

11 Assessment of qualifications



KEY INSIGHTS

- GRPs related to the assessment of foreign qualifications are progressively gaining more importance; this enables qualified foreign service suppliers to operate across borders more easily and efficiently, without compromising quality.
- Under the GATS, WTO members are required to provide for adequate procedures to verify the competence of professionals of other jurisdictions. Furthermore, the GATS allows WTO members to recognize various types of qualifications obtained abroad, autonomously or through a mutual arrangement.
- The SDR Disciplines apply GRP principles to qualifications requirements and procedures and require examinations, where used, to be scheduled at fairly frequent intervals with a reasonable period of time to request them; they also encourage receiving requests electronically and using electronic means for other aspects of the examinations. Some recent PTAs align with the SDR Disciplines, while others go beyond, including by encouraging oral examinations and offering exams in the other parties' territories.
- At the domestic level, differences exist among jurisdictions and across sectors, particularly in the application of substantive assessment criteria and procedures. Recent technological advances allow for tools such as digital submission, online examination, as well as remote invigilation – enhancing the accessibility and efficiency of examinations. Other practices are also emerging, including structured paths for recognition via a third jurisdiction, helping to create new opportunities for qualified suppliers to offer their services in other jurisdictions.

Key features

In order to obtain authorization, service suppliers need to comply with a range of substantive requirements. Depending on the specific sector, some of these requirements relate to their competence to supply such a service. This is the case typically in the field of professional services (e.g. law, accounting, engineering) but also in other areas such as education (e.g. teachers), transport (e.g. pilots) and financial services (e.g. insurance agents).

Natural persons typically acquire their qualifications in their home jurisdictions before looking to provide services in foreign ones. In such cases, for natural persons to be able to operate abroad, the host economy must not only be open to foreign-qualified professionals but also assess whether the qualifications obtained abroad are equivalent to those typically required in the host jurisdictions.

Several GRPs exist with regard to the assessment of qualifications, notably with respect to two main aspects: (i) substantive requirements to be fulfilled for admission to the assessment; and (ii) assessment procedures.

GATS, SDR Disciplines and other relevant trade agreements

In addition to the non-discrimination principle set out in GATS Article II (most-favoured-nation treatment) and Article XVII (national treatment), Article VI:6 requires WTO members, where they have undertaken commitments specifically in professional services in their schedules of specific commitments, to “provide for adequate procedures to verify the competence of professionals of any other Member”.¹ The obligation concerns the specific situation of persons engaged in the supply of professional services whose competence has been acquired outside the host country jurisdiction. One GRP principle which has emerged in this area concerns giving due consideration to applicants’ relevant professional experiences, including by taking into account membership in professional associations or registries in other jurisdictions.²

Article VI:6 aims to ensure that where market access is granted, such access is not undercut by lack of adequate verification mechanisms of competence in the host economy. The provision deals with procedures

only and does not address the issue of different substantive requirements between foreigners and local professionals. The latter is possible only where national treatment limitations have been entered in schedules of specific commitments, that is to say, limitations allowing WTO members to impose requirements that modify conditions of competition to the advantage of domestic suppliers.

WTO members have provided no further guidance as to what constitutes “adequate procedures” in GATS Article VI:6. Keeping in mind the objective of the provision (namely, to ensure that qualified foreign professionals can engage in the supply of services), the procedures must therefore be appropriate to establish equivalence between foreign and local qualifications and competence. Implementing the provision means ensuring that competent foreign professionals are not unfairly excluded from practising a certain profession, while maintaining the required competence levels that prevail in the domestic market.

An important tool to facilitate the assessment of qualifications is through recognition under GATS Article VII:1. A WTO member may, for the purpose of meeting its standards or criteria for authorization, licensing or certification, recognize education or experience obtained, requirements met, and licences or certifications granted in another jurisdiction.³ In accordance with the conditions set out in this Article, recognition can be granted autonomously, or through a mutual recognition arrangement (MRA) with other WTO members. In a nutshell, recognition facilitates the realization of market access opportunities compared to a process of verification of competence through Article VI:6.

