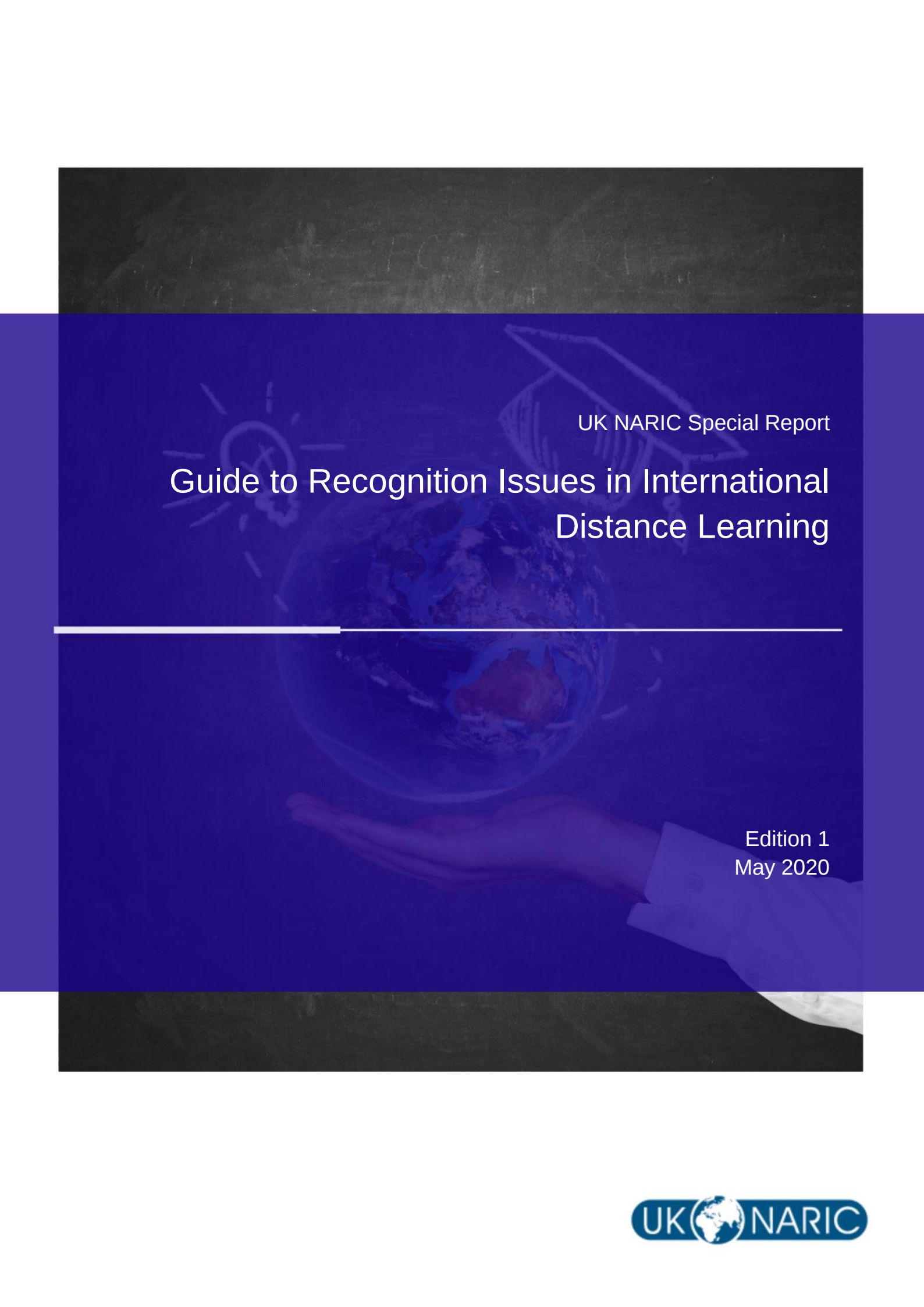




UK NARIC Special Report

Guide to Recognition Issues in International Distance Learning

Edition 1
May 2020

Foreword

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of quality assured distance learning has been brought to the foreground as schools, colleges and universities around the world adapt to the crisis, to ensure continuity of quality education to learners during these challenging times.

