



A Way Forward for Refugees:

Findings from the WES Pilot Project



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Denise Jillions



Project Lead

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INTRODUCTION

By July of 2016, when World Education Services (WES) launched its pilot project to assess the credentials of Syrian refugees to Canada, millions of people had fled conflict in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Africa. They had streamed across the borders of Europe and the Middle East, creating an unprecedented wave of displaced people in distress. UNHCR estimates that today there are more than 66 million refugees, asylees, and displaced people on the move, more than any time since the Second World War.¹

Canada, where there is a robust infrastructure of settlement services and a long tradition of welcoming refugees, mobilized to respond to the crisis in an impressive way. Between November 2015 and February 2016, the Canadian government settled more than 26,000 Syrians who had fled to Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. By June 2017, almost 47,000 had been settled in Canada – with a sustained outpouring of public support.² Among this wave of immigrants to Canada were many highly educated individuals who were unable to access official documents from their educational institutions, and who therefore would face difficulty having their qualifications recognized in their new country. Over 40 percent of them arrived in Ontario; about half of those settled in Toronto, where WES has had its Canadian office since 2000.

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. 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 and assess 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 WES evaluation. This approach guarantees a high quality assessment based on bona fide documents and a rigorous protocol.

Meeting the requirements for a 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 at all; 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 a similar situation.

Arriving in the United States or Canada without access to proof of their education, such individuals have difficulty moving forward with their careers 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. It is well-documented that gaining recognition for international qualifications is critical to immigrants and refugees trying to rebuild their lives and identity in their new host countries. New arrivals and long-term residents alike are often employed well below their levels of qualification, despite the fact that many are highly educated. Recognition of academic credentials is the springboard for these individuals to pursue suitable employment, further education, and licensing in

1 UNHCR: <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

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

By June
2017, almost
47,000 Syrian
refugees had
been settled
in Canada.



regulated professions. When a refugee or immigrant utilizes foreign education, training, and experience, both the individual and the community benefit.

Finally, despite the document challenges, recognition of refugee credentials is enshrined in international conventions. Specifically, the Lisbon Recognition Convention, to which Canada is a signatory, requires that displaced people without documentation are given a fair assessment of their qualifications.³

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

As a first step, WES researched international practices in refugee credential assessment and recognition, and released its findings in a report, *Recognizing Refugee Credentials: Practical Tips for Credential Assessment*.⁴ The report covers approaches WES found in Canada, Europe, and the United States, and articulates some promising practices with regard to assessing and recognizing refugee credentials.



Download the report:
<http://bit.ly/2BqBTFF>

In May 2016, WES convened its key constituents and stakeholders in Toronto to share these findings and to explore the degree of support among academic and regulatory institutions for a WES assessment of documents that could not be authenticated. The concern heard loud and clear was that this wave of refugees – many of them highly-educated – would be knocking on their doors in the next few years, seeking admission to higher education and regulated professions.

WES had some questions to consider:

- How could academic and professional communities come to a consensus regarding the handling of documents that cannot be authenticated?
- A WES evaluation relies on an authentication process that requires receiving academic documents directly from issuing institutions. Yet, many refugees have in their possession some credible evidence of academic study even if such documents cannot be verified. Could an assessment by WES, with its extensive expertise and robust database, be a part of a layered strategy to validate the applicant's claims?
- What methods would be sufficiently rigorous to give WES' institutional partners the confidence they need to build the case for recognition? Would a WES assessment add any value to the due diligence and tools institutions can employ, perhaps as a "first opinion" to be corroborated?

Assessing documents in the applicants' possession seemed an approach worth testing in that historical moment, as WES considered the more than one hundred applications from Syrians who could not meet its document requirements because major Syrian universities were unresponsive to inquiries. The usual approach was not working for anyone, least of all refugees. Flexibility and imagination were required, and WES was willing to share the risks with institutional partners by revisiting its own document policies as other actors revisited theirs.

3 Lisbon Recognition Convention, 1997, Article VII. See also "Assessing the Qualifications of Refugees: Best Practices and Guidelines", (CICIC, 2017) for the latest guidance from the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC) to Canadian organizations that assess refugee qualifications.
https://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/376/Best_Practices_and_Guidelines.pdf

4 <http://knowledge.wes.org/wes-research-report-recognizing-refugee-credentials.html>

THE WES REFUGEE PILOT PROJECT

WES launched its refugee pilot project in July 2016 with the target of accepting 200 applications by the end of that year. This goal was achieved and, in fact, surpassed without publicizing the program. WES accepted additional applicants until the project was paused in May 2017 to undertake program evaluation. This report analyzes the sample of the first 205 individuals who applied before December 31, 2016, 95 percent of whom received a WES Alternative Credential Assessment of their academic qualifications (as it was known in the pilot phase).

As stated previously, because many refugees are unable to obtain verifiable documents, the assessment of their qualifications calls for a different approach than is normally used by WES. The pilot

project was designed to test many assumptions, as well as new methods, policies, and a new model of service delivery. To validate its approach, WES issued credential evaluation reports to a select number of Syrian refugees and conducted a thorough evaluation of the pilot program itself. WES recruited applicants by working through trusted referral partners who could screen participants for program eligibility, explain the purpose of an assessment, and guide them through the process. Beyond testing assumptions and methods, WES also hoped to learn more about its refugee applicants, including their aspirations, intentions, and needs related to using the assessment to achieve their goals.

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.

PROJECT DESIGN

Several considerations were critical to the design of the pilot project. First, because some Syrian schools are open and functioning, WES needed criteria for determining which applicants could legitimately access this “alternative” service, and which applicants should receive the standard WES evaluation. (WES continues to receive documents from the Syrian Ministry of Education, and many Syrian institutions are still functioning.) Furthermore, WES needed to ensure that only refugees were being served, and not others who might simply wish to circumvent its standard document requirements. This led WES to propose eligibility criteria and a new service delivery model that engaged trusted referral partners. These partners would prescreen applicants for admission to the pilot program and support them through the process.

