

Recommendation for the assessment of foreign higher education entrance qualifications

The Federal Ministry of Women, Science and Research in its function as ENIC NARIC AUSTRIA recommends to proceed according to the following considerations when assessing the general university entrance qualification (*allgemeine Universitätsreife*) with foreign qualifications (except certificates equivalent to Austrian secondary-school leaving certificates by agreement under international law):

1. Remark

The amendment F. L. G. No 93/2021 restructured the provisions on the general university entrance qualification to be applied from the academic year 2022/23 onwards pursuant to § 64 para 2 Universities Act 2002 – UG (*Universitätsgesetz 2002 – UG*) in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention (Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region).¹

When assessing foreign qualifications, henceforth the existence of equivalence with an Austrian secondary-school leaving certificate that is no longer to be examined, but whether there are significant differences with regard to learning outcomes. The criteria now specified in § 64 para 2 subparas 1 to 3 UG (system in the country of issue, duration of schooling, content of school education) are to be taken into account in this examination. Thus, the practice recommended by the Federal Ministry of Women, Science and Research (ENIC NARIC AUSTRIA) is also embodied in study law in order to make admission decisions more uniform and predictable.²

This means that the described examination procedure is to be applied in future to all foreign qualifications, i.e. also to those that were not issued by a party to the Lisbon Recognition Convention. However, the reversal of the burden of proof provided for in the Convention remains – at least until the Global Convention enters into force in Austria – limited to qualifications of the parties to the Convention.

¹ In the course of the amendment, § 52b para 2 of the *Hochschulgesetz 2005 – HG* was amended accordingly. Therefore, following statements also apply to University colleges of teacher education (*Pädagogische Hochschulen*).

² Against this background, the following considerations can also be applied *mutatis mutandis* to the assessment of the general university entrance qualification pursuant to § 4 para 5 no 3 of the University of Applied Sciences Studies Act (*Fachhochschulgesetz – FHG*).

The new regulation also facilitates recourse to authentic sources as well as to the extensive international literature on fair recognition. In this context, reference should be made above all to the accompanying documents to the Lisbon Recognition Convention as well as to the "[The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions](#)", which is designed to support the responsible persons at higher education institutions to practice fair recognition in accordance with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. In the following, the symbol ➤ is used to refer to further information in the "The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions".

2. Legal text and terminology

2.1 Legal text³

The general university entrance qualification may also be established by proof of a foreign qualification if there are no substantial differences to the general university entrance qualification according to para 1 subpara 1. Indications of the absence of a substantial difference are particularly present if

- 1. the qualification gives access to all sectors of higher education institutions in the country of issue,*
- 2. the duration of schooling is at least twelve years and*
- 3. general educational contents prevail; this may be established by proof of the successful completion of six general education subjects (two languages, mathematics, one natural sciences subject, one humanities subject as well as another general education subject) at secondary level II.*

If the duration of schooling under subpara 2 is only eleven years, or if educational contents under subpara 3 should be missing, the rectorate may prescribe no more than a total of four supplementary examinations to be taken prior to admission.

2.2 Concept of „foreign qualification“

The new provision replicates one of the basic principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention: "Foreign qualifications shall be recognized unless there is a substantial difference between the foreign qualification to be recognized and the corresponding qualification of the host country."

The term "foreign qualification" was adopted from the Lisbon Recognition Convention in the new provision in order to clarify that all qualifications that open up access to higher education in the country of issue can formally be considered as proof of general university entrance qualification in Austria. The main reason for this were cases in which a secondary-

³ Unofficial translation adapted to the current legal situation.

school leaving certificate in conjunction with a national university entrance examination is required in the issuing state for university entrance (e.g. Greece, Türkiye).

Foreign qualifications that allow access to higher education in the country of issue and do not differ significantly from Austrian secondary-school leaving certificates or whose deficits can be compensated for with a total of up to four supplementary examinations are to be regarded as secondary-school leaving certificates within the meaning of Austrian study law.

- See also chapter [2. The five elements of a qualification](#)

2.3 Concept of "substantial difference"

The law now specifies three criteria for foreign qualifications, which are to be taken into account when examining a substantial difference. In this respect, § 64 para 2 subpara 1 to 3 UG should be understood as a guideline and are intended to support the responsible persons at higher education institutions in making quick, uniform and fair admission decisions. If a foreign qualification meets all three criteria, experience shows that there are no significant differences between the foreign qualification and an Austrian secondary-school leaving certificate. This is why an examination based on subpara 1 to 3 – as a kind of "checklist" – generally leads to less administrative work.