With 5 million students studying abroad before the crisis hit^[1], the recognition of transnational distance learning is now, more than ever, a matter of critical importance to the global higher education sector.

Furthermore, the implications of this global crisis are likely to be felt far beyond the current lockdowns: distance learning will play an increasingly key role in education internationally for the foreseeable future. The significant shift to online learning will amplify pressing questions around the recognition of distance learning for providers, students, and national authorities.

As a leading national recognition agency, UK NARIC knows only too well the barriers to recognition that distance learning can face internationally.

This report series – highlighting recognition issues in international distance learning – is designed to provide an essential resource for the international education sector, from those involved in international admissions, recruitment and partnerships through to those in policy and accreditation aspects.

This publication forms part of a much wider strand of UK NARIC's resources to support the education sector in driving progressive change in the international understanding and fair recognition of credible distance learning, supporting global mobility and opportunity for graduates and providers.

Dr Cloud Bai-Yun
Head of UK NARIC

^[1] UNESCO (2019), *Global Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications*.

Contents

INTRODUCTION	4
GUIDANCE ON RECOGNITION BY COUNTRY	6
China	7
Hong Kong	9
India	11
Malaysia	14
Nigeria	16
Oman	18
Pakistan	21
Singapore	23
Sri Lanka	25

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Introduction

Online and distance learning¹ has significant potential. It can play a key role in widening access to quality education to sectors of the population who might otherwise not be able to pursue their studies of choice. It also has a lower carbon footprint than other forms of international education; and, as we are witnessing with the COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning can be a way to guarantee continuity of education to students during challenging times.

However, the growth of distance learning has its own challenges: from the development of IT infrastructures and resources allowing reliable and equitable access to students; to concerns on the capacity of distance learning to provide education of the required quality and standards. This guidance focuses on the latter challenge.

The recognition of qualifications awarded through distance learning has long been a complex issue. Recognition is often essential for admission to further study (especially in public universities), for employment (particularly in public sector organisations) and, in certain countries, to obtain a visa². Whilst many countries may accept distance learning as a temporary and necessary measure to the COVID-19 pandemic, qualifications obtained through distance learning are not universally recognised.

In November 2019, UNESCO's General Conference adopted the [*Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education*](#) stating that qualifications which are "subject to **comparable quality assurance mechanisms** and which are considered part of the higher education system... will be assessed...using the same criteria as those applied to similar qualifications acquired through traditional learning modes"³.

As such, it is important to understand who is responsible for the oversight of distance learning provision. In some countries, distance learning forms an integral part of the national quality assurance system, where higher education institutions must demonstrate how they maintain standards across all modes of learning. In others, distance learning may fall outside of the national quality assurance system, whether being self-regulated or falling under the remit of a specialised distance learning accreditation agency. In all cases, recognition is typically only possible where the awarding institution is subject to external oversight by an appropriate competent authority.

¹ Hereafter referred to collectively as 'distance learning'

² Professional recognition – for degrees in professional fields such as medicine, allied health, engineering and accounting – often lies with the relevant professional body in each country: such bodies may have further requirements in terms of modes of learning and assessment.

³ The Convention, published by designed to promote transparency, consistency and trust in international recognition and quality assurance, will build upon and consolidate regional recognition conventions for Africa, Arab States, Asia-Pacific, Europe and North America; and Latin America and the Caribbean.

However, as this report highlights, even where there is educational oversight of distance learning, this does not necessarily result in international recognition. In countries like [India](#) with its own large-scale distance learning provision, no foreign distance learning is recognised; whilst in [Oman](#), only certain international institutions are recognised for distance learning. Some recognition agencies may recognise qualifications awarded by an institution which also offers a counterpart programme through full-time face-to-face study, but not those awarded by distance-only institutions.