Second, WES has built its reputation by adhering to the strictest document practices, thereby guaranteeing the authenticity of documents it assesses.⁵ Although WES would not be the first or only credential evaluation service in Canada to assess non-verified documents, it needed to demonstrate high quality and transparency to ensure the credibility of the assessment report. In being willing to examine documents in the applicant’s possession when official documents could not be obtained, WES was relying on its expertise to detect fraudulent documents. Furthermore, this project involved implementing a new intake process that depended on partners. It also involved serving a population that was vulnerable and often in the media. These elements entailed risks to the WES reputation. It was thus critical that the pilot project meet the same quality assurance standards as WES’ normal processes.⁶

Finally, WES needed to test its methodology for “reconstructing” a credential where a full transcript was not available, in some cases relying on originals, photocopies, or electronic images of a range of evidence of professional and academic accomplishments. WES determined that it could work with at least one credible (officially-issued) document in the applicant’s possession, examine corroborative evidence in its database, and, in most cases, outline the program of studies the individual likely pursued. Based on that outline, WES could then provide the list of courses that an applicant had completed. Although there would be no grades to assess, an individual might get course credit or advanced standing on this basis. Alternately, applicants might get a chance to take a challenge exam based on the course syllabus and their claimed competencies.

In the 1970s, WES had already tested this methodology during a period of increased migration by educated immigrants and refugees from the (former) Soviet Union and Vietnam. Now, with 40 years of precedent cases in the database, a team of trained evaluators with language and country-specific expertise, and technical and research capacity to quickly identify fraudulent documents, WES was prepared to stand by the validity of its assessment with a high level of confidence. What was less certain was whether institutions could and would utilize such an assessment report once it was in circulation. WES would need to be sure of its utility to justify expanding the program.

New Service Delivery Model

Traditionally, WES clients apply online for an assessment of their credentials. For the pilot, however, the project was administered in community-based, refugee-serving agencies, allowing WES to embed its service in familiar and trusted environments. This approach also allowed WES to test a model that could bring refugee services to scale. For the applicant, WES created a potentially seamless pipeline from the caseworker, to WES, and then to a specified recipient (i.e., college, university, employer, or regulator). In the event that the refugee

5 Best Practices: Strategies and Processes to Obtain Authentic International Education Credentials <http://knowledge.wes.org/WES-Training-Best-Practices.html>

6 This includes the right to not process an application if fraud is detected or suspected.

was not sure of their plans at the time of application, WES established a loop back to the referral partner by sending the credential evaluation report to the caseworker and the applicant simultaneously. The duplicate report provided caseworkers with an opportunity for further discussion with refugees about how to use their foreign education and experience to move forward in their careers.

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.

Through its Global Talent Bridge program, WES provided the training and support to the referring agencies. The partners provided information about the pilot, application assistance, and case management to their clients. No compensation was made to agencies for their participation, and no fees were charged to refugees during the pilot.

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

- a refugee or in a “refugee-like” situation
- educated in Syria, completed at least grade 10⁷
- unable to meet usual WES document requirements for Syria
- had at least one piece of credible evidence of academic study

As indicated previously, WES agreed to examine any applications accompanied by at least one piece of credible evidence of academic study. This evidence could include, for example, a complete or partial

transcript or degree certificate, license or registration in a licensed occupation; an official student card; or a letter of professional appointment. Originals, photocopies, and electronic copies were acceptable if in the original language.

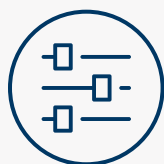
The assessment report format was based on the standard WES evaluation but presented so as to distinguish it as an “alternative” to that evaluation. In the assessment report, WES advised on the nature of the credential and its equivalency in Canada, indicating what evidence and methods were used to complete 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 was supplemented by contextual information on the educational system in Syria to assist in interpreting results, as well as by an explanation of WES methodology and best practices in refugee credential recognition.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

After a slow start, there was a surge in applications once word got out. WES easily met its target of 200 applications in five months, although it took many more months to process all of these files. WES’ program evaluation focused on whether the policies, program design, and implementation process supported the intended outcome: to provide skilled refugees who lacked access to their official documents with a timely assessment of their credentials that could be useful for recognition purposes.

It remains to be seen to what degree the WES assessment is being successfully used to facilitate entry to licensing, education, and employment, however initial findings are encouraging. Improvements in the referral process and internal operational efficiency are already being addressed by WES. This report describes the various elements of the project, and includes analysis of the data to provide context for specific recommendations and next steps for this project.

⁷ 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.



Program Evaluation Methodology

Findings are based on survey responses from 50 applicants who received assessments, and from 45 stakeholders (with a 62 percent and 67 percent response rate respectively). Thirty-three qualitative interviews were conducted with applicants, academic institutions, regulatory bodies, employers, and referral partners, as well as with WES staff. WES also interviewed 11 of the 12 applicants who were prescreened for eligibility, but who did not successfully complete the application process. Interviewer bias was checked by using multiple interviewers and note-takers. Analysis of qualitative data focused on key themes and outliers. Interview findings were triangulated with survey data. Administrative data was also carefully analyzed to provide recommendations on internal operations. The extent and depth of this evaluation gives WES a high level of confidence in the findings of this report.

APPLICANT PROFILE

Applicants to the pilot project included a fairly diverse group (see [page 8](#)). 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.

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

In addition to the data collected from the application form, WES collected information from the applicant survey (n=50) to better understand the applicant pool. 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 WES applicant profile reflects characteristics of "privately sponsored refugees."⁸ According to government data on privately-sponsored refugees arriving in Canada in early 2016:

- 37 percent had completed some post-secondary education.
- Over 60 percent spoke English, French or both.
- 52 percent were of working age (ages 25-64).