To ensure that the benefits do not remain exclusive, the GATS requires there to be a degree of openness in recognition regimes. Where a WTO member grants recognition autonomously, it must provide an adequate opportunity for any other WTO member to demonstrate that education, experience, licences or certifications obtained, or requirements met, in the other WTO member’s territory be recognized.⁴ However, where recognition is accorded based on a mutual agreement, WTO members are required to provide adequate opportunity to other interested WTO members to negotiate their accession to such an arrangement or, alternatively, to negotiate comparable ones.⁵ These obligations are complemented with a substantive obligation not to grant recognition

in a manner that would constitute a means of discrimination or a disguised restriction on trade in services.⁶

Furthermore, in accordance with GATS Article VII:5, recognition should, wherever appropriate, be based on multilaterally agreed criteria, and WTO members shall work in appropriate cases towards common international standards and criteria for recognition as well as the practice of relevant services trades and professions.⁷

The SDR Disciplines contain several GRP principles which are relevant in the assessment of competence of foreign service suppliers, through their applicability to qualification requirements and procedures. With respect to substantive requirements, they stipulate that measures, including qualification-related requirements, are based on transparent and objective criteria including the competence to supply a service.⁸ Moreover, the SDR Disciplines provide that information, particularly in relation to the procedures for verifying qualifications and competence, is clearly outlined and accessible, including details on how to apply for examinations, what documentation is required, timelines for processing, as well as associated fees.⁹

Appropriate mechanisms (such as help desks or enquiry points) are to be established to guide interested suppliers, including foreign ones who are seeking instructions, with a view to meeting local requirements and requesting examinations.¹⁰ In accordance with the SDR Disciplines, (qualification) procedures are to be impartial and adequate for applicants to demonstrate that they meet any existing qualification requirements.¹¹ Additionally, procedures are to be conducted within established and reasonable time frames, and applicants are to be informed of the results of their applications (i.e. in this case, examinations), including with reasons in case of failure, and given the opportunity to re-apply.¹² A possibility should be provided to submit applications to demonstrate compliance, including with qualification requirements, to only one competent authority.¹³

Furthermore, the SDR Disciplines address the issue of assessment of qualifications directly and in a manner complementary to the GATS as follows:

If a Member requires an examination for authorization for the supply of a service, that Member shall ensure

that its competent authorities schedule such an examination at reasonably frequent intervals and provide a reasonable period of time to enable applicants to request to take the examination. Having regard to the cost, administrative burden, and the integrity of the procedures involved, Members are encouraged to accept requests in electronic format to take such examinations, and to consider, to the extent practicable, the use of electronic means in other aspects of examination processes.¹⁴

This provision contains four key elements:

1. Authorities shall schedule any required examinations at reasonably frequent intervals

The term “reasonably frequent intervals” refers to the expectation that if a jurisdiction requires examinations, to provide authorization for the supply of a service, such exams should be held often enough to avoid creating unnecessary delays or barriers to market entry. The appropriate frequency may vary depending on factors such as the volume of applicants, the complexity and resource intensity of the examination, and the administrative capacity needed to ensure integrity and fairness of the process. For example, examinations with standardized written formats and high demand may be held continuously or several times per year, while highly specialized or practical assessments requiring expert supervision or specific facilities (e.g. aviation, or clinical tests) may be offered less frequently.

In practice, intervals for professional exams typically range from one to four times per year, depending on the profession and the jurisdiction (Figure 1).

2. Authorities shall provide a reasonable period of time to enable applicants to request to take the examination

This requirement seeks to ensure that applicants have sufficient time to submit their applications for examinations, ensuring that they can prepare the necessary documentation, plan logistics and review relevant materials. In practice, application/registration models vary: some exams offer rolling, year-round scheduling, where eligible applicants can reserve dates during a booking window (anecdotal evidence points to booking windows offering dates of 3–6 months in the future). Where fixed examination sittings are offered, application windows commonly open 1–4 months (or more) ahead and close about 2–8 weeks before the exam.¹⁵

Figure 1: Frequency of examinations in selected WTO members and professions (2025)