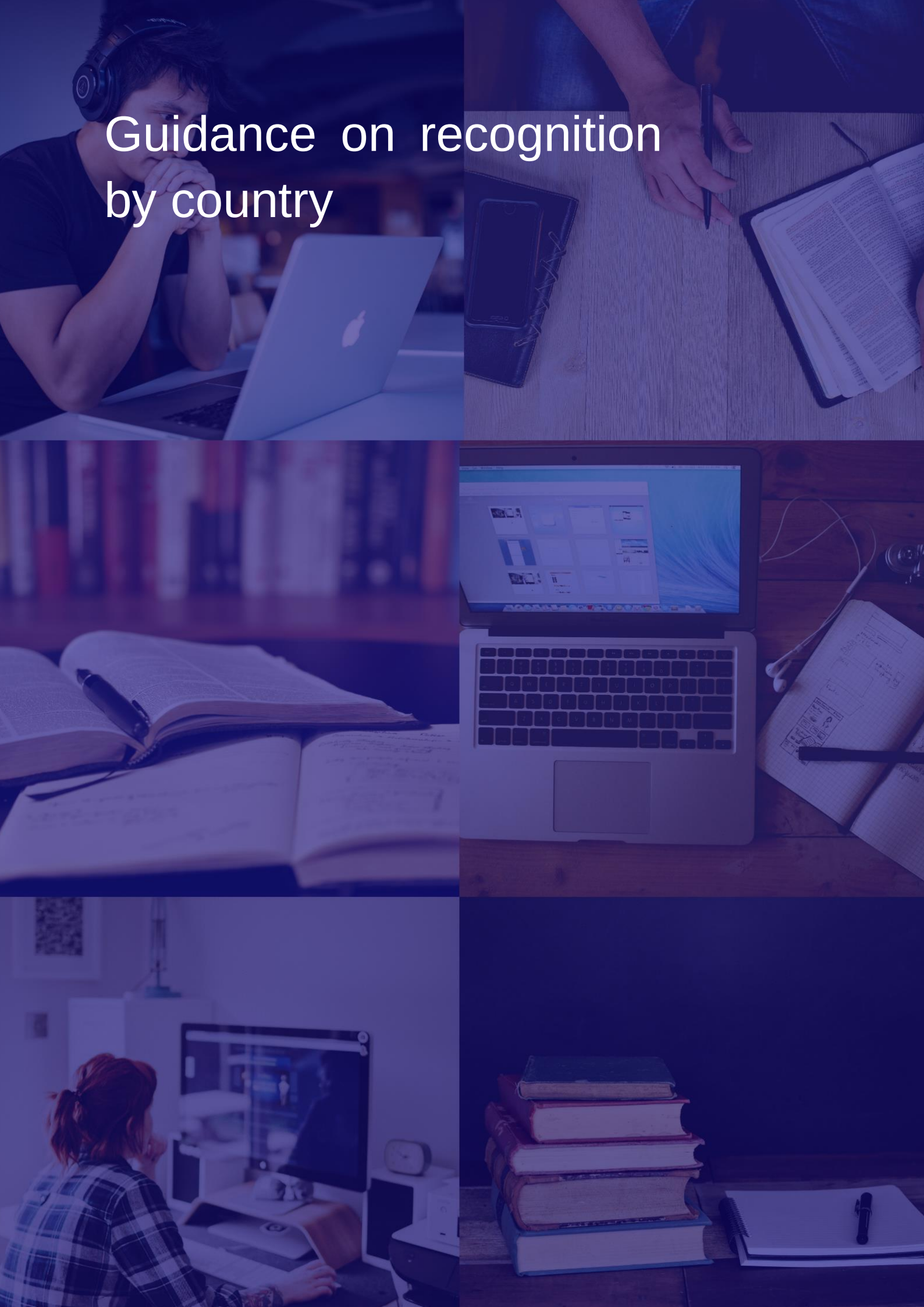
Crucially recognition agencies look for reassurance that that providers have robust systems in place capable to safeguard the integrity of academic or professional standards, and the quality of the student experience, for their distance learning provision.

To support and guide stakeholders in their understanding and recognition of international qualifications, UK NARIC holds information on the accreditation and quality assurance systems of over 190 countries on its [International Comparisons](#)⁴ database, along with specific information on the recognition and regulation of transnational education in 58 countries.