⁸ Refugees in Canada can be settled in different ways, including by being "privately" sponsored by churches, small groups of citizens and families who provide financial and other support to the refugee for the first 13 months.

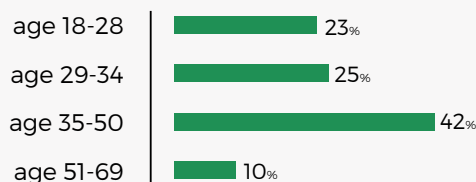
Participants



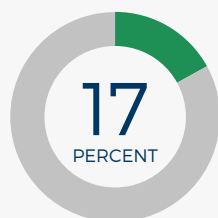
52%
Males



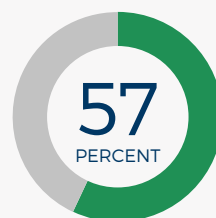
48%
Females



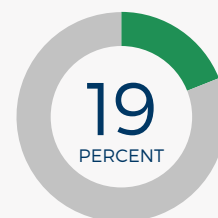
High school
diploma



Some post-
secondary study



Bachelor's
degree



Graduate
degree

One Applicant's Journey

One applicant interviewed for this study, a young man who had been in Canada for over a year, holds a bachelor's in accounting from a Syrian university and had worked in banking in Syria before the war. He was completing a master's in accounting at the time the war started, but fled the country before finishing his thesis. Once in Canada, a co-worker at his "survival job," an immigrant from India, told him about WES. The applicant was upset to find that he could not meet the eligibility requirements for a standard evaluation because he was unable to obtain his documents directly from Syria.

Fortunately, he found the WES pilot project through a community agency and submitted an application with copies of his full transcript for both degrees (the master's transcript was complete except for the thesis). He received a WES alternative assessment for both the completed bachelor's and the incomplete master's.

The young man had hoped to use the report to return and finish his master's degree. Since then, however, he has learned that he may only need a few certifications, which he can obtain from the Canadian Securities Institute, to return to the accounting profession. He will use his WES assessment report to enroll in the Certified Public Accounting program and avoid repeating prerequisite courses. Then, he simply needs to take the Canada-specific courses, such as tax regulations and business law. He is hoping that the WES assessment report will suffice for this purpose. He also plans to use the report on his résumé.



“

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



In contrast, only 6 percent of those who were settled as “government-assisted refugees” had some post-secondary education, and 67 percent spoke neither English nor French.⁹

Privately sponsored refugees are dispersed throughout Canadian society and are financially supported by families, churches, or small organizations that take an active interest in their settlement. For example, one of WES’ referral partners is a faith-based group that is assisting dozens of privately sponsored Syrian refugees. Though privately sponsored refugees may not routinely use settlement services, they can access specific support services as needed from agencies, such as language and employment programs and, in this case, access to the WES pilot project.

Although WES has only indirect evidence that privately sponsored refugees accessed the project, its survey confirmed that a majority of applicants found the pilot project by word of mouth from family and friends (38 percent), or through an employment or settlement agency (30 percent). A more targeted outreach to this loosely-networked group of refugees will be needed in the future.

PROJECT RESULTS AT A GLANCE

- 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 the sample) were successfully assessed.
- Applications submitted with full transcripts (72 percent) were easily processed using standard WES procedures. The remainder (28 percent) required reconstruction of at least part of the credential because of missing or incomplete documentation.
- With the success of this project WES has demonstrated the value of facilitating credential assessment through community engagement. Referral partners concur that this approach provides a tool and a platform of support for their refugee clients to achieve goals that utilize their international education.
- There was universal appreciation for this service, despite the risks in working with documents that cannot be readily authenticated. Organizations that recognize foreign credentials face the same risks, and it was felt that WES is sharing this risk.
- WES’ reputation for rigor and high quality enhanced the credibility of the report. Seventy-three percent of stakeholders surveyed indicated that the methods used gave them confidence in the results, and almost half indicated their organization would use, or would consider using the report for recognition.
- At least half of the organizations interviewed had, or were formulating, policies of their own to admit refugees and, having seen the new WES assessment, some are planning to include it in their policy. One admitted to having no plan and was grateful to WES respondent for providing a solution. Unless an institution is doing its own evaluations, the WES assessment provides a gateway to an orderly process for credential recognition.
- Institutions frequently expressed the hope that WES would extend the service beyond Syrians to refugees from other countries and victims of natural disaster.
- Some clients have successfully used the WES assessment to apply for higher education, licensing, and employment.

9 Immigrants, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), June 2016.

INTAKE AND REFERRAL PROCESS

The initial reason for WES to work with referral partners was to recruit a limited number of refugees who met basic eligibility requirements for testing new methods of working with documents that cannot be readily authenticated. WES could then produce an assessment that could be useful in granting these refugees access to educational, licensing, and employment pathways.

Designated agencies were asked to vet refugees according to clear eligibility criteria to ensure they were not able to obtain official documents. Agency staff assisted clients in completing the application for inclusion in the pilot, and for scanning any available documents related to academic history. Upon completion of the assessment report, intake workers received a copy at the same time as the applicant.

Partnerships

WES Global Talent Bridge staff provided “high-touch” support, and worked collaboratively with the agencies to implement this project. Partners reported that WES was reliably responsive to their inquiries, and that issues were handled promptly and with good judgement. Routine communication with clients and ways for them to check on the progress of applications were not part of the original design of the pilot. For all parties involved, including WES, the experience of working this way with partners to assess refugees’ academic qualifications as a gateway to professional opportunities has been a success. There are now community partners in place eager to refer more clients.

Each referral partner was asked by WES Global Talent Bridge staff to commit to the number of refugees whom they thought they could serve within the pilot period. Agency heads reported that they did not feel overburdened by program requirements and that they perceived this service as a benefit to their clients. In interviews and follow-up conversations with agency managers and staff, WES found support for expanding these services, for tracking applicant

outcomes, and for formalizing the expectation that partners would provide more comprehensive services to supplement this intervention. There is clear support for case managers to work with clients to help them understand their assessments, and to make decisions about how to use them. WES is prepared to support this partner activity with enhanced training and resources.