Country	Accounting exams	Engineering exams	Medical exams	Nursing exams
United States	CPA: Year-round through private online invigilation services	- FE exam: Year-round through private online invigilation services; - Most PE: Year-round	USMLE steps 1, 2, and 3 Year-round	NCLEX: Year-round through private online invigilation services
Canada	CFE: twice per year	Varies by province; multiple sittings per year common	MCCQE Part 1: Year-round through private online invigilation services	NCLEX: Year-round through private online invigilation services
Australia	CPA: Four times per year	No fixed national examination schedule (applications accepted year-round).¹⁶	- Multiple choice year-round through private online invigilation services); - Clinical: in scheduled blocks	NCLEX: Year-round; OSCE held in scheduled blocks
India	CA exam: Three times per year	- No single national licensure exam. GATE: Once per year. - IEI AMIE exams: per IEI schedule.	FMGE twice per year	State-specific; multiple sittings per year common
South Africa	- Initial test of competence twice per year; - Assessment of professional competence once/year	Competency assessed on rolling basis without fixed examination schedule	Two to three times per year	Two to three times per year
Brazil	Twice per year	- No national exam; - Registration with regional engineering councils based on a ministry-recognized degree.	Revalida exam: Twice per year	- No national exam; - Registration with state nursing council based on a Brazilian-recognized degree
China	CPA: Once per year	- No single, all-discipline licensure exam; - Specialty-specific national qualification exams held once per year	National medical licensing exam: Once per year	National nursing registration exams: Once per year

Glossary of abbreviations in Figure 1:

- AMIE — Associate Member of the Institution of Engineers (India)
- CA — Chartered Accountant
- CFE — Common Final Examination (CPA Canada).
- CPA — Certified Public Accountant
- FE — Fundamentals of Engineering (US)
- FMGE — Foreign Medical Graduate Examination (India).
- GATE — Graduate Aptitude Test in Engineering (India).
- IEI — Institution of Engineers (India)
- MCCQE — Medical Council of Canada Qualifying Examination.
- NCLEX — National Council Licensure Examination (nursing).
- OSCE — Objective Structured Clinical Examination
- PE — Professional Engineer (US licensure)
- Revalida — Exame Nacional de Revalidação de Diplomas Médicos (Brazil).
- USMLE — United States Medical Licensing Examination.

Source: WTO/World Bank.

3. Authorities are encouraged to accept requests in electronic format to take such examinations

The obligation to accept examination requests in electronic format is to be distinguished from the obligation to accept applications for authorization in electronic format. The former obligation serves to facilitate one distinct step in the authorization process (the sitting of examinations), whereas the latter facilitates the permission to supply the service altogether.

The shift towards electronic submission of applications for professional and equivalence examinations has become widespread across both developed and developing countries. The benefits of electronic systems – such as lower costs, faster processing times and ease of access – have driven many regulatory bodies to move away from paper-based procedures.¹⁷ However, there are still some countries or professional bodies that maintain paper-based systems, either due to technical limitations or other concerns or preferences. Many jurisdictions have adopted hybrid models where portions of the process are handled electronically, but some verification steps still require manual submission of documents.¹⁸

4. Authorities are encouraged to consider the use of electronic means in other aspects of examination processes

With advancements in technology, the trend towards conducting exams on computers in the host jurisdiction, instead of paper, has become more prevalent both in developed and developing economies.

Furthermore, the possibility of remote examinations has progressively been spreading, partly in response to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote examinations range from supervised examinations in test centres in the host jurisdiction, to examinations that can be taken abroad, either in accredited test centres or remotely invigilated (proctored) exams on personal computers. The availability of remotely invigilated examinations has expanded since COVID-19, particularly via major private online invigilation services (e.g. Pearson VUE's OnVUE and Prometric's ProProctor) and is now used by several jurisdictions in various sectors.¹⁹

For many professional and other services, practices vary: some regulators maintain domestic test-centres, others are piloting remote test centre options, and a few accept remotely invigilated ancillary tests (e.g. language

proficiency assessments). Where permitted, remote invigilation can lower travel and visa costs for foreign candidates, but adoption remains exam-specific rather than jurisdiction-wide. In parallel, some jurisdictions are deploying automated tools or AI-assisted review mechanisms to verify qualification documentation or support decision-making, while ensuring transparency and the possibility of meaningful human oversight, including avenues for review or appeal, as essential safeguards.

A summary of GRPs in the area of assessment of qualifications in both the GATS and the SDR Disciplines can be found in Figure 2.