This report is designed to complement the information on quality assurance and qualifications made available to UK NARIC members on the database. It focusses specifically on the distance learning in nine key countries highlighting, where relevant, potential barriers to academic recognition for applicants holding qualifications obtained in this way. As such, this report may be of particular relevance to higher education staff involved in admissions, recruitment or international partnerships development.

⁴ Login required.

Guidance on recognition by country



China

Qualifications awarded by overseas institutions through distance learning are not recognised.

This will not apply to students who have switched to online learning as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic to complete their degrees: their degrees will be recognised.



Relevant authorities

Regulation of higher education

- Ministry of Education (MOE) (*Jiaoyu Bu* 教育部)
- Provincial departments of education
- Academic Degree Committee of the State Council (*Guowuyuan Xuexue Wei Yuanhui* 国务院学位委员会)

Regulation of distance learning

As above

Recognition of overseas qualifications

Chinese Service Centre for Scholarly Exchange (CSCSE) (*Zhongguo Liuxue Fuwu Zhongxin* 中国留学服务中心))

Policies and guidelines on qualifications studied by distance learning

Specific policies / guidelines for distance learning?



Recognition of overseas qualifications studied by distance learning

International qualifications obtained through distance learning are not recognised.

However, the CSCSE released a [statement](#) on 3rd April 2020 explaining that a more flexible approach would be adopted for students who had switched to distance learning as a result of the suspension of face-to-face delivery due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This will not affect the recognition of their degrees in China, even if they do not meet the usual requirements for time spent studying at the overseas institution.

National distance learning provision

There are a number of Chinese higher education institutions approved to offer distance learning. The largest provider is the Open University of China (国家开放大学), which has had degree awarding powers since 2012.

Recognised distance learning providers

Approved list of national distance learning providers?



Recognised distance learning institutions are included within the list of adult education institutions published by the Ministry of Education. Some have degree-awarding powers; others only award sub-degree level (*zhuanke* 专科) qualifications.

Approved list of overseas distance learning providers?



There are no approved overseas distance learning providers.

Applying for recognition: the process for individuals

Graduates of overseas programmes must apply to the Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange (CSCSE) (*Zhongguo Liuxue Fuwu Zhongxin* (中国留学服务中心)) for recognition of their degrees.

The CSCSE does not currently recognise international qualifications obtained via distance learning.

China is a signatory of the [Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education 2011](#).

Hong Kong

Overseas degrees studied through distance learning are recognised in Hong Kong if they are recognised in the home country.

Distance learning programmes offered in Hong Kong can gain accreditation and be listed within the Hong Kong Qualifications Register (HKQR), but this is not required for recognition to be granted.



Relevant authorities

Regulation of higher education

- Education Bureau
- Hong Kong Council for Accreditation and Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ)

Regulation of distance learning

As above

Recognition of overseas qualifications

HKCAAVQ

Policies and guidelines on qualifications studied by distance learning

Specific policies / guidelines for distance learning?



Recognition of overseas qualifications studied by distance learning

Overseas qualifications studied by distance learning are recognised, if they are recognised by the relevant authorities in the home country of the awarding institution.

Programmes that are offered purely via distance learning are not required to be registered, whereas other non-local (transnational education (TNE)) programmes offered in Hong Kong are required to be registered with the Education Bureau and may also be accredited by HKCAAVQ and listed on the [Hong Kong Qualifications Register](#) (HKQR).

Distance learning qualifications may not be recognised for employment in the public sector and regulated professions.

Accreditation of local and overseas distance learning programmes

In 2018, HKCAAVQ launched an accreditation service specifically for online study programmes. An online programme is defined as one in which at least 50% of the instruction is delivered online. Both local and non-local online programmes can be accredited, benchmarked against the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework and listed in the HKQR.

Recognised distance learning providers

Approved list of national distance learning providers?



Any local distance learning programmes accredited by HKCAAVQ are listed in the HKQR, but there is no separate list of accredited distance learning providers.

Approved list of overseas distance learning providers?



There is no list of recognised overseas distance learning providers, but distance learning programmes offered by overseas providers which have been accredited by HKCAAVQ are listed in the [HKQR](#).

