

# Overseas degree equivalency: methodology

This document was produced by UK NARIC for the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL)

## 1. Introduction

The current allocation of bursaries for postgraduate teacher training places in England is linked to the achievement of trainees at undergraduate level, with differing levels of financial incentive awarded to those with a 1st, 2.1 and 2.2 at Bachelor degree level.

To support the allocation of bursaries to holders of international qualifications, UK NARIC undertook a grade comparisons study in 2011 on behalf of the erstwhile Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) reviewing and comparatively analysing the qualifications of 160 education systems against the UK education system. Acknowledging that education systems, along with the extent of information available on them, continue to evolve, UK NARIC was commissioned by the National College for Teaching and Leadership, in February 2015, to undertake a new grade comparison study for the following 41 countries:

Australia	Estonia	Latvia	Pakistan
Austria	Finland	Liechtenstein	Poland
Belgium	France	Lithuania	Portugal
Bulgaria	Germany	Luxembourg	Romania
Canada	Greece	Malta	Slovakia
China	Hungary	Mexico	Slovenia
Croatia	Iceland	The Netherlands	South Africa
Cyprus	India	New Zealand	Spain
Czech Republic	Ireland	Nigeria	Sweden
Denmark	Italy	Norway	Switzerland
			USA

The study involved identifying the relevant qualifications for analysis before conducting a robust comparative analysis to determine the grades required from each qualification to be considered comparable to achievement at 1st, 2.1 and 2.2 for a British Bachelor degree. The resulting dataset was intended to provide both updated information on existing qualifications, where applicable, and identify relevant new qualifications introduced since the 2011 study<sup>1</sup>.

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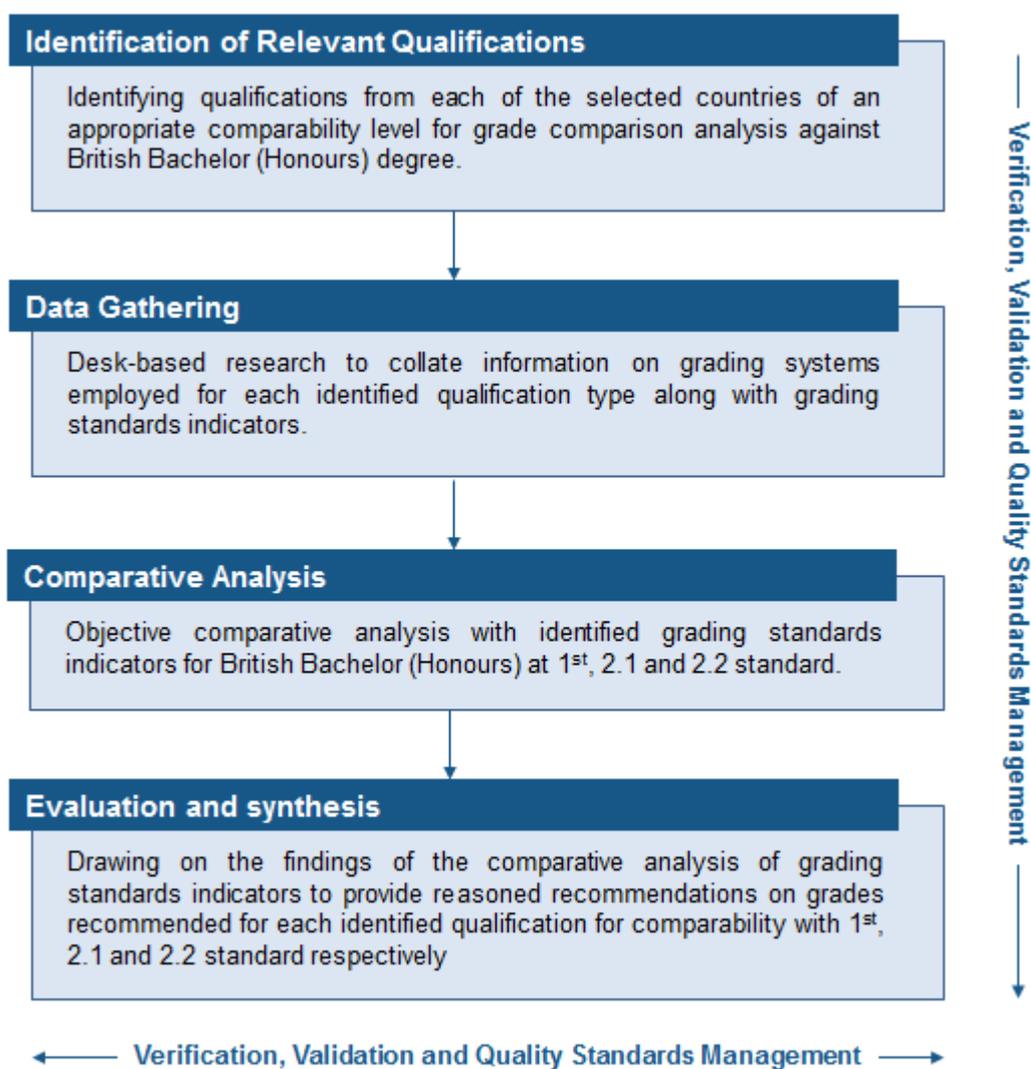
<sup>1</sup> Please note that for historical awards, phased out considerably earlier than the 2011 study, the recommendations from the 2011 study were carried forward and incorporated within the results table.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology drew on the approach applied during the 2011 grade comparisons study completed for the TDA: an evaluation process designed to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate for a wide variety of qualification types and grading systems whilst maintaining transparency and robustness to ensure the reliability of the grade comparison recommendations.