By embedding the credential assessment as an essential, normative part of settlement services for skilled refugees, WES, the WES Global Talent Bridge program, and partner agencies are empowering refugees to pursue opportunities that utilize their foreign qualifications.

Pre-screening

WES Global Talent Bridge staff trained agency staff on eligibility requirements and program goals, which included checking refugee status. WES is confident that the pilot project served only refugees. According to feedback from caseworkers, the simple eligibility requirements were easy to apply. Three applicants were eligible for a standard WES assessment because their official documents were available. Interviews with applicants revealed that the difference between a standard WES assessment and an “alternative” assessment – which carries with it some limitations in use – was unclear to some applicants. The free service appeared to be an incentive, rather than the limitations of the report being a disincentive.

Application and Intake Protocols

WES’ aim in this project was to create a seamless referral pipeline that would help to identify and serve those eligible for the program. Records show that there was a high level of compliance with prescreening and application protocols from partner agencies. However, WES also identified a need to further improve some aspects of training, and to institute some quality assurance measures, especially given high staff turnover at agencies.

The program evaluation sought to identify which attitudes and characteristics among partners correlated with successful referrals. Among these were:

Eagerness to help refugees with a product that has value

“We’ve developed a partnership with a community college that requires a credential evaluation for their bridging program, and we were so excited to find out that refugees were eligible for this. We don’t want to just give them another piece of paper – it needs value. We would absolutely be willing to advise clients after they receive the report about how they could use it.”

– Intake workers, referral partner

Staff assigned to the project who have cultural competence, language skills, and experience working with refugees

“Two of us worked with this project. We sent WES between 35 and 45 people. With all the inquiries from email, phone, and walk-ins, we tried to answer all their questions. We speak 16 languages in our office, and interviewed everyone in Arabic because that is what applicants preferred, even if they could speak English. This project is important for us to work with. We understand how important it is for their lives.”

– Coordinator, referral partner

A clear understanding of the value of a credential assessment, project goals, and eligibility criteria

“We reached the number [of applicants] we committed to very quickly; we went beyond that to help eager applicants. We tell them they have to get their education recognized. It’s part of the usual way we work with clients. For those who are highly educated, it is a no-brainer – they see a chance to regain a sense of pride in their profession.”

– Agency head, referral partner

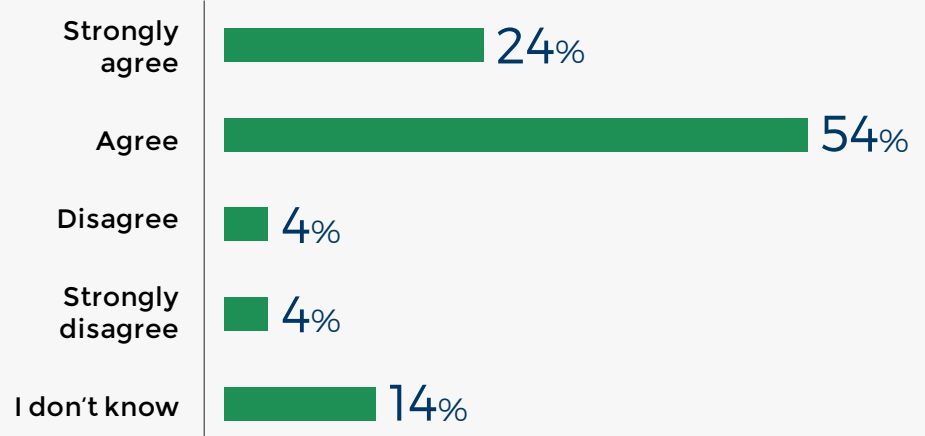
Sound case management practices and focus on outcomes

“We select the refugees that we think we can help. Every one of the refugees we serve who had a university degree got referred to WES. We are committed to working with the person through coaching and troubleshooting for as long as it takes.”

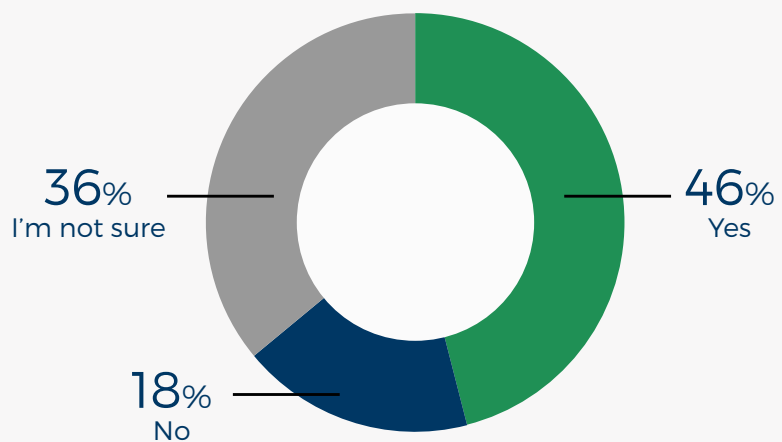
– Agency head, referral partner

Using the WES Report

The Alternative Credential Assessment will be useful in helping me take the next step in my educational and/or career journey in Canada.



Do you know how you intend to use your World Education Services (WES) Alternative Credential Assessment?



Client Outreach

In terms of completing the application, the best outcomes for applicants correlated with assistance from a personal case worker. Sixty-two percent of applicants surveyed had an intake worker help them with their application. The 38 percent who were not assisted came primarily from two information sessions offered by one of the agencies seeking to process applications as efficiently as possible. In this case, applicants were instructed to mail or scan their documents, and to send them directly to WES. As one applicant told WES, “In the Middle East, we do everything in person. We don’t send in the mail. So, that’s why all Syrians brought their certifications to the information session. We all thought that we had to provide everything there in person. But in Canada, you have to mail everything. Everything is online, nothing in person.”