Applying for recognition: the process for individuals

Individuals can apply to HKCAAVQ for recognition of their qualifications and an assessment of whether the learning outcomes meet a particular level of qualification in Hong Kong.

India

Overseas degrees studied through distance or blended learning are not recognised by the Association of Indian Universities (AIU).

Qualifications of a shorter duration than counterpart programmes in India (such as accelerated degrees); those with flexible admissions requirements; or those representing a pathway programme may not be eligible for equivalence with the AIU.



Relevant authorities

Regulation of higher education

- Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD)
- University Grants Commission (UGC)

Regulation of distance learning

Distance Education Bureau (DEB) of the University Grants Commission (UGC)

Recognition of overseas qualifications

Association of Indian Universities (AIU)

Policies and guidelines on qualifications studied by distance learning

Specific policies / guidelines for distance learning?



Recognition of overseas qualifications studied by distance learning

As stated above, overseas degrees studied through distance or blended learning are not recognised by the AIU. All degrees issued by foreign universities need to meet a number of eligibility criteria in order for the student's qualification to be recognised by the AIU. It should:

- **Have at least the same entry requirements as a comparable programme in India** - in the case of a Bachelor degree this would mean Standard XII, the upper secondary school qualification in India
- **Be of at least the same overall duration as the counterpart programme in India** – in the case of Bachelor degrees then this would mean at least three years for BA, BSc, and BCom degrees, and two years for a Master's degree. This means accelerated two-year Bachelor degrees offered by some UK universities are unlikely to be recognised, the UK one-year Master's degrees have encountered similar issues.
- Be awarded by a university which is **recognised/accredited in its own country**
- Delivered through **full-time on-campus study**.

There are a number of further policies relating to the eligibility requirements for the recognition of transnational education qualifications, including offshore campuses and franchise arrangements. More detail is available on [International Comparisons](#)⁵ and in the AIU [Advisory to Students](#).

National distance learning provision

Higher education through open and distance learning is regulated by the Distance Education Bureau (DEB) of the University Grants Commission (UGC). The DEB has approved over 100 universities and institutes to offer degrees and postgraduate diplomas through distance learning. These institutions must also obtain approval for their higher education programmes from the respective regulatory bodies (e.g. the UGC, the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) or the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE)).

Recognised distance learning providers

Approved list of national distance learning providers?



The UGC maintains a list of [recognised distance learning programmes](#).

⁵ Login required.

Approved list of overseas distance learning providers?

Distance learning programmes offered by overseas providers are not recognised.

Applying for recognition: the process for individuals

Individuals can apply to the AIU for recognition of overseas qualifications in India. The AIU's remit covers equivalence for qualifications from the Grade 10 secondary certificate up to PhD level, evaluating these for the purpose of admission to further study and employment.

Applicants are asked to provide all preceding qualifications as well as proof, typically in the form of a letter from the awarding school or university, confirming that the applicant was a full-time student on the campus.

Degrees in professional fields such as Architecture, Law, Medicine, Nursing and Pharmacy should be evaluated by the relevant professional body.

Malaysia

Overseas degrees studied through distance learning are recognised if they are recognised in the home country.

Distance learning programmes delivered in Malaysia with local support must be accredited by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) and listed in the Malaysian Qualifications Register (MQR).



Relevant authorities

Regulation of higher education

- Ministry of Higher Education
- Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA)

Regulation of distance learning

As above

Recognition of overseas qualifications

MQA

Policies and guidelines on qualifications studied by distance learning

Specific policies / guidelines for distance learning?



Recognition of overseas qualifications studied by distance learning

Degrees delivered through distance learning are recognised in Malaysia if they are recognised by the relevant authorities in the home country of awarding institution.

National distance learning provision

The MQA has a [Code of Practice](#) for the accreditation of open and distance learning programmes. The first edition of these guidelines was published in 2013, and they were updated in 2019. A programme of study is defined as open and distance learning if more than 60% of the courses offered in the programme are conducted through open and distance learning.

Recognised distance learning providers

Approved list of national distance learning providers?



