



Executive Summary

A Way Forward for Refugees:

Findings from the WES Pilot Project



When World Education Services launched a pilot project in 2016 to assess the credentials of Syrian refugees to Canada, millions of people had already fled conflicts in nations around the world. They had streamed across borders throughout Europe and the Middle East, creating an unprecedented wave of displaced people in distress. Between November 2015 and February 2016, the Government of Canada settled more than 26,000 Syrians from Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. By June 2017, almost 47,000 had arrived in Canada – to a sustained outpouring of public support.¹ This report describes how World Education Services has begun to help those with post-secondary qualifications take their next steps toward integration.



Download the full report at
globaltalentbridge.org/refugeereport

¹ Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC):
<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/welcome/commitment.asp>

INTRODUCTION

World Education Services (WES) is a non-profit organization with more than 40 years of experience in assessing academic credentials from more than 200 countries and jurisdictions, and 40,000 educational institutions around the world. In that time, WES has provided more than 1.5 million credential evaluation reports to immigrants and international students; its database contains 1,600 grading scales, and specimens of 20,000 different types of credentials and their U.S. or Canadian equivalencies. This allows WES to confidently authenticate virtually any credential from almost any academic institution in the world.

Receipt of verifiable documents directly from the awarding institution is normative credential evaluation practice throughout North America. Accordingly, WES does not accept originals, photocopies, or affidavits from the applicant as part of a standard evaluation. This approach guarantees a high quality assessment based on bona fide documents and a rigorous protocol.

Meeting the requirements for the standard WES assessment can be hard on refugees, who often flee their homes under dangerous circumstances. In many cases, refugees may not have taken all or even *any* of their documents with them. Many discover only later that they cannot obtain their official records, since the educational system or institutions they attended may be disrupted or even closed due to conflict. In Syria, for example, many institutions are not operating; others have been destroyed. Even when open, some institutions may be unresponsive or refuse to issue documents for various reasons. Victims of natural disasters and those seeking asylum from persecution may face similar situations.

Arriving in the United States or Canada without access to proof of their education, such individuals have difficulty moving forward with their careers or fully utilizing their education, skills, and experience.

Through its Global Talent Bridge program, WES works actively in Canada and the United States on issues of integration, employment, and opportunities for career success among skilled immigrants. As the Syrian refugee crisis unfolded throughout 2015, WES began to evaluate how its Global Talent Bridge program could play a role in their resettlement. Gaining recognition for qualifications is critical to immigrants and refugees trying to rebuild their lives and identities in their new country. Furthermore, recognition of refugee credentials is enshrined in international conventions, to which Canada is a signatory, that require displaced people without documentation be given a fair assessment of their qualifications.¹

As the largest provider of credential evaluation services in Canada and a respected non-profit organization in the settlement community, WES realized that it was in a position to play a leadership role in facilitating the recognition of credentials.²

The goal of our effort would be to use documents in a refugee's possession to determine whether they could be corroborated by verified documents in the WES database, and by other information available to the evaluators. Among the questions we sought to answer were:

- Could WES employ an assessment method that would be sufficiently rigorous to serve as a proxy for authentication, thereby giving institutions the confidence they need to build the case for recognition?
- Would a WES assessment add any value to the due diligence and tools institutions could employ, perhaps as a first opinion to be corroborated?

With so many highly skilled refugees on the move around the world, we faced a historical moment that demanded a fresh approach to credential assessment. In early 2016, WES had more than a

1 Lisbon Recognition Convention, 1997, section VII. See also recent guidance from Canadian Information Centre for International Qualifications (CICIC).

hundred applications on hold from Syrians who could not meet its standard document requirements because major Syrian universities were closed or unresponsive. The usual approach to credential evaluation was not working for anyone, least of all refugees. Flexibility and imagination were required. WES was willing to work with institutional partners and revisit its own document policies as other actors revisited theirs. This new approach would have to be credible and scalable. To define it, WES designed and executed a pilot project that WES implemented in the last six months of 2016.