Fifty-four percent of those who received personal assistance in submitting the application completed their applications, compared to only 24 percent of those who attended these information sessions. Outreach to clients to address incomplete applications increased the processing time.

Arabic-speaking WES staff reached out to refugees who had either incomplete applications or missing documents. The goal was to learn as much as possible about whether there had been any misunderstanding at the referral end, what documents these applicants had in their possession, and whether they were sending all the documents they had. Although it is true that WES will not use every piece of evidence to conduct an assessment, seeing everything helps to build a picture of the applicant’s history and corroborate an applicant’s claims. In more than a few cases, additional information supplied by the applicant created a more complete picture. WES found clients more responsive to telephone calls than emails, Arabic language skills were useful (and appreciated), but usually not as essential for cooperation as honoring the cultural norm of engaging personally.

These findings confirm WES’ decision to utilize referral partners with case management capacity to conduct intake on an individual basis, whether face-to-face or by telephone, and where possible, with relevant language skills. In any case, with access to evaluators who represent 40 countries speaking 37 different languages, WES has the capacity to reach out to most clients to have conversations where technical terms can be understood in a way familiar to the client, as well as to corroborate the translation of any documents.

Training

Foreign credential assessment is a new concept for many newcomers, and even for some settlement workers and job developers who are focused on helping refugees or immigrants get settled and become financially self-sufficient as soon as possible. Newcomers are not always made aware of the doors a credential assessment can open to opportunities that utilize their qualifications. Training the staff at partner agencies was, therefore, an essential element of this project.

In terms of screening applicants, the training provided appears to have been reasonably effective: virtually all referrals met WES’ program criteria and most applications were complete on arrival. However, through surveys and interviews done as part of the program evaluation, WES learned that at the time of application, caseworkers did not always provide sufficient and accurate information about the purpose and value of an assessment. Interviews revealed that some caseworkers unknowingly gave misleading information about documentation; some caseworkers screened out documents they didn’t think were pertinent to eligibility for participation in the pilot project (which they were not trained to do); some turned people away who had incomplete degrees (which is not WES policy). In some agencies, staff focused on processing applications for the pilot project, not on carefully explaining what a credential assessment is, and how it would be useful to their clients. Some staff admitted in the survey and interviews that it was because they did not understand it themselves. This is corroborated by

the applicant survey: Only 22 percent of respondents said that they understood the limitations of the alternative assessment compared to the standard WES assessment.

In retrospect, WES underestimated how much training would be necessary. In addition, interviews revealed that there had been considerable turnover in staff at agencies over the duration of the pilot, so that by the end, many of the caseworkers in the program had been trained by coworkers who had moved on, and not by WES.

This finding led to an important insight: As this wave of refugees enters a different stage of settlement, programs that support refugees are evolving and stabilizing. WES services will be even more important to foreign-trained individuals who are ready to continue a professional career. WES intends to modify its training program to provide more targeted support and better resources to its partners. Partner agreements will articulate expectations for wrap-around support for the referral process, including post-assessment debriefs and path-finding support. The agreements will also include tracking of applicant outcomes and satisfaction, as well as feedback on WES training and resources. One applicant perfectly expressed the challenges that come after a WES assessment:

“When we come here, we feel lost. We need some sort of roadmap. What’s next for us? Now that we have this report, what’s next? We lack direction – we lack advisement. Where can we go? What can we do? What are the next steps? Syria and Canada are two totally different systems. We feel lost.”

In summary, it was learned that there is plenty of work for WES and the WES Global Talent Bridge program to do to support partners both at the time of application and after the assessment has been received. It is in the best interest of refugee clients to expand this program from a simple intake and referral partnership to a more comprehensive service, with the credential assessment embedded as an important tool for using one’s foreign qualifications in Canada.

ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Assessment Methods

The assessment methodology used in this project relies upon well-tested processes for document examination and verification, a robust database of precedent cases, and country-specific and language expertise of senior evaluators. In reporting results, WES was transparent regarding the methodology and documents used in the assessment. Of stakeholders surveyed, 73 percent stated that the WES methodology gave them confidence in the results.

All of the applications accompanied by at least one credible piece of evidence (95 percent of the sample) were successfully assessed. Seventy-two percent of these were accompanied by full transcripts and could easily be processed. The remainder of the applications (28 percent) required “reconstruction” of at least part of the credential, depending on what documents were available. In all but one case, this was possible.

Reconstruction is feasible for Syrian-educated clients because of the highly structured and centralized higher education system in Syria, where the course requirements and curricula are standardized across institutions and are remarkably consistent over time (see box on [page 16](#) for example). In countries where such consistency is lacking, or where similar precedent cases (same credential, same institution, same program, same year of graduation) do not exist in the WES database, it may not be possible to validate documents or to reconstruct a credential.

All documents received were scrutinized according to normal WES practices and quality assurance standards, and no evidence was found of fraudulent documents being submitted. Before beginning to assess any file where there was missing or partial documentation, a senior, Arabic-speaking evaluator contacted the client personally to review their situation. In this way she was able to learn as much as possible about WES’ refugee clients and their document challenges, and to then decide with confidence how to proceed. This level of scrutiny

and due diligence was necessary for the pilot, and may be employed in cases where evaluators have any questions about the documents with which they are working.

The documents used for the Alternative Credential Assessment had to be submitted in the original language, even if an English translation was available. The assessment report issued on the basis of this examination includes the documents submitted, as well as a detailed description of the documents used as the basis of the assessment (e.g., photocopy of transcript, student ID, etc.) specifically to encourage institutions or receiving authorities to corroborate WES' findings by further examination. This level of transparency underscores the shared risk that institutions, licensing boards, and employers are taking to serve refugees. This level of risk also demands that WES indicate that its assessment is advisory in nature. This is all the more important when working with documents that cannot be authenticated.