However, this does not mean that the examination of substantial differences is limited to the criteria explicitly listed in the law. Rather, the new regulation provides a framework for a more detailed review of learning outcomes if necessary (see point 3.4).

- See also chapter [9. Substantial and non-substantial differences](#)

3. FAQs for examining substantial differences

The section below answers frequently asked questions related to the assessment of general university entrance qualifications for foreign qualifications under the new legal situation. This section is regularly updated and expanded.

3.1 Access to higher education in the country of issue (§ 64 para 2 subpara 1 UG)

- **What role does the subject-relatedness of foreign secondary school leaving certificates play, i.e. if a foreign secondary-school leaving certificate only gives access to certain fields of study in the country of issue?**

It is important to distinguish between institutional and subject-related limitations on access to higher education: § 64 para 2 subpara 1 UG only refers to institutional limitations by stipulating that foreign qualifications are to be regarded as secondary-school leaving certificates within the meaning of Austrian study law if they give access to all sectors of

higher education (at least to universities) in the country of issue. The subject-relatedness, on the other hand, concerns the subject-related limitation of access to higher education. While e.g. in the German education system there is a qualification that opens access to higher education only for certain fields of study (*Zeugnis der fachgebundenen Hochschulreife*), such a distinction is unknown to Austrian study law. We tend to consider the general university entrance qualification formally fulfilled in the case of foreign qualifications that give subject-restricted access to higher education in the country of issue. However, if deficits in the content of such certificates are identified (e.g. lack of general educational content according to § 64 para 2 subpara 3 UG), these can be compensated for with up to four supplementary examinations.

- **Is there a country overview that lists qualifications that provide access to all sectors of higher education in the issuing country?**

The information pages of the Dutch ENIC NARIC ([NUFFIC – Education Systems](#)) and the Australian government ([CEP – Country Education Profiles](#); subject to a fee) provide diagrams of the education system in the respective country overview, showing the requirements for university access in the country of issue. In addition, the databases "[Qualifications Assessment Tool](#)" of the Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR) and "[Kwalifikator](#)" of the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA) provide also information from various countries.

- **In which countries is a university entrance exam an indispensable component for university entrance?**

There is no general answer to this question. One indicator for a university *entrance* examination is that it is held nationwide and is generally required for university entrance in the issuing state (e.g. Panhellenic examinations in Greece). Such qualifications have also to be taken into account in the examination for the general university entrance qualification (*allgemeine Universitätsreife*) in Austria. In contrast, university *admission* examinations are not relevant (e.g. at individual universities, for specific study programmes).

- **Is admission with the requirement of supplementary examinations possible if a foreign qualification does not give access to all sectors of higher education institutions in the country of issue?**

No. Such qualifications are not to be regarded as secondary-school leaving certificates in the meaning of Austrian study law, which is why supplementary examinations are not foreseen (e.g. *Berufsmaturität* certificate from Switzerland, *Fachhochschulreife* certificate from Germany). In these cases, the general university entrance qualification in Austria has to be fulfilled in another way, e.g. by completing bridging programmes in the issuing country (e.g. *Passerelle* in Switzerland) or by passing an Austrian *Externistenreifeprüfung*.

3.2 Duration of schooling (§ 64 para 2 subpara 2 UG)

- **Is admission with the requirement of supplementary examinations possible if the duration of schooling underlying the foreign qualification is only ten years?**

No. In accordance with international standards and guidelines, it is now explicitly stipulated by law that secondary-school leaving certificates have to be based on a minimum period of schooling of twelve years. Foreign qualifications acquired after ten (or fewer) years of schooling are not to be regarded as secondary-school leaving certificates within the meaning of Austrian study law due to substantial differences. This means that in these cases the general university entrance qualification cannot be attained by supplementary examinations either.

3.3 General educational contents (§ 64 para 2 subpara 3 UG)

- **According to § 64 para 2 subpara 3 UG, the predominance of general education content in the upper secondary level has to be examined when assessing foreign secondary-school leaving certificates. Does this mean that applicants always have to submit all annual reports of secondary level II?**

No. The submission of the relevant annual reports is only recommended if there are doubts about the existence of general education contents, for example because these are not (sufficiently) evident from the school leaving certificate.