Other supportive GRP practices related to the assessment of qualifications have emerged in various jurisdictions (Figure 3). For example, in case of deficiencies in the qualifications, some regulators identify the missing requirements and offer the applicant an opportunity to meet them, including through course work, examinations or training. The possibility of fulfilling such requirements may extend to institutions in the host jurisdiction, as well as home ones, including by utilizing electronic tools. Another practice relates to the recognition of qualifications obtained in third jurisdictions. This means that, if a foreign professional has already been recognized in another jurisdiction, the authorities facilitate the recognition of such “recognized qualifications”, as long as these are considered equivalent or may be supplemented by additional training. Such “triangulation” helps avoiding duplication of efforts and accelerates the authorization process. However, it is still quite uncommon as it requires a high level of trust in another jurisdiction's regulatory decisions, which many governments may be reluctant to grant due to legal liability, quality assurance concerns and divergent qualitative standards.

PTA practice

In PTAs, obligations relating to the assessment of qualifications reflect to a variable extent the four GRP elements set out in the SDR Disciplines.

Most PTAs generally reproduce the first two GRP elements in this area, that is to say, (1) scheduling examinations at reasonably frequent intervals, and (2) providing a reasonable time for applicants to request to take the examination. This is the case, for example, in the 2018 CPTPP²⁰, the 2022 RCEP²¹, the 2016 Pacific Alliance Additional Protocol²², and the 2011 Hong Kong, China–New Zealand CEPA.²³

Figure 2: GRPs on assessment of qualifications – Comparison between the GATS and the SDR Disciplines

GRPs	GATS	SDR Disciplines
Non-discrimination between foreign and local professionals ("national treatment")		
Non-discrimination between foreign professionals (MFN)		
Assessment based on objective and transparent criteria		
Availability and accessibility of information on assessment procedures		
Establishment of appropriate guidance mechanisms to provide support to foreign professionals		
Possibility to submit applications to demonstrate compliance with qualification requirements to only one competent authority		
Procedures for the assessment of foreign professionals conducted within established and reasonable time frames		
Provision of information on result of examinations, including deficiencies in applications and possibility to complete them		
Provision of information on result of examinations, including reasons of failure of examination and possibility for retaking it		
Possibility for appeal or review of assessment decisions		
Acceptance of authenticated copies in place of original documents		
Impartiality and independence of assessment procedures		
Procedures not excessively burdensome or disproportionate to the nature of the profession		
Reasonable and transparent fees charged for qualification procedures		
Organization of examinations held at reasonably frequent intervals		
Opening of applications for examinations sufficiently in advance to allow participants sufficient time to apply and prepare, including logistics		
Possibility for electronic examinations in the host country		
Possibility for remote examinations to be offered at international test centres		

 Covered

Source: WTO/World Bank.

Some agreements also add the other two elements, which are (3) accepting requests for examinations electronically and (4) using electronic means in the examination process – thereby mirroring in full the SDR Disciplines. For instance, Article 8.8 of the 2023 UK-Australia FTA on "Domestic Regulation" reflects all four elements discussed above.²⁴

Similarly to GATS Article VI:4(a), the 2020 USMCA explicitly requires that measures relating to qualification requirements and procedures (such as examination or assessment procedures) are to be "based on criteria that are objective and transparent".²⁵ As examples of such criteria, the Article refers to "competence and the ability to supply the service".²⁶ Furthermore, with respect to examinations, Article 15.8.3(c) states that where a party requires an authorization for the

supply of a service, it shall ensure that its competent authorities schedule "the examination at reasonably frequent intervals and provides a reasonable period of time to enable an applicant to request to take the examination".²⁷

Compared to the SDR Disciplines, this obligation replicates the third element (namely, accepting requests for examinations in electronic format). However, it does not explicitly require that the request for and/or conduct of the examination process be done electronically. It should be noted that the USMCA also sets out recognized "professional levels": it identifies a list of professions, such as accountant, architect, computer systems analyst, economist and the corresponding minimum education requirements and alternate credentials.²⁸

Figure 3: Emerging GRPs in assessment of qualifications

Assessment focused on actual skills, knowledge, and abilities required for the supply of the services (competency-based assessment)	Requirements not more burdensome than necessary and only containing requirements relevant to ensure the quality of services	Legitimate and proportionate language requirements
Consideration of qualifications recognized by third jurisdictions	Fees not higher than the approximate costs incurred by the competent authorities, including for supervision of the relevant service	Possibility to complete deficiencies in requirements for qualifications (including through course work, training, or work experience)
Opportunity for foreign suppliers to demonstrate competence through experience, references, or relevant membership in professional associations	Facilitation of access to international assessments and examinations (including through supportive visa measures)	Use of automated tools or AI-assisted review mechanisms to process qualification documentation or support decision-making

Source: WTO/World Bank.