Higher education qualifications in Malaysia must be accredited by the MQA. Accredited programmes, including those delivered through distance learning, are listed in the MQR. There is no separate list of approved distance learning providers.

There are several open universities in Malaysia, including Open University Malaysia, Wawasan Open University, Al-Madinah International University and Asia e-University. Many other institutions also offer distance learning programmes.

Approved list of overseas distance learning providers?



There is no list of approved overseas providers; degrees delivered through distance learning are recognised if they are recognised by the relevant authorities in the home country of the awarding institution.

Applying for recognition: the process for individuals

The MQA carries out the evaluation of overseas qualifications for the purposes of entry to higher education and employment in the civil service.

Nigeria

UK NARIC is not aware of any recognition issues in regards to overseas degrees awarded through distance learning.

Distance learning is well established in Nigeria, but there is insufficient local provision to meet demand.



Relevant authorities

Regulation of higher education
National Universities Commission (NUC)

Regulation of distance learning
NUC

Recognition of overseas qualifications
Ministry of Education

Policies and guidelines on qualifications studied by distance learning

Specific policies / guidelines for distance learning?



Recognition of overseas qualifications studied by distance learning

There are no published policies on the recognition of overseas qualifications studied through distance learning. Recognition of international qualifications falls under the Ministry of Education; however, the evaluation criteria are not currently published.

National distance learning provision

Approval of distance learning falls under the NUC as part of its wider remit as the statutory body responsible for ensuring the quality of all academic programmes offered in Nigerian universities. NUC approval must be achieved at both the institutional and programme level.

There is a dedicated unit within the NUC – the Directorate of Open and Distance Education – focussed on distance learning and transnational education provision. Its [Guidelines for Open and Distance Learning in Nigerian Universities](#) sets out a number of eligibility criteria Nigerian universities must meet to offer degree programmes through distance learning. Included within this is the requirement that applicants must meet the minimum national requirements for admission. For programme approval, the individual programme must score at least 70% across core areas of pedagogy/learning resources; academic learner support, advice and guidance; evaluation and assessment; and staffing.

Recognised distance learning providers

Approved list of national distance learning providers?



The NUC maintains a list of [approved distance learning providers](#). It is also important to check the list of programmes which have been approved at each centre: this can be found on the same webpage as the list of providers.

Approved list of overseas distance learning providers?



There is no particular list of approved overseas distance learning providers.

Applying for recognition: the process for individuals

Individuals can apply for evaluation through the [Evaluation and Accreditation Division](#) of the Ministry of Education, which provides statements for the purposes of employment or admission to further study. Criteria for recognition are not published; however, the Ministry of Education links to the [International Handbook of Universities](#) for a list of international higher education institutions.

Nigeria is a signatory country of the [Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States 2014](#).

Oman

Distance learning is only recognised for certain MA and PhD programmes, and only when awarded by selected UK, Australian, New Zealand and US institutions.

Students wishing to study at non-Omani institutions should seek written approval from the Ministry of Higher Education prior to enrolment. Only 47 UK universities currently appear on the list of recommended institutes for distance learning.



Relevant authorities

Regulation of higher education

Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA)

Regulation of distance learning

OAAA

Recognition of overseas qualifications

Ministry of Higher Education – Department of Qualifications and Recognition

Policies and guidelines on qualifications studied by distance learning

Specific policies / guidelines for distance learning?



Recognition of overseas qualifications studied by distance learning

Overseas higher education programmes offered purely via distance learning are only recognised when studied at an institution listed by the Ministry. Undergraduate programmes by distance learning are not recognised. For students looking to continue their undergraduate or postgraduate studies at an overseas institution, the Ministry states that Diploma, Bachelor and Master's degree programmes must be studied full time. Master's and Doctoral programmes may be recognised when awarded by an institution that appears on the Ministry's list of recommended e-learning institutions, although certain subjects – those requiring practical skills such as medicine, allied health or engineering – will not be recognised.