THE WES REFUGEE PILOT PROJECT

WES officially launched its refugee pilot project in July 2016 with the target of accepting 200 applications by the end of that year. Applicants were recruited through trusted referral partners who could screen for program eligibility, explain the purpose of an assessment, and guide applicants through the process. This recruitment process allowed us to reach (even exceed) our target number of applications.

The WES refugee applicant pool reflects the profile of a privately-sponsored refugee to Canada.² Applicants to the pilot project included a fairly diverse group. Men (52 percent) and women (48 percent) were almost equally represented, while applicants' age ranges were diverse: 23 percent were aged 18 to 28, 25 percent were aged 29 to 34, and 42 percent were aged 35 to 50, with 10 percent older than 50 (51-69).

The highest credential attained by a majority of the applicants was a bachelor's degree (57 percent), followed by a graduate degree (19 percent). Those with some post-secondary study (17 percent) and a high school diploma (7 percent) complete the picture in

terms of educational attainment among participants. By far the largest fields of study were engineering and computer/information technology (27 percent), and English language and literature (26 percent).

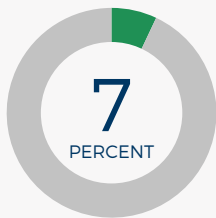
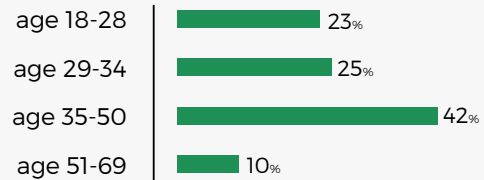
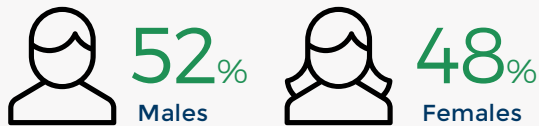
We learned more about applicants to the pilot project from a post-assessment applicant survey. For example, WES learned that the majority of those surveyed (68 percent) had been in Canada one to two years. Some 38 percent were unemployed. About 40 percent were working full-time: 16 percent in their original profession; 18 percent in a "new profession" (which might indicate a survival job or something similar to their original profession); 6 percent in their first-ever job.

The pilot sought to test methods of reconstructing a credential in cases where a full transcript was not available. It also sought to determine the utility of the credential assessment - whether the assessment were based on non-verified transcripts or the credential had been "reconstructed" from partial documents - both from the perspective of the applicant, and from the perspective of the referring agencies and receiving institutions.

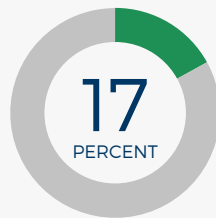
Before the pilot, WES determined that an assessment could be done if at least one credible (officially-issued) document was in the applicant's possession. On the basis of this document, WES was able to examine corroborative evidence in its extensive archives, which include a large number of documents from Syrian institutions. In most cases, examiners were able to outline the program of studies an applicant had followed. Using this methodology, examiners could, in cases where a full transcript was unavailable, establish a list of courses the individual had likely taken. Although no grades could be assessed or assigned, an applicant could potentially be granted course credit or advanced standing on the basis of this process. Alternately, applicants might, based on the reconstructed course syllabus and claimed competencies, get a chance to take a challenge exam which would establish their qualifications.

² Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), 2016. These refugees tend to be older, better educated, speak English or French and would therefore benefit from recognition of post-secondary credentials to resume their careers.

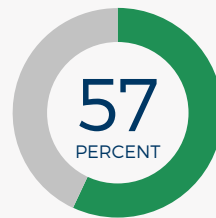
Participants



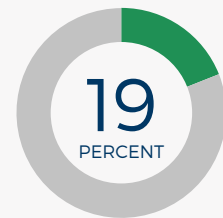
High school diploma



Some post-secondary study



Bachelor's degree



Graduate degree

Project Principles



A WES alternative process will be based on credible evidence of educational achievement and professional standing in the applicant's possession only when official documents cannot be obtained.



