PRELIMINARY REPORT CONCERNING THE PREPARATION OF A GLOBAL CONVENTION ON THE RECOGNITION OF HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS

OUTLINE

Background: Pursuant to 37 C/Resolution 15 and in accordance with the Rules of Procedure concerning recommendations to Member States and international conventions covered by the terms of Article IV, paragraph 4 of the Constitution, the Director-General submits the preliminary report concerning the preparation of a global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications.

Purpose: This document contains the preliminary report concerning the preparation of a global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications and the comments of the Executive Board thereon (197 EX/Decision 8).

Decision required: Paragraph 9.
BACKGROUND

1. The General Conference at its 37th session examined the preliminary study on the technical and legal aspects relating to the desirability of a global standard-setting instrument on the recognition of higher education qualifications and the comments and observations of the Executive Board thereon.

2. By Resolution 37 C/Resolution 15, the General Conference recognized the benefits of a global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications and invited the Director-General to initiate the process of elaborating a global convention. The General Conference requested that the development of the global convention build upon and complement the regional conventions. It also requested that further comprehensive consultations with Member States and relevant stakeholders be undertaken in order to consider further key issues relating to the establishment of a global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications. The General Conference invited the Director-General to submit to the 38th session of the General Conference a preliminary report for consideration and decision on further action.

3. Pursuant to this Resolution, the Director-General convened a meeting of international experts in July 2014 and April 2015, which provided valuable insights on the possible development of a global convention. In April 2015, a draft preliminary report concerning the global convention was transmitted to Member States for their inputs and comments. A vast majority of Member States and experts viewed favourably the proposal to establish a global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications. The issues raised during these consultations are addressed in the preliminary report concerning the preparation of a global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications. A summary of the preliminary report was examined by the 197th session of the Executive Board. This document contains the summary of the preliminary report (Annex I) and the comments of the Executive Board thereon. The full text of the preliminary report on the preparation of a global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications is available on the UNESCO Education Sector website.¹

COMMENTS OF THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

4. Upon examining the preliminary report, many Executive Board members expressed their support to the development of a global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications. The Executive Board suggested that the new normative framework should be flexible and take into account the diversity of national systems. The Executive Board further stressed that the implementation and revision of regional recognition conventions should continue while the global convention is developed. The Executive Board highlighted that the global convention should be based on quality assurance, transparency, equity and reciprocity, with due attention being paid to academic freedom, institutional autonomy and accountability.

5. Some Executive Board members expressed their concerns on how the global convention will respond to national specificities as well as on the financing of the convention, its implementation and the timeline proposed for the elaboration of the instrument. Several Board members requested that the development of the global convention be done through an intergovernmental process and expressed their interest to take part in the proposed Drafting Committee. Some Board members expressed their willingness to support financially the development of the global convention.

6. By 197 EX/Decision 8 (Annex II), the Executive Board recommended to the 38th session of the General Conference to invite the Director-General to continue the process of elaborating a global convention and to submit a progress report, accompanied by a preliminary draft of the convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications to the 39th session of the General Conference (2017).

COMMENTS OF THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL

7. The Director-General proposes to convene a Drafting Committee (category VI) in the course of the biennium 2016-2017. In accordance with the 'Regulations for the general classification of the various categories of meetings convened by UNESCO', members of the Drafting Committee shall serve in a personal capacity. In response to the request of some of the members of the Executive Board that the Member States be engaged in the process, the Director-General will appoint the members of the Drafting Committee from amongst experts and stakeholders in higher education, based on consultations with the Member States.

8. The main task of the Drafting Committee will be to prepare, jointly with the Secretariat, the preliminary draft of the global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications. The text will be further refined through regional consultations with the Member States to be organized by the Secretariat. If and when possible, regional consultations will be conducted jointly with planned meetings of organs established under respective regional recognition conventions in order to maximize benefits while reducing costs. The Secretariat will seek financial support with a view to ensure an inclusive and participatory process of developing the global convention with Member States and key stakeholders in the field of higher education.