WES reviewed some complex cases that presented policy challenges, and it waived eligibility requirements in a few cases. WES also reserved the right not to process a file, such as in the 12 cases where no documentation was ever submitted.

WES reached out at least once to 90 applicants (44.5 percent of the sample under study) who had submitted either partial (n=60) or no (n=34) documentation with their applications.

- About half of these files required reconstruction. Files with missing documentation were reconstructed as long as evaluators had at least one credible piece of evidence with which to work.
- Outreach was critical in these cases. For example, some had sent only the degree or diploma certificate, not realizing they should send the transcript as well; others needed to hear the Arabic word for “transcript” to understand what WES needed.



“Reconstruction” refers to using WES research and other assets to substitute for missing documents. For example, if a transcript was provided for only year one of a two-year graduate diploma in engineering, and the degree certificate was also provided, indicating completion of the diploma, it could be assumed that year two was completed even if the transcript was missing. If WES could match the university, year of study, and program to a specimen in its database, it could provide the courses studied in that year. Even if an exact match was not available, because of the standardized nature of the Syrian education system, studying engineering at one university in Syria that year would follow the same curriculum in a similar university. Even semester credits could be reconstructed; grades, of course, could not. In our example, this detailed level of knowledge allows WES to profile the course of studies for year two and to provide valuable information to a recognition authority. The authority can then corroborate or challenge the applicant’s claims, and even provide a way for the candidate to demonstrate competence in advanced courses in the absence of grades – for instance, through “challenge” examinations or tests.

- Of those who applied without submitting any documents, 20 applicants responded to WES' outreach by sending documents: Many of them had attended the general information session and had not followed up by mailing their documents. If they sent documents, the processing continued. The remaining applications were cancelled.¹⁰

A combination of more rigorous training, a clear policy of cancelling incomplete applications (i.e. without *any* documentation), and a dedicated outreach effort will ensure that refugees send required documentary evidence so that assessments can proceed as efficiently as possible.

Processing Times

The project entailed a learning curve: The best outcomes with regard to timeliness correlated with those files processed later in the project.¹¹ The files needing reconstruction took almost twice as long to process as files based on full transcripts. Ten percent needed an English translation, which extended the processing time by an average of two weeks.

To provide for the learning and flexibility important to a pilot project, WES' automated database system was not used in implementation. However, this approach slowed down operations, and deprived the project of key functionality at WES that ensures speed. All of the feedback WES has received indicates that, while the report was of high quality, processing times were too long. WES heard from partners that the delays were disheartening for their clients, particularly those who were motivated

to quickly move forward with their next steps. Refugees unable to track the progress of their evaluation or discover an explanation for delays became frustrated. The issue underscored what can happen when the benefits of an automated system generating routine updates are not built into the process. By integrating refugee services into WES' normal business systems when the project is scaled up, this issue will be remedied. The anticipated result is that WES will be able to deliver a more timely report.

In May 2017, WES put the pilot project on pause in order to evaluate it. It decided at that time to eliminate its backlog of 130 remaining files through expedited processing. A *document assessment* includes a complete description of the study undertaken and the Canadian equivalency. This type of assessment, adequate for most purposes, was provided to those refugees. This briefer report, similar to the basic WES evaluation, did not include a course and grade analysis. Otherwise, the same methods and quality assurance standards were applied. Should one of these applicants need a *course assessment* in the future to satisfy admissions requirements, a free upgrade will be provided.

The backlog was cleared within a matter of weeks, confirming that WES can meet reasonable timeliness standards for this program in the future if it takes into account the purpose of the assessment. An evaluation of this second cohort of applicants is pending to determine if the document assessment satisfied their immediate needs.

ASSESSMENT REPORT

All of the elements of a standard WES evaluation are included in WES Alternative Credential Assessment. For example, just as in a standard evaluation, a degree equivalency is provided. Where transcripts are available, courses are listed, and credit hours and grade conversions are supplied. For these reports, language of instruction is indicated as is the function of the credential in Syria. For example, a bachelor's

¹⁰ Before cancelling a file, WES reached out multiple times. Eleven of these candidates were eventually interviewed as part of the program evaluation. Reasons for not completing their applications ranged from, "I got a job," to "I forgot," to "I no longer need it," to "I thought WES was going to get my documents from Syria."

¹¹ The last 38 percent of files were processed in an average of 17 days, compared to taking months when WES first started, and every file was scrutinized by senior management and multiple proofreaders. With more integration into WES automated platforms in the future, this time can be shortened; however providing a course analysis where reconstruction is required will still be largely a manual task and take longer.



A standard WES evaluation is based on academic documents that have been sent to WES directly from the awarding institution. WES conducts an objective assessment of the documents, confirming their authenticity, the type and level of education they represent in the home country, and advises on a comparable equivalency level for Canada. The *document assessment* can be accompanied by a detailed *course assessment* in which course names along with grades and credit equivalencies are reported.

An alternative assessment follows a similar pattern, but is based on documents that have not been sent directly to WES and that may not be complete. In the latter case, WES utilizes its considerable experience and archival data to complete the report.

degree would enable graduate study; a Diploma of Education can be used to teach in Syria. In the May 2016 stakeholder forum, this contextual information was specifically requested by institutions and others. WES therefore included an infographic on the Syrian education system with each report.¹²

WES did not require the refugee to indicate a recipient institution on the application form to participate in this pilot. Only 10 percent asked WES to send the report to an institution, making the refugee the main recipient of the report.

A distinctly branded report, clearly explaining the methodology and including the documents used for the WES assessment, was central to the credibility of the program. Because there were not many reports in circulation among end users by May of 2017, WES surveyed a list of its institutional clients and other stakeholders, and included a sample report for their review. With a 67 percent response rate to its survey, WES received feedback.