### 2.1 The methodological process

Figure 1: Overview of the Methodological Process



#### 2.1.1 Identification of relevant qualifications

This stage involved the identification of relevant international qualifications in the 41 selected countries. These were drawn from UK NARIC's *International Comparisons*, a comprehensive database comprising information on over 190 education systems and the qualifications offered within these. To ensure that evolving standards and changing education provision

are acknowledged and fairly reflected in the evaluation process, all information on *International Comparisons* is subject to a rolling programme of updates.

### 2.1.1.1 International Comparisons: the evaluation process

The comparability statements provided in *International Comparisons* reflect how international qualifications compare to national qualification standards in the UK and have been determined through consideration of the following qualification components:

- Entrance requirements
- Programme duration
- Programme structure and content
- Modes of study and assessment
- The status of the awarding institution, i.e. whether it is accredited/recognised by the appropriate authority in the country of origin and as such, subject to external quality assurance
- The standing of the qualification within the country's education system, i.e. whether it constitutes a national standard and/or forms part of the national qualifications framework / national education system; together with the progression routes available for qualification holders on completion, such as access to Master's degree programmes in the country of origin.

Once the above core qualification components have been reviewed, international qualifications are benchmarked against the UK NARIC Band Framework. Based on the qualification-related eligibility criteria for a bursary and the scope of this study, grade comparison analysis was conducted for relevant qualifications falling at Level 10 of the UK NARIC Band Framework:

Table 1: Relevant level from the UK NARIC Band Framework

NARIC Band	Band Descriptor	Relevant Comparison Statements
10	"Qualifications that enable holders to use their detailed knowledge and understanding to develop appropriate methodologies and apply appropriate techniques to complex problems and issues within a specialised subject or discipline. Individuals have complete autonomy and are able to use initiative in professional situations which are subject to change..."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Comparable to British Bachelor (Honours) degree standard</li><li>• Comparable to British Bachelor degree standard, offering access to the FHEQ [Framework for Higher Education Qualifications] second cycle of study.</li></ul>

Qualifications considered comparable to British Bachelor (Ordinary) degree standard were not included to grade comparison analysis on the basis that they were not considered to fulfil the Honours requirement specified by the NCTL for a bursary at 1st, 2.1 and 2.2 levels<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, a specific bursary was available to those that had successfully passed a Bachelor (Ordinary) degree. Achievement of an international qualification comparable to British Bachelor (Ordinary) degree standard can be demonstrated through a UK NARIC Statement of Comparability.

The evaluation criteria and process used to evaluate international qualifications is published in UK NARIC's [Code of Practice](#), available on the UK NARIC website.

## **2.1.2 Data gathering and comparative analysis of grading systems**

Following the identification of relevant international qualifications, desk-based research was undertaken to identify the following information for each qualification, where available:

- Grade distribution data
- Grade descriptors
- Postgraduate admission requirements in the home country and the UK.

The corresponding data for the UK was collated and summarised as part of the methodological development.

### **2.1.2.1 Grade distribution data**

Grade distribution data provides a useful indicator of grade comparability between international education systems by enabling comparison of the proportion of students achieving each grade. In the context of this study, this enabled UK NARIC to consider how the proportion of students achieving the highest grade / classification in one system compared with the proportion of students achieving the highest classification (a 1<sup>st</sup>) in the UK. This was similarly used to compare levels of achievement to a UK 2.1 and 2.2, by considering the relative proportion of students achieving these grades and above.

In some countries, grade distribution data is collated at a national level, whilst in others it is only collated at institution level. Where available, national data was used for the analysis; for other countries grade distribution data from a sample of institutions was used.

UK grade distribution data is collated at a national level by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). UK NARIC used the full UK statistics (encompassing both full-time and part-time study modes and UK- and non-UK domiciled students) and calculated the proportion of students achieving 1st, 2.1, 2.2 as a percentage of the total number of students achieving a classified Bachelor (Honours) degree<sup>3</sup>.

When drawing comparisons, fail data (the proportion of students failing to obtain a pass grade) was omitted and proportions obtaining each grade calculated as a percentage of the total number of students passing.