PROPOSED RESOLUTION

9. In light of the foregoing, the General Conference may wish to adopt the following resolution:

The General Conference,

Recalling 37 C/Resolution 15,

Taking note of 197 EX/Decision 8,

Also taking note of the broad support expressed by Member States, experts and other stakeholders for the development of a global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications,

Having examined document 38 C/26 which presents a summary of the preliminary report concerning the preparation of a global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications and the comments and observations of the Executive Board thereon,

1. Reaffirms that a global convention will improve academic and professional mobility, enhance international cooperation in higher education, and will represent a significant step forward towards global recognition and trust,

2. Acknowledging progress made regarding the revision of regional recognition conventions,

3. Stresses that the global convention should build upon and complement the existing regional recognition conventions,

4. Invites the Director-General to continue the process of elaborating a global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications;

5. Further invites the Director-General to convene a Drafting Committee (category VI meeting) to elaborate a preliminary draft of the global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications and requests the Director-General to appoint the members of the Drafting Committee based on consultations with the Member States;
6. Requests the Director-General to consult Member States and relevant stakeholders on the preliminary draft of the global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications in an inclusive manner through regional consultations;

7. Encourages Member States to provide financial resources to facilitate the consultation process, including the regional consultations,

8. Requests the Director-General to submit a progress report, accompanied by a preliminary draft of the convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications to the 39th session of the General Conference (2017) for consideration and decision on further action.
SUMMARY OF PRELIMINARY REPORT CONCERNING THE PREPARATION OF A GLOBAL CONVENTION ON THE RECOGNITION OF HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS

Background

1. Ever since UNESCO has been created, it has served as a global platform for discussion on recognition of higher education qualifications and promotion of academic mobility. In 1947, the General Conference at its 2nd session discussed this topic. In 1963, the Executive Board invited the Director-General to study the technical and legal aspects of developing normative instruments on the equivalence of secondary school certificates, diplomas and university degrees. It was later concluded that the initial phase could be addressed at regional levels. Consequently, between 1975 and 1983, six regional recognition conventions were developed.

2. In 2011, recognizing that the existing regional conventions do not adequately address the new dynamics in higher education, Member States expressed their support to UNESCO conducting a feasibility study for a global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications. An initial feasibility study on the technical and legal aspects relating to the desirability of a global standard-setting instrument on the recognition of higher education qualifications was examined by the General Conference at its 37th session in 2013. By 37 C/Resolution 15, the General Conference, while recognizing the benefits of such a global normative instrument and inviting the Director-General to initiate the process of elaborating a global convention, invited the Director-General to consult Member States and relevant stakeholders to consider further key issues relating to it. Hereby, the Director-General submits a summary of the preliminary report on this matter.

3. This preliminary report reflects the results of consultations with Member States and international experts. As part of the consultations, a group of international experts were convened twice (Paris, 10-11 July 2014 and 23-24 April 2015) and all Member States were invited to provide their inputs and comments on the draft version of the report (Circular Letter dated 29 April 2015).

4. A vast majority of Member States and experts generally viewed the proposal as favourable and provided constructive inputs to it. A number of issues raised through the consultations such as the level of ambitions for a global convention; funding of the implementation process; and the value added of a global convention to the countries which have ratified and implemented well-functioning regional conventions are addressed in this preliminary report.

Global trends in higher education

5. The proposal for a global convention is to be examined in the light of the current global trends in higher education and the education communities’ response to the Education 2030 Agenda, which puts emphasis on lifelong learning, including higher education. Higher education is today highly characterized by such trends as massification and democratization; diversification of provision and providers; academic mobility; employability; heightened attention given to quality assurance; and the introduction of qualifications frameworks.

6. Between 2000 and 2012, global enrolment in tertiary education grew from 97 million to 196 million. Universities built on the nearly 1,000-year-old classical tradition are being challenged by a fast-growing number of new providers, especially using information and communication technologies.
technologies (ICTs) as delivery mechanisms. This diversification of providers and delivery modalities is being accompanied by diversification in funding sources. In 2012, at least 4 million students studied outside their home country. A rapidly-changing labour market is requiring many workers to “re-skill” or “up-skill”, consolidating higher education’s role as an important component of lifelong learning. Societies are increasingly relying on higher education institutions to address many of the challenges they face through high-calibre research and innovation.