National distance learning provision

The OAAA undertakes institutional and programme accreditation in Oman. The scope of this accreditation encompasses programmes through all modes of learning, including distance learning. Institutions are expected to ensure that course materials are designed appropriately and accompanied by adequate student support. Completion rates in courses delivered by distance education should also be monitored by the institution.

Recognised distance learning providers

Approved list of national distance learning providers?



There is no distinct list of national distance learning providers. In addition to the Arab Open University, other universities may offer programmes accredited by the OAAA.

Approved list of overseas distance learning providers?



The Ministry of Higher Education maintains lists of recommended overseas universities, by country; however, the only countries with recommended institutions for distance learning are the UK, Australia, New Zealand and the USA. Currently, **only 49 UK universities** appear on the list.

Applying for recognition: the process for individuals

Students should apply to the [Department of Qualifications and Recognition](#) within the Ministry of Higher Education. Students will have to be able to demonstrate campus-based study through a copy of their passport showing entry and exit stamps for the country of award.

As stated above, local students are additionally required to seek approval before enrolment.

Oman is a signatory country of the [*Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab States 1978*](#).

Pakistan

Degrees awarded by overseas distance learning providers may be recognised providing they meet three key criteria set out by the Higher Education Commission (HEC)

Degrees issued by universities that *only* deliver online are not eligible for recognition. The requirement for distance learning programmes to be “indistinguishable” from campus-based programmes may also mean that individual degrees may not be recognised.



Relevant authorities

Regulation of higher education

Higher Education Commission (HEC)

Regulation of distance learning

HEC

Recognition of overseas qualifications

HEC

Policies and guidelines on qualifications studied by distance learning

Specific policies / guidelines for distance learning?



Recognition of overseas qualifications studied by distance learning

The HEC [Policy on Distance / Virtual / On-line Education](#) sets out three key factors for the recognition of distance learning offered by foreign universities, specifically that:

- The institution should be accredited/chartered by a body recognised by the HEC and
- Have both on-campus and distance education programmes
- Degrees granted by the institution through on-campus and distance learning modes should be “indistinguishable”.

National distance learning provision

Guidelines on distance education in the public domain is limited: nonetheless, the scope of the [Institutional Performance Evaluations](#) conducted by the HEC encompasses all modes of learning: it may place restrictions on or close any distance learning centres identified as not meeting performance standards. The HEC has also put out [specific guidelines for quality programmes](#) under Covid-19.

Recognised distance learning providers

Approved list of national distance learning providers?



There is no standalone list of national distance learning providers. The HEC maintains a [list](#) of all recognised institutions able to award degrees and may place restrictions on some universities in terms of the distance education centres which are able to operate.

Approved list of overseas distance learning providers?



There is no standalone list of approved overseas distance learning providers. The HEC does maintain a [list](#) of foreign institutions allowed to provide collaborative degree programmes in Pakistan.

Applying for recognition: the process for individuals

Individuals seeking recognition of overseas degrees should [apply for equivalence](#) with the HEC. Whilst the *Policy on Distance / Virtual / On-line Education* demonstrates that degrees should be recognised where the three criteria have been fulfilled, the [SOPs for Foreign Degree Equivalence](#) state that the individual is expected to be able to present a copy of their passport indicating “visa, entry and exit in respective country” for the duration of their studies.

Singapore

There is no central authority in Singapore that assesses or grants recognition to degrees awarded by overseas universities, whether studied via distance learning or face-to-face. Decisions about qualifications are made at the discretion of the employer or admitting institution.

Recognition of degrees in professional subjects, such as accountancy, engineering, law and medicine, is the responsibility of the relevant professional body.



Relevant authorities

Regulation of higher education

Ministry of Education (publically funded higher education only)

Regulation of distance learning

As above

Recognition of overseas qualifications

N/A

Policies and guidelines on qualifications studied by distance learning

Specific policies / guidelines for distance learning?



Recognition of overseas qualifications studied by distance learning

As the Ministry of Education does not grant recognition to private or overseas institutions or their qualifications, there are no national policies or guidelines relating to the recognition of distance learning.