### **2.1.2.2 Grade descriptors**

Grade descriptors (specifically, outcomes-based descriptors) refer to the requirements/standards a student must meet for the award of a particular grade. These provide a valuable indication of what is meant by a given grade, which can then be compared against grade descriptors for 1st, 2.1 and 2.2 in the UK.

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<sup>3</sup> HESA statistics contain numbers for those achieving unclassified degrees and other first degree data submitted without a classification. To enable meaningful comparison with international data, UK NARIC calculated distribution in relation to classified degrees only.

As autonomous institutions, UK universities are responsible for establishing their own standards of performance required for achievement of a 1st, 2.1, 2.2, 3rd and pass<sup>4</sup>. As such, for the purposes of this study, UK NARIC considered grade descriptors from a range of UK universities and collected examples of expected competencies at 1st, 2.1 and 2.2, grouping these into two categories: (i) subject knowledge, understanding and application; and (ii) analysis, synthesis and evaluation<sup>5</sup>.

For international qualifications, generic grade descriptors (i.e. those applied across all faculties in a given institution) were sourced, where available. Where further detail was required, a range of faculty- and programme-specific descriptors were reviewed and cross-referenced. Accounting for the fact that terminology used in grade descriptors would likely vary between institutions, UK NARIC sought to identify commonalities in order to discern the broad skills expected at each level of achievement in each country.

By comparing international qualification grade descriptors against those identified for British Bachelor (Honours) degree, UK NARIC determined how the level and range of knowledge and skills expected at a given grade compare to the expected skills at each grade in the UK system.

### 2.1.2.3 Postgraduate admission requirements in the home country and the UK

To inform admission decisions for postgraduate courses, a considerable number of UK universities have developed country-specific entry requirements in terms of qualifications and their associated grades. It is understood that these have been informed, in part, by the level of knowledge and skills demonstrated by international applicants and their suitability for study at postgraduate level in a UK academic context. For example, a university may request a score of 75% or above in the individual's undergraduate degree from a particular country having determined this to provide suitable indication of applicant's abilities to meet the demands of a British Master's degree. As such, country-specific postgraduate entry requirements of a sample of 20 UK universities were collated. To provide context to the international requirements, the admission requirements for holders of a UK degree were also considered, as this provided an indication of the general standard of admission for a given university.

### 2.1.3 Establishing grade comparability

The above three indicators were selected to provide a combined quantitative and qualitative approach to the grade comparison analysis. It is important to note however, that, as anticipated, there were countries and/or specific qualifications, for which data was not available on one or two of the indicators at the time of writing. In such cases, greater emphasis was placed on the remaining indicator(s).

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<sup>4</sup> QAA, 2013. *The UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards.*

<sup>5</sup> Given that this study aims to identify recommended grades, comparable to achievement of a 1st, the examples selected for the award of a 1st represent the minimum threshold level descriptors for a 1st (typically attributed a 70-79% grade) rather than the full grade range (70-100%).

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It is also important to highlight that some international qualifications have restricted / highly competitive entry (more so than that of other national qualifications) and often low retention rates meaning that, in addition to the three indicators outlined above, further analysis of programme entry requirements, learning outcomes and progression was required.

In most cases, recommendations pertain to the minimum final grades comparable to a UK 1<sup>st</sup>, 2.1 and 2.2. In the course of the research and analysis, it was identified that in some of the selected countries, qualifications may be graded on a pass/fail basis and/or have no (further) overall grade specified. There were also instances where an international qualification was found to have fewer, broader classifications than those available for UK degrees.

In the first case, comparing the 'pass' classification alone would only enable comparison to a UK 2.2 at most, and only where there is sufficient evidence that the minimum pass standard is above a UK 3<sup>rd</sup> class standard. In the second case, this would similarly mean that those who may have performed at a standard comparable to a UK 1<sup>st</sup>, for example, would not be immediately identifiable from the overall classification.

In order therefore to identify the level of achievement required to compare to a UK 1<sup>st</sup>, 2.1 and 2.2, UK NARIC made recommendations in the following ways:

- **A recommended grade average**  
Individuals and ITT providers should then calculate the (weighted) average grade from the individual's transcripts. Any assessment/modules graded on a pass/fail basis should be excluded from the calculation.
- **A recommend minimum number / proportion of credits at a particular grade**  
This approach was taken where multiple grading systems are used within one qualification. This would similarly require individuals and ITT providers to review the individual's transcript and identify whether the recommended number / proportion of credits with the recommended grade(s) had been achieved.

In cases where there was no reliable means of comparisons to each of the UK first degree classifications; whether due to significant differences in the structure, grading systems or grading methods of a particular international qualification, or due to the availability of information, UK NARIC has benchmarked the qualification as a whole to a specific grade in the UK, for example identifying a grade as 'at least comparable to a 2.2'.

**For all enquiries on the project and the allocation of bursaries for postgraduate initial teacher training, please contact the funding team at the National College for Teaching and Leadership, [FA.TEAM@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:FA.TEAM@education.gsi.gov.uk)**