WES will use the information and documentation provided by the applicant, in combination with its research and experience with credentials issued by Syrian educational institutions, to corroborate the applicant's claimed academic history, and "reconstruct" the credential where possible, if documentation is missing.



WES will advise on the Canadian equivalency of the Syrian credentials and include contextual information on the Syrian education system to assist in interpreting the applicant's background.



To validate the approach, WES will issue assessments to a select number of Syrian refugees and conduct a thorough evaluation.



WES will advocate for the recognition of the refugee's credentials based on the WES assessment.

This report analyzes the sample of the 205 individuals who applied before December 31, 2016. Using surveys and interviews of refugee participants and institutional stakeholders, the evaluation phase of the pilot program focused on whether the policies, program design, and implementation process supported the intended outcome: serving skilled refugees without recourse to their official documents with an assessment report that could be useful to them.

With four decades of precedent cases in the database, trained evaluators with language and country expertise, and technical and research capacity to reliably identify fraudulent documents, WES was prepared to stand by the validity of its findings with a high level of confidence. What was less certain was whether institutions could and would utilize such a report once it was in circulation, a critical factor in determining if WES should expand the program.

PROJECT DESIGN

Traditionally, WES clients apply online for an assessment of their credentials. The pilot, instead, was administered in community-based, refugee-serving agencies, allowing WES to provide access to its service in familiar and trusted environments. For the applicant, WES created a potentially seamless pipeline from the caseworker, to WES, and then to a specified recipient (i.e., college, university, or regulator). In the event that the refugee was not sure of their plans at the time of application, WES established a loop back to the referral partner by sending the assessment report to the caseworker and the applicant simultaneously. This process provided caseworkers an opportunity for further discussion with their clients about how to use their foreign education and experience to move forward in their careers. It also allowed WES to thoroughly test its model before determining whether to bring this type of refugee service to scale.

Six community agencies in Ontario and one in Alberta were designated as referral partners. In addition, two

regulatory bodies (one each in Ontario and Alberta) asked to engage with the project as referral partners and sent their applicants directly to WES. While this was not in the original design of the pilot, WES will consider this model going forward.

The WES Global Talent Bridge program provided training and support to the referring agencies to facilitate the prescreening and application processes. This included instruction on how to apply program eligibility criteria and document requirements, explain the purpose of credential assessment to clients, and submit supporting documentation. The partners provided information about the pilot, application assistance, and case management to their refugee clients. No compensation was made to agencies for their participation, and no fees were charged to refugees.

Applicants were eligible for the alternative process if they met the following criteria. Eligible applicants were:

- either a refugee or in a “refugee-like” situation
- educated in Syria, completed at least grade 10³
- unable to meet usual WES document requirements for Syria
- in possession of at least one piece of credible evidence of academic study

Credible evidence of academic study could include, for example, a complete or partial transcript or degree certificate, license or registration in a licensed occupation, official student card, or letter of professional appointment. Originals, photocopies, and electronic copies of these documents were acceptable in the original language.

3 If an individual had studied both in Syria and a country that could be processed in the standard way, a hybrid protocol was adopted, depending upon which was the higher degree.

The assessment reports issued to applicants employed a format based on the standard WES evaluation. However, the reports for refugee applicants were distinctly marked as a “WES Alternative Credential Assessment.” In each report, WES advised on the nature of the credential evaluated and its equivalency in Canada, indicating what evidence and methods were used to complete the assessment. In addition, WES provided a course analysis and access to the information and documents submitted (with English translation) to facilitate corroboration and further assessment. The report also included contextual information on the educational system in Syria to assist in interpreting results, as well as an explanation of WES methodology, and best practices in refugee credential recognition.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The program evaluation looked carefully at the intake and referral process for applicants, including the training, prescreening and application processes, client outreach and partner support; the assessment process, including assessment methodology and processing times; and the perceived validity and utility of the assessment report for both institutions and applicants.