Recognition of distance learning for professional registration

Qualifications accepted for professional registration are determined by professional bodies, such as the Singapore Medical Association and the Board of Professional Engineers. These bodies maintain lists of approved degrees from overseas universities. Policies and guidelines on qualifications studied by distance learning vary. For example, the [Board of Professional Engineers](#) stipulates that at least 50% of approved engineering degrees must have been studied on-campus. Degrees in accountancy studied by distance learning from [recognised overseas institutions](#) are acceptable for membership of the [Institute of Singapore Chartered Accountants](#) and eligible for enrolment on [Singapore Accountancy Commission](#) Chartered Accountant qualification. The [Singapore Medical Association list of recognised degree programmes](#) does not include any distance learning qualifications.

Recognised distance learning providers

Approved list of national distance learning providers?



Under the Private Education Act, private providers must register with the [Committee for Private Education \(CPE\)](#). The [list of approved programmes](#) includes programmes offered by distance learning.

Approved list of overseas distance learning providers?



The [CPE list of approved programmes](#) also includes distance learning programmes offered by overseas providers in Singapore, often through a local partner.

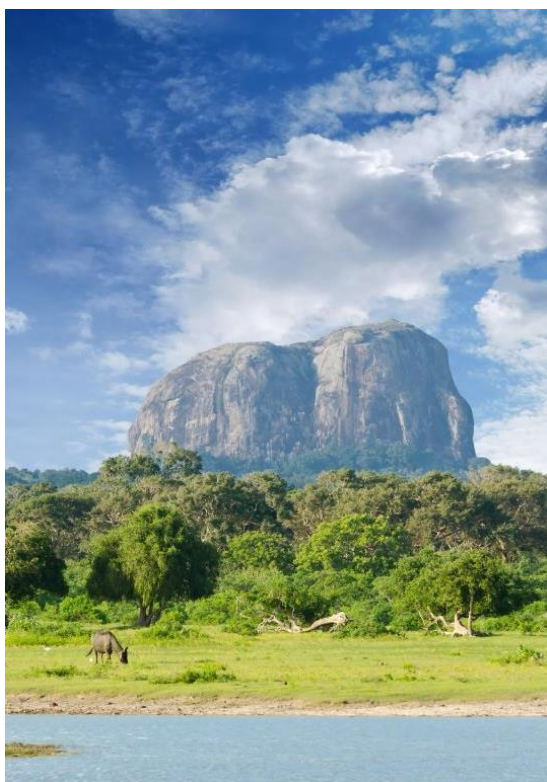
Applying for recognition: the process for individuals

There is no central authority which recognises overseas qualifications; decisions are made by employers and admitting institutions.

Sri Lanka

UK NARIC is not aware of any recognition issues in Sri Lanka relating to overseas degrees awarded through distance learning.

Transnational education has seen considerable growth in Sri Lanka at undergraduate level, with institutions from Australia and the UK the main providers



Relevant authorities

Regulation of higher education

University Grants Commission (UGC) – Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council

Regulation of distance learning

UGC

Recognition of overseas qualifications

UGC

Policies and guidelines on qualifications studied by distance learning

Specific policies / guidelines for distance learning?



Recognition of overseas qualifications studied by distance learning

There are no specific policies in place for the recognition of overseas distance learning qualifications.

National distance learning provision

In 2019, the UGC published the [Manual for Review of Undergraduate Study Programmes of Sri Lankan Distance Higher Education Institutions](#). This sets out criteria, best practices and standards for quality assessment in distance learning, along with guidelines for institutions. It replaced an earlier toolkit published under the Distance Education Modernization Project in 2009.

Recognised distance learning providers

Approved list of national distance learning providers?



There is no specific list of providers recognised for the purposes of distance learning: the UGC maintains a list of recognised universities and higher education institutions and programmes. In addition to the Open University of Sri Lanka, other universities may offer programmes through their Centers of Distance and Continuing Education.

Approved list of overseas distance learning providers?



There is no list specifically relating to distance learning: the University Grants Commission recognises higher education institutions listed in either the [Commonwealth Universities Yearbook](#) or the [International Handbook of Universities](#).

Applying for recognition: the process for individuals

Individuals need to apply for a Certificate of Recognition from the [University Grants Commission](#).

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