WES now has a rich picture of both the strengths and weakness of the assessment report format, the credibility of the methodology, and the ways the report might be used by applicants, institutions, and other recipients.

The majority surveyed believed WES was providing a useful service to assist refugees.

- Over 80 percent were familiar with WES and the standard WES evaluation. By relying on their knowledge of standard WES processes, they were able to assess whether the report effectively explained WES' new methodology and its limitations, and whether it presented results in a clear, comprehensive, credible, and accessible way in comparison to a standard report.
- Over 80 percent were either satisfied or very satisfied with the report package, and over 65 percent indicated that information included with the report was necessary for their understanding. Only three stakeholders responding to the survey had unanswered questions after seeing a sample report.

¹² In interviews with refugee applicants WES was asked a number of times why it would include the Syrian Education System in the report when they needed to understand the Canadian Education System. Having patterned the alternative WES report as closely as possible to the standard WES report, which serves primarily the needs of institutional clients, this had not even been considered.



Using the Assessment: Institutions

In North America, credential recognition is handled by institutions that create the policies and procedures to support their mandates and missions. Academic institutions, employers, and regulatory bodies in various industries and professions all entertain a different degree of risk in working with documents that cannot be authenticated. WES' initial research into global practices for assessing refugee qualifications detailed ways that institutions can add requirements to corroborate applicant claims and compensate for insufficient documentation. It also provides recommendations for discretionary options, such as pathways to conditional admission, employment, paid internships, or temporary or provisional licensing or certification¹³. How a third-party assessment fits into these institutional policies is a question that is posed by WES' initiative and the efforts of other credential agencies serving refugees. *Is a third-party assessment useful? Does it carry any validity for those making recognition decisions?*

Responses to WES' stakeholder survey begin to paint a promising picture. Of 45 respondents, 30 percent reported that they intended to use the report to

support recognition, and some are already doing so. Sixty percent found the inclusion of the documents and translations either very useful or essential.

Although there was virtually universal praise for WES' initiative based on seeing the sample report, few organizations were willing to commit to accepting its validity before a report had been received from a candidate and processed. This can take a long time and, as one respondent said, "This [report] gets the applicant one step closer to recognition, but it does not solve the issue of the gaps in education due to lack of documentation."

There are likely to be many scenarios and different ways and degrees in which the WES report might be used, depending upon the flexibility of institutional policies. For example, the accounting regulators of Ontario are using the WES report to recognize the foundational requirements of a bachelor's degree, but not to meet subject-specific requirements, which will be met by challenge exams. One university in Ontario has accepted the report "as equivalent to a standard WES evaluation," but others may use it as part of their own assessment protocols. Not surprisingly, institutions that had a pre-existing relationship with WES reported that they are likely to accept the assessment as part of their process, and some are already using it.

¹³ <http://knowledge.wes.org/wes-research-report-recognizing-refugee-credentials.html>



Unless they are doing the evaluation themselves, academic institutions and other recognition agencies have few options if they want to consider refugees with incomplete or missing documentation. Most of those interviewed were willing to lean on WES' credibility, and its very clear and careful methodology. Asked if their organization was likely to use the report, an almost equal number of respondents agreed or strongly agreed as were non-committal. One organization indicated they would not use the report because they do their own assessments.

Another clue that this report may gain traction is that many of respondents had specific recommendations to make the report easier to use, such as:

- Provide electronic access and transmission, and keys for grade conversion and other interpretive tools.
- Allow direct communication between third parties and WES regarding refugee client.
- Use academic and regulatory institutions as a source of referral.

WES is now considering these recommendations.

These preliminary findings are hopeful. However, licensing and admissions processes are lengthy and

dependent on internal policies that may need to change. Acceptance by some regulatory bodies will likely have an effect on others, such as provincial counterparts in the same profession. WES will continue to provide technical assistance and training related to its research and assessment methods, especially where WES believes that it adds value: in the validation of unofficial documents and in the reconstruction of credentials from partial or missing documentation.

Using the Assessment: Applicants

Using the report for admission to a licensed profession, college, or university depends on an institution accepting that the report meets *their* requirements for assessment of foreign credentials. However, beyond its traditional purpose, WES believes there is intrinsic value to refugees and immigrants knowing the value of their foreign credentials in Canada. This information empowers individuals to plan and access opportunities that use their qualifications, and to advocate for themselves.

Because only a small number of participants asked WES to send the report to specific institutions, it was important that WES use the opportunity to survey and interview its applicants to learn more about what receiving the report meant to them. This included understanding their aspirations and experience using

the report, their understanding of the limitations of the report, and their plans for next steps in their journey.

WES found that applicants were eager to receive the report and, that once received, it gave many of them hope, dignity, and a basis upon which to reclaim their identity and plan for their futures. A timely credential assessment appears to be not only a tool for credential recognition, but useful for increasing confidence and understanding of the way things work in Canada. For example, many complained that there was not enough information about the Canadian education system in the report. WES may have to consider how it defines successful outcomes if a recipient or purpose is not yet clear on the application, or if the assessment will not immediately be used to gain entry into further education or a profession. *How does one measure the impact of hope? Dignity? Empowerment?*

Over 75 percent of the applicants who responded to the survey agree or strongly agree that the WES report will help them on their educational and career paths in Canada.

Some applicants were self-directed and motivated to move quickly, having indicated a recipient on the application form. Of the 22 applicants who did so (almost a year ago) some are definitely using it to pursue further education and licensing. However, WES has learned that a few of these individuals did not, in fact, have an active application with the institution at the time it was sent, or withdrew their applications because they “weren’t ready,” “life took over,” or they were overwhelmed and depressed. With the assistance of its referral partners, WES will be tracking such applicants for another year as part of this pilot project.

Other applicants, having seen the report, became more motivated to learn how they could use it. Referral partners reported clients returning for advice, and WES Global Talent Bridge hosted a well-attended information session in one referral agency to explain the report and answer questions about opportunities for skilled refugees to resume their careers or consider alternate careers.

