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Title

Bridging Barriers: How Guidance Services and NGOs Support the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications and Career Integration

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Abstract

Introduction

Recognising formal foreign qualifications significantly improves employment outcomes, wages, and occupational matching (Brücker et al., 2021) but is a highly complex process. OECD evidence shows that timely, transparent procedures reduce overqualification and accelerate labour market entry (OECD, 2017; OECD, 2023). In Germany's highly standardised education system, recognition pathways remain complex because of fragmented responsibilities, uneven regional support structures, and limited transparency (Döring et al.,

2015; Körtek, 2015). These barriers can delay labour market entry, increase skill underutilisation, and push migrants into precarious employment (Brücker et al., 2021; Pecoraro, 2023). Counselling plays a key intermediary role by reducing uncertainty, coordinating referrals, and facilitating access to follow-up support, although its provision remains uneven across regions (Döring et al., 2015; Müller & Ayan, 2015). Effective support must therefore go beyond procedural advice and include migration-sensitive, trust-based, and customized counselling, with low-threshold NGO services complementing formal administrative guidance through culturally sensitive, empowerment-oriented support (Müller & Ayan, 2013; Müller & Ayan, 2015). However, little is known about how public guidance services and NGOs perceive their roles and address barriers within the recognition pathway.

Objectives

This study examines how guidance services and NGOs support migrants in navigating through recognition procedures for foreign qualifications and how this contributes to migrants' labour market integration and careers. We investigate how support actors define their role, which strategies they use to reduce procedural, communicative, and institutional barriers, and how institutional conditions shape best practice for more sustainable recognition systems.

Theoretical Basis

The study combines complementary theoretical perspectives to analyse recognition support across macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. At the macro-level, credentialism highlights how recognition systems can reproduce exclusion through documentation demands, institutional opacity, and culturally coded standards (Freidson, 1994; Spence, 1973). At the meso-level, human capital theory underscores the importance of recognition for labour market matching, employability, and the prevention of skill underutilisation (Becker, 1993). Migration research shows that the value of foreign qualifications depends on their transferability and institutional legibility, which are often constrained by recognition barriers, limited transparency, and documentary requirements (Chiswick & Miller, 2009; Friedberg, 2000). At the micro-level, solution-focused brief therapy frames counselling as activating resources, enhancing self-efficacy, and promoting solution-oriented coping within complex recognition pathways (De Shazer & Dolan, 2024). Career construction theory complements this by situating recognition within migrants' broader career adaptation, encompassing identity reconstruction, future orientation, and career adaptability under uncertainty (Savickas, 2013). Together, these perspectives capture both individual support processes and the structural barriers that shape recognition outcomes.

Methodology

The study is based on ten semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in December 2025 in Germany: five with professionals from public guidance services and five with NGO representatives involved in recognition-related support. Key topics included role perceptions, counselling practices, institutional cooperation, barriers, and support needs. The interviews are analysed using a combination of structuring and explanatory qualitative content analysis (Mayring & Fenzl, 2019).

Results

The findings reveal that recognition support is a crucial interface between career guidance, institutional navigation, and social inclusion, drawing on both public guidance services and NGOs. Effective support combines procedural guidance with resource activation, self-efficacy, and career adaptability, while also addressing structural barriers such as institutional opacity and fragmented responsibilities. Recognition support is not merely an administrative task but a distinct field of migration-sensitive career guidance.

Conclusions

A key contribution of this study is a differentiated understanding of complementary roles: public services mainly provide procedural orientation and transparency, while NGOs offer trust-based, language-sensitive, and empowerment-oriented support. The findings underline that inclusive career guidance in migration contexts requires holistic, migration-sensitive counselling, accessible communication, structured inter-institutional cooperation, and adequate personell resources.

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