Institutions and stakeholders were surveyed (n=45, 67 percent response rate), and 21 qualitative interviews were conducted with individuals from educational institutions, regulatory bodies, and employers. Refugee applicants were also surveyed several months after receiving their report (n=50, 62 percent response rate) and interviewed to learn as much as we could about their experience with the assessment report, and about their aspirations and needs. WES also interviewed 11 of the 12 applicants who did not complete the process to learn what challenges they faced.

The extent and depth of the program evaluation gives WES a high level of confidence in its findings. Careful analysis of the delays and challenges, as

well as the successes, point to ways to improve and streamline services, strengthen the training and resources given to referral partners, and develop new tools and resources so that applicants can advocate for themselves and move forward to contribute their talent to Canadian society.

KEY INSIGHTS

The program was an overall success, with some important lessons learned.

- All documents were scrutinized according to normal WES practices and quality assurance standards, and no evidence was found of fraudulent documents.
- All of the files accompanied by at least one credible piece of evidence (95 percent of applicants) were successfully assessed.
- 72 percent of applicants submitted full transcripts. These could be easily assessed using standard WES processes.
- The remaining credentials (28 percent) required ‘reconstruction’ of at least part of the credential because of missing or incomplete documentation.
- Screening protocols were effective in referring eligible candidates and did not appear burdensome to either applicants or partners; however, more training of partners is needed to convey the purpose of a credential assessment and support discussion of how to use the results.
- Given the pilot nature of the program, a significant amount of time was devoted to reaching out to clients in cases where documents were missing or incomplete, which led to longer than anticipated processing times. This process nonetheless afforded WES an opportunity to learn how to best communicate its requirements, and to evaluate the effectiveness of its pre-screening and quality assurance protocols.

- The basic WES (document) assessment may be sufficient for most purposes. A course and grade assessment may only be needed by those actively pursuing further education or licensing.

There is confidence in the approach that WES used to support credential recognition.

- Those interviewed expressed the belief that WES' reputation for rigor and quality enhanced the credibility of the assessment report. Seventy-three percent of stakeholders who were surveyed after seeing a sample report indicated that the methods used gave them confidence in the results.
- Almost half of the stakeholders surveyed indicated their organization would use or consider using the assessment reports for recognition. Only one would not, because the organization has their own evaluators. The remainder were "not sure."
- Organizations that recognize foreign credentials expressed universal appreciation for the service provided.
 - Those organizations which typically shoulder the risks in accepting non-verifiable documents felt that the WES assessment was helping to mitigate their risks.
 - At least half of the organizations interviewed had, or were formulating, policies of their own to assess the credentials of refugees.
 - For organizations that do not conduct their own evaluations, the WES assessment provides a gateway to an orderly process.
 - Some have already begun to include the new WES assessment as an element in their policies. (One organization admitted to having no plan at the time of the pilot, and was grateful to WES for providing a solution.)
 - As more of these assessment reports are in circulation, WES will continue to study to

what degree the assessment is being used by institutions to recognize foreign credentials.

The assessment report is credible and useful, despite its limitations.

- Over 75 percent of applicants surveyed 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that the WES report will help them on their educational and career path in Canada.
- Referral partners concurred that engaging community agencies to facilitate credential assessment provides a platform of support for their refugee clients to put their educational qualifications to use.
- Refugees were anxious to receive their assessments and grateful when they did. These comments speak for themselves:

"Thank you for believing the best can be attained and offered to refugees to Canada, as it takes a creative and original will for all this to be achieved and done! I am beyond grateful that there are people somewhere out there that have taken my credentials into consideration."

"With this report I can now fight for myself."

- Referral partners expressed similar sentiments:
 - "This report gave my clients back their dignity. The sooner you can deliver hope, the better. An early sign that your foreign education has value is a priceless gift when everything else has been taken from you"*
- Forty-eight percent of applicants surveyed reported that they were ready to use the assessment to advance their careers. In interviews it became clear that receiving the assessment had stimulated them to think about their future in a positive way.
- Some clients have successfully used the WES assessment to apply for higher education, licensing, and employment.



“

Now I have something in my hand that I can use to fight for myself. I think it's enough for me now.”

- WES Applicant

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

- WES Partner



- Applicants need more information at the time of application to understand the limitations of the alternative assessment, and how it can be used.