As of February 2017, 46 percent of applicants surveyed knew how they would use the report; 36 percent were not sure. Their current thinking represented the range of possibilities in roughly equal proportions: employment using their qualifications, relicensing in their profession, further education, and training for a new career.


Based on applicant survey data, those in their thirties appear to be the most ready to proceed, compared with those in their late teens or twenties, or in middle age, or older. Seventy percent in this age bracket were more likely to answer “yes” when asked if they knew how they wished to use the report, compared to 37 percent of those under 30 years old, and only 20 percent of those 40 to 49 years old. Thirty-somethings may have the right combination of career experience and confidence, with many already knowing at least some English.

CONCLUSIONS

The pilot sought to test a new methodology, a new outreach and service model, and the utility of a new kind of WES report. WES succeeded in all three aims, thanks to referral partners who implemented the program, refugee clients who participated, and the support of stakeholders who helped evaluate the program.

The following are concluding impressions, highlighting some risks going forward and questions that remain, as well as next steps for WES’ service to refugees and others with similar challenges in Canada in the immediate term; and refugees in the United States in the longer term.

There is no doubt that there are risks in this endeavor and that working with documents that cannot be authenticated runs counter to normative practices that WES has insisted on for years, notwithstanding its recent research on best practices for working with such documents. The WES Alternative Credential Assessment will be a non-starter in professions and institutions that cannot be flexible with their entry

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a lit sparkler. The person is wearing a grey, textured knit sweater. The sparkler is bright and glowing, with many sparks flying out. The background is dark and out of focus, suggesting an outdoor night setting. The overall mood is hopeful and celebratory.

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.

requirements for whatever reason(s). At the same time, many refugees may find the assessment a valid and credible tool for exploring their options and gaining recognition of qualifications.

The innovation and value in this pilot was directly related to WES' claim that it could *reconstruct* credentials from partial documentation, as well as validate documents in the applicant's possession. WES has applied its extensive resources and expertise to developing a methodology that can sustain the utmost scrutiny and be corroborated by additional strategies available to recognition bodies.

Of course, there is a human face to this technical problem. Thousands of high-skilled, internationally-trained Syrian refugees are now in Canada, improving their language skills, and ready to thrive – not to speak of the thousands of refugees from other countries. WES believes that all of these individuals deserve to have the same opportunities as other permanent residents. This gets to the heart of the problem that refugees face: A credential assessment is a lifeline to many who would otherwise have to start over. There are serious risks to the fabric of society when people fail to thrive.

Until the utility of the alternative assessment is known, there are risks of unmet and unmanaged expectations. WES must provide prompt and early intervention, understanding as it does from its work with immigrants that it takes sometimes years to regain momentum in one's career. So much is now known about 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, although an important one to get people in these circumstances moving in the right direction. This is especially the case when a partner agency can provide wrap-around services.

The demand for credential assessments among this population is potentially immense, and will

be ongoing if the program is to be brought to scale. WES hopes to serve this current wave of Syrian refugees in all regions of Canada and begin to extend the program to refugees from other countries, as well as to refugees in the United States. The capacity and commitment to do this has been determined. WES, however, is mindful that its findings suggest that readiness is a key concept, and "just-in-time intervention" is a challenge. Refugee clients did not initiate this intervention. It was offered to them whether or not they knew how they would put it to use.

One could make the mistake of thinking that a credential assessment was a premature intervention – but it may be more complicated than that. Although recognition is in the hands of institutions and employers, there is a journey to that point that deserves more attention, where an assessment is a tool for another kind of purpose. 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 timing, type of assessment, as well as its function, purpose, and usefulness as part of the refugee's journey are all variables that can be studied to better serve WES' clients. For example, while waiting for the report, the WES Degree Equivalency Tool,¹⁴ available free on the WES website, may be used as the basis for a first conversation between caseworker and refugee to imagine possibilities. A simple document assessment may be what is needed for employment. A course assessment may be useful only for those who are ready to submit an application to higher education or licensing. WES has already started testing some of these ideas in interviews with partners, stakeholders, and applicants.

14 <https://applications.wes.org/ca/degree-equivalency-tool/>

NEXT STEPS

WES will build on the findings and conclusions of the pilot project, and continue to expand the services it offers refugees. WES will encourage institutions to review and revise their recognition policies and procedures by promoting the assessment methods and knowledge resources that WES offers. WES believes that a refugee has the right to know how the qualifications earned in their home country are recognized in their new country. In the absence of access to verifiable academic documents, a third-party assessment may be helpful.

WES intends to develop its policy regarding documents that cannot be readily authenticated with not only refugees in mind, but anyone who cannot retrieve their academic documents due to circumstances beyond their control, such as refugee claimants, and victims of natural disaster.

WES also intends to extend refugee services to all regions of Canada by developing agreements with additional agencies and organizations that have the capacity to provide referral and follow-up services to refugee clients in collaboration with WES.

WES intends to offer this service to refugees from countries other than Syria. WES has already begun researching countries in distress and conflict to better understand the criteria by which it can serve refugees from those countries. Many of these refugees have been in Canada for years and have not been eligible for a WES report. This research involves understanding not only the flow of refugees over time to determine the need for services, but the nature of the disruption to institutions, the integrity of the educational system during conflict, and other considerations. WES is committed to rolling out this service to refugees from other countries based on this research, in ways still under consideration.

Finally, WES is developing a plan to implement this program in the United States, through a pilot project in 2018. Based on lessons learned through the pilot in Canada, WES will work closely with selected

referral partners to provide training and resources that support credential assessment as a path to credential recognition and integration.

These activities will require time to bring this program to scale. At the same time, WES continues to track the experience of its applicants in accessing professional and educational opportunities using the WES Alternative Credential Assessment, and will report these subsequent findings in due course.



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