Regional conventions as the foundation of a global convention

7. The implementation of the regional conventions has followed different paths and has experienced variable success. Although the implementation levels of the regional conventions are not uniform, the regional conventions must be seen as the core foundation of a global convention on recognition of higher education qualifications. The second generation of regional recognition conventions, notably the 1997 Lisbon Convention (Europe), the 2011 Tokyo Convention (Asia and the Pacific) and the 2014 Addis Ababa Convention (Africa), have introduced a number of interesting new modalities into the field of cross-border recognition and these should be investigated further for the potential inclusion in a global convention.

8. In parallel to the development of a global convention, there is a need for UNESCO to continue to support and encourage revisions of those regional conventions which have not yet been modernized. Such revisions will create a better regional balance in the field of intra-regional academic mobility and thus strengthen the foundation for implementation of a global convention.

Aims and value added of the global convention

9. The Global Convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications aims to:

   o strengthen inter-regional academic mobility;
   o promote increased international cooperation in higher education;
   o promote democratization of higher education and lifelong learning opportunities for all;
   o provide a framework of quality assurance for the fast-growing diversity of higher education providers; and
   o develop agreed principles for recognition of on higher education qualifications common to all regions.

10. As of today, there are about 2.5 million students studying outside their home region. These students have in principal no legal framework governing the principles or procedures used for recognition of their qualifications for if and when they return to their home region. The proposed global convention will provide such framework.

11. Furthermore, the rapidly growing online provision of higher education makes it pertinent to facilitate recognition on the global level as online provision are often not limited to single regions. The use of ICT in higher education is not limited to the provision. ICTs can also be further utilized in higher education administration, such as cross-border and cross-regional recognition of higher education qualification. Such use could potentially significantly counteract some of the challenges seen by recognition practitioners today and make the administration and bureaucracy of academic recognition more efficient for all involved parties.

12. Reciprocity is an important principal for the global convention. A global convention should not be set up in an imbalanced manner. A global recognition convention must be based on mutual trust, mutual gain and mutual opportunities for the mobility of individuals. Strong, reliable, and transparent quality assurance systems are needed to reach the necessary level of trust between
the Parties and between the higher education institutions. The ongoing developments in recognition, quality assurance and qualifications frameworks will greatly benefit from being seen as complementary actions within the same agenda.

Scope of the global convention

13. The global convention will not seek to harmonize higher education systems or to develop a framework for automatic recognition or recognition based on equivalence.

14. It is not within the scope of the global convention to include other levels or thematic areas of education than higher education. The convention should be in synergy with instruments in important fields of education such as technical and vocational education and training.

15. Furthermore, the global convention will not be designed or aimed at recognition for the purpose of entry into a profession, especially those which are specifically regulated such as the medical professions. Academic recognition could facilitate labour market entry, but entry into certain professions remains of national regulation or is governed through other international agreements.

16. The global convention will also not interfere with or hinder bilateral mobility agreements between countries or higher education institutions.

Areas for further consideration in the development and implementation of the global convention

17. In the development of the global convention, some choices must be made in order to facilitate success in the challenging process of implementation. For instance, there is a need to define the relationship between the global convention and the regional conventions in order to ensure that the regional conventions address regionally specific challenges.

18. The relationship between recognition, quality assurance and qualifications frameworks should be further discussed throughout the development process.

19. The recognition of informal and non-formal learning is yet another topic for further elaboration.

20. A set of globally agreed principles on procedures for the recognition of qualifications for refugees and people in refugee-like contexts can be developed.

21. The global convention would encourage cooperation between formal Parties of the convention and non-Parties.

Financial implications

22. Developing a new normative instrument in the field of recognition of higher education qualifications will require adequate human and financial resources. While it would be the intention of the Director-General to meet the associated costs, it might be challenging to absorb this cost in the regular programme budget in the current financial context of the Organization. Extrabudgetary resources would be required to meet the needs to develop this instrument. Throughout the implementation, sustainable funding is required for UNESCO to support the convention committee and the network of practitioners.

