcher. Now, the appropriateness of this action is questioned. Credential evaluation as understood by the researcher when embarking on this research is not actually the same as credential evaluation at HEIs. At HEIs, credential evaluation in practice is typically so deeply embedded within the significantly broader activity of admission, encompassing factors such as a potential student's motivation and language skills, that it is unrecognisable. There are different admission mechanisms in place for postgraduate study across HEIs, with differences internally between processes for taught and research programmes being the most visible. Perhaps efforts would be best placed, at least initially, in identifying appropriate means of facilitating and supporting the delicate system already in place, to take advantage of the rich expertise of all practitioners.

Conclusion

While this research adds valuably to the field of credential evaluation practice, it may provoke as many questions as it answers. The study demonstrates the complex nature of the field of credential evaluation at HEIs. Credential evaluators at HEIs are working in a space where personal, local, national and international influences are prevalent. It is important that within HEIs, there is an awareness of daily practice, as credential evaluation and wider recognition activities are carried out in every department and reflect the institution externally. Likewise, the researcher argues that an understanding of practice at HEIs is essential for external stakeholders in fulfilling their missions and objectives. Such stakeholders include ENIC-NARIC centres, quality assurance agencies and higher education representative bodies. Ultimately, the placing of recognition activities in HEIs 'on the agenda' both internally and externally will benefit individual holders of foreign qualifications.

This study has attempted to fill a need for knowledge on current institutional practice as a necessary precursor to inform means for its improvement. It is hoped that this work will prompt discussion within and amongst HEIs and relevant stakeholders on relevant policy developments and implications on credential evaluation practice. Work needs to be centred on increasing the capacity of credential evaluators to critically reflect on their practice so as to instigate action for enhancement. While debate on the concept of substantial difference as per the LRC needs to continue, it is clear that perhaps all of the groundwork needed is actually not yet in place to really impact on practice in a positive way. Hence, it is hoped that this study will encourage more research to complement the work started here.

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