- **How can the predominance of general education content be examined?**

It should be further examined whether the educational contents on which a foreign secondary school leaving certificate is based are comparable to those according to the curricula of Austrian AHS and BHS. The educational content can be considered sufficient if at least the subjects mentioned in § 64 para 2 subpara 3 UG have been successfully completed at secondary level II. Deficits in single subjects can be compensated by means of supplementary examinations (e.g. *Externistenreifeprüfung* from the subject mathematics). The country recommendations published by ENIC NARIC AUSTRIA | Credential Evaluation (available on www.oead.at) remain valid until.

- **Is admission possible even if one of the six listed general education subjects in § 64 para 2 subpara 3 UG cannot be proven?**

Yes. The examination of general education content is not limited to the subjects listed in § 64 para 2 no 3 UG. Generally, admission is possible even if the completion of all general education subjects in upper secondary level II cannot be proved. Deficits can be compensated with up to four supplementary examinations.

- **Do mandatory supplementary exams have to be imposed if all six listed general education subjects in § 64 para 2 subpara 3 UG cannot be proven?**

No. If general educational content is missing, the rectorate can prescribe supplementary examinations. However, the foreign secondary-school leaving certificate has to be considered as a whole, as has been the practice up to now. In cases where no supplementary examinations were imposed in the past, for example because the grading was taken into account (beyond the pass mark) or because deficits in one subject were balanced by a predominance in another subject, there is still no need to impose supplementary examinations (e.g. school-leaving certificates from African countries).

3.4 Learning outcomes (§ 64 para 2 S 1)

- **Can admission be denied if the general education content prevails but the foreign qualification still has significant deficits compared to an Austrian secondary-school leaving certificate?**

Yes. The new legal provision generally leads to a less administrative work due to the examination on the basis of § 64 para 2 subparas 1 to 3 UG, but at the same time provides a framework for a more detailed examination of learning outcomes when needed: Foreign qualifications which formally fulfill subparas 1 to 3 may nevertheless show an (other) substantial difference to an Austrian secondary-school leaving certificate. This applies, for example, to school-leaving certificates whose learning outcomes are known or obviously do not come close to those of an Austrian school-leaving examination (e.g. school-leaving certificates from Afghanistan or Bangladesh). In such cases, admission can still be denied if deficits cannot be compensated for with a total of up to four supplementary examinations.

- **Do the grades or quotas shown on the secondary-school leaving certificate remain relevant when examining the general university entrance qualification?**

Yes. As in the past, grades can be included in the overall assessment, especially in the case of foreign qualifications from educational systems that stipulate minimum passing grades that differ from the Austrian grading system (e.g. secondary-school leaving certificates from Pakistan). Foreign qualifications that formally fulfill § 64 para 2 subpara 1 to 3 UG, but whose overall grade is below 50%, are not to be considered as secondary-school leaving certificates in the meaning of Austrian study law. This means that admission is also not possible under the condition of supplementary examinations. If, on the other hand, the pass rate in single general education subjects falls below 50%, there is a substantial difference in the learning outcomes, which can be compensated for by the requirement of a total of up to four supplementary examinations.

4. Remarks on the requirement of supplementary examinations

The new provision provides a framework for the requirement of supplementary examinations by naming deficits of foreign secondary-school leaving certificates that can

typically be compensated for by supplementary examinations (eleven-year duration of schooling, lack of general education content) and setting an absolute maximum limit for the amount of supplementary examinations.

For the decision on how many supplementary examinations should be imposed, it is recommended to refer to the country recommendations published by ENIC NARIC AUSTRIA | Credential Evaluation (available on www.oead.at) as well as to the assessment suggestions in Anabin (conversion key: one academic year \cong two supplementary examinations).

Examinations and academic achievements already completed abroad should be taken into account when supplementary examinations are imposed (e.g. *Feststellungsprüfungen* from Germany).

For the decision on which supplementary examinations should be imposed, the general education subjects mentioned in § 64 para 2 subpara 3 UG may be considered. Usually, the compulsory subjects of the Austrian Centralised Matura (*Zentralmatura*), namely German, mathematics, living foreign language are to be included. Furthermore, a certain subject orientation towards the planned study programme may also be useful.

Country-specific decision practice, which has so far been successful, should be maintained. However, it should be noted that according to the new legal situation, a maximum of four supplementary examinations can be imposed. If the schooling on which the foreign school leaving certificate is based is only eleven years, for example, the twelfth school year can be compensated for by up to four supplementary examinations. If there is also a lack of educational content, the limited scope for supplementary examinations must also be taken into account. If these cannot be compensated with further supplementary examinations, the foreign qualification will not be considered as a secondary-school leaving certificate in the meaning of Austrian study law due to substantial differences.