23. At the national level, the implementation of a global convention will require resources for quality assurance agencies, national information services, recognition agencies and the like. These structures are required, regardless of the status of ratification to the global convention. For
Member States which have already ratified a regional convention, the national structures which are already in place can be utilized.

24. UNESCO is ready to facilitate and provide technical support to Member States for capacity development needed for full implementation at national, regional and global level. The funding for such activities cannot rest upon UNESCO alone but also based on political commitment and financial contributions from Member States.

**Proposed timeline and action expected by the Executive board**

25. In accordance with 37 C/Resolution 15, this preliminary report will be presented to the General Conference at its 38th session (2015), along with the comments of the Executive Board at its 197th session.

26. Having examined this preliminary report, it may wish to request the Director-General to undertake further steps in elaborating a global convention with the aim of presenting the final draft of the convention text for examination and possible adoption by an International Conference of States (ICS) in 2018 or 2019, or by the General Conference at its 40th session (2019), pursuant to the decision of the General Conference at its 39th session (2017).

27. In accordance with the Rules of Procedure concerning recommendations to Member States and international conventions covered by the terms of Article IV, paragraph 4, of the Constitution, the further steps would include:

- A drafting committee (category VI) consisting of international experts, which may also include smaller theme-specific sub-committees, will be convened by the Director-General. A final report including a draft convention will be communicated to all Member States.

- Regional consultations of Member States, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders will be conducted by the Director-General.

- If the General Conference decides, at its 39th session, that the draft convention will be adopted at its 40th session, the Director-General’s final report will be examined by a special committee consisting of technical and legal experts appointed by the Member States. All Member States will be invited as full participants in the special committee. The final draft convention approved by the special committee will then be submitted to the General Conference at its 40th session.

28. In the lead-up to the final draft of the convention, the General Conference may wish to request the Director-General to submit a progress report with a preliminary draft of the convention to the 39th session of the General Conference (2017).

**Conclusion**

29. Based on the preliminary report, drafted based on valuable inputs from Member States and international experts, the Director-General, while acknowledging the challenges within its development and implementation, considers that such a global normative instrument should be a core action within higher education towards 2030 and towards equitable higher education being established as a public good. UNESCO will be fully prepared to take a strong lead in the development and implementation of the convention.
ANNEX II

197 EX/Decision 8

PRELIMINARY REPORT CONCERNING THE PREPARATION OF A GLOBAL CONVENTION ON THE RECOGNITION OF HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS

The Executive Board,

1. Recalling 37 C/Resolution 15, which requested the Director-General to consult Member States and relevant stakeholders on key issues relating to the establishment of a global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications, further to the preliminary study of the technical and legal aspects (document 37 C/45),

2. Having examined document 197 EX/8 presenting the preliminary report concerning the preparation of a global convention on recognition of higher education qualifications,

3. Committed to the Incheon Declaration and the proposed Sustainable Development Goal 4 on education to promote quality lifelong learning opportunities for all, including higher education and research,

4. Takes note of major developments in higher education such as massification and democratization, increased mobility and diversification of higher education provision and providers, and the use of information and communication technologies (ICT);

5. Further notes the broad support expressed by Member States through the extensive consultations of Member States, experts and other stakeholders;

6. Stresses that a global convention should be built on, and will complement strong regional conventions, and not in any way weaken their achievements on the regional level;

7. Conscious of the need for sufficient supplementary resources to be provided through extrabudgetary funds in order to facilitate comprehensive consultations with Member States and other stakeholders and their broad participation in the process of developing a draft convention;

8. Requests the Director-General to present to the 38th session of the General Conference a timeline of the procedures to be undertaken for the global convention taking into consideration the discussions in the 197th session of the Executive Board;

9. Recommends to the 38th session of the General Conference to invite the Director-General to continue the process of elaborating a global convention and to submit a progress report, accompanied by a preliminary draft of the convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications to the 39th session of the General Conference (2017).