There is support for expanding the program and services to refugees. A frequent recommendation among stakeholders was that WES extend the service beyond Syrians to refugees from other countries and victims of natural disaster. This commentary indicates to WES that this is a service that is needed and will be valued by the community.

Caseworkers – all of whom received a copy of the report at the same time as the applicant – did not always take the opportunity to debrief with their clients and suggest next steps to utilize their foreign education. When interviewed, agency heads indicated that this is an expectation that can be built in to an expanded program with additional training and resources.

CONCLUSIONS

The WES refugee pilot project tested a new methodology, a new service model, and the utility of a new kind of WES report for both individuals and referral agencies. The pilot achieved success on all fronts, thanks to its referral partners who implemented the program, the refugee clients who participated, and the support of stakeholders who helped to evaluate the program.

There is no doubt that there are risks inherent in recognizing partial credentials, and that working with non-verifiable documents does not comply with best practices that WES has employed and championed for years. The WES Alternative Credential Assessment will be a non-starter in professions and institutions that cannot be flexible with their entry requirements for whatever reason(s). At the same time, many refugees may find the WES Alternative Credential Assessment a valid and credible tool for exploring their options and gaining recognition of qualifications. WES cannot ignore the findings that the assessment reports

conveyed hope, empowerment and dignity, or that they sparked the imagination and resolve of many refugees to take action.

The innovation and added value in this pilot was directly related to the claim that WES could reconstruct credentials from partial documentation, as well as validate full transcripts. The proven ability to achieve both goals addresses a significant barrier for refugees who cannot access proof of their qualifications. WES has applied its extensive resources and expertise to developing a methodology that can sustain the utmost scrutiny and be corroborated by recognition bodies using additional assessment methodologies and vetting procedures.

Until the utility of the WES Alternative Credential Assessment is further documented, there are risks of unmet and unmanaged expectations among refugees and others. In the interim, WES and other community members focused on refugee integration must provide prompt and early intervention. Our Global Talent Bridge work with immigrants has taught us that, even when full documentation of training is in place, it takes sometimes years to regain momentum in one's career.

That said, WES remains optimistic about the prospects for more rapid integration of refugees and others. So much is now known about the value of directing individuals to bridging programs, alternate careers, industry-recognized certificates, skills-related employment, internships, and further education. These are strategies that need to be offered to refugees so they can use their qualifications to succeed. The credential assessment is but a tool, albeit an important one to help refugees and other newly arrived immigrants move toward full integration and meaningful employment.

The findings of the refugee pilot project have helped WES to renew its commitment and refine its approach to the service it offers to refugees and other displaced persons. Going forward, WES will:

Enhance and extend its services. This includes meeting standards for a high quality product, timely service, customer support, partner training, and client outreach.

- Continue to promote its assessment methods and knowledge resources by encouraging institutions to review and update their recognition policies and procedures.
- Ensure the WES Global Talent Bridge program extends refugee services to all regions of Canada by developing agreements with additional agencies and organizations that have the capacity to provide high quality referral and follow-up services to refugee clients.
- Develop its policy regarding non-verifiable documentation with not only refugees in mind, but also anyone who cannot retrieve their academic documents due to circumstances beyond their control, such as asylees and victims of natural disaster. This will depend upon assessing the damage to a country's academic infrastructure as well as WES's own knowledge of global educational systems.
- Study the feasibility of implementing a similar program in the United States.
- Train partners and provide resources that support not only a bridge to credential assessment, but pathways to recognition and integration.
- Continue to advocate for the utility and validity of its approach to assessing non-verifiable documents, and be receptive to feedback from its community and institutional partners to improve its services.

These activities and the effort needed to bring this program to scale will require some time. In the meantime, WES will continue to track the experience of its refugee applicants in accessing professional and educational opportunities using the WES Alternative Credential Assessment report, and will report these subsequent findings in due course.



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World Education Services is a non-profit organization whose mission is to foster the integration of internationally educated persons into academic and professional settings.

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