The USMCA states that:

Each Party shall grant temporary entry and provide confirming documentation to a business person seeking to engage in a business activity at a professional level in a profession set out in Appendix 2, if the business person otherwise complies with the Party's measures applicable to temporary entry, on presentation of: (a) proof of citizenship of a Party; and (b) documentation demonstrating that the business person will be so engaged and describing the purpose of entry.²⁹

Therefore, where businesspersons fulfil the qualifications set out in Appendix 2, the parties are required to grant them temporary access.³⁰ Additionally, the parties are prohibited from requiring “prior approval procedures, petitions, labour certification tests or other procedures of similar effect” as a condition for temporary entry. Nonetheless, prior to entry, the parties may require businesspersons seeking temporary entry to obtain a visa or its equivalent.³¹

With respect to the procedures for assessment, it is interesting to note that the 2020 Indonesia-Australia CEPA³² and the 2003 Singapore-Australia FTA³³ go beyond the ambition of the SDR Disciplines. Besides the use of electronic means for conducting examinations, these PTAs provide that the parties should explore, as appropriate, the possibility of conducting such examinations orally, as well as providing opportunities for taking such examinations in the territory of the other party.

The issue of recognition of qualifications via a third jurisdiction is included in various MRAs. For

example, in 1996, Australia and New Zealand signed the Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition Arrangement (TTMRA), which provides a practical pathway for secondary recognition of foreign professional qualifications.³⁴ Under the TTMRA, individuals registered to practise a regulated profession (such as doctors or engineers) in New Zealand and Australia are legally entitled to practise an equivalent profession in each other's jurisdictions without further assessment. In practice, this means that even professionals holding third-country qualifications – such as from India or the Philippines – who are first recognized and licensed in New Zealand can subsequently gain access automatically to the Australian market based on that original recognition. In effect, New Zealand assumes the initial evaluative role, and its recognition facilitates secondary recognition in Australia. Similarly, in 2024, the EU and Canada concluded an MRA on the professional qualifications of architects – the first bilateral MRA for professional qualifications to be concluded by the EU.³⁵

Building on the 2017 EU-Canada CETA which sets out the conditions under which architects can temporarily move between the EU and Canada to provide services or set up a business there,³⁶ the MRA aims to supplement such guarantees with a straightforward process for EU architects to obtain a Canadian licence and vice versa, provided they meet the conditions in the MRA. Specifically, once the MRA enters into force, architects with a minimum of 12 years of combined education, training and practice (including four years of practical experience) will be able to apply online for

recognition of their professional qualifications by the authorities of the jurisdiction where they wish to work.

EU architects also need to complete a one-off 10-hour online course. Both EU and Canadian architects have to register with the relevant local authorities in order to get permission to work.³⁷ In addition, Article 4.3 of the MRA provides the basis for recognition of a third jurisdiction by stating that such requirements “may also be met by formal qualifications issued by a third party and recognized as equivalent according to the requirements of a jurisdiction of a party, and where appropriate, supplemented by professional training, examination or professional experience as required in that jurisdiction”.³⁸

Implementation at the domestic level

At the domestic level, practice with respect to assessment of qualifications varies significantly depending on the different jurisdictions and sectors. One example is Canada, where foreign-educated engineers seeking admission to practice are required to apply to a provincial engineering regulator for, amongst other things, an assessment of academic and experience qualifications.³⁹ In the case of Nova Scotia, for example, to satisfy the academic requirements, examinations may be assigned to verify knowledge that an applicant is presumed to have, based on their academic background (confirmatory exams) or to address gaps identified in their academic record (structured confirmatory or general exam programmes).⁴⁰ Applicants who hold both a recognized bachelor’s and master’s degree in the same or a closely related discipline will have their master’s degree evaluated to determine whether any examinations can be waived.

Similarly, applicants with 10 or more years of relevant experience may have exams waived or reduced based on the depth and relevance of their professional background. After the academic assessment is completed, applicants will receive information on the decision by e-mail, which will outline any further steps required to fulfil the academic requirements for registration. All registration requirements must be completed before an applicant is eligible to apply for licensure as an “engineer in training”. Applicants may request a re-assessment if they wish to submit additional information following a decision. The outcome of any re-assessment will be communicated within six months of receiving the additional information. If an

applicant disagrees with the decision, they may request an internal review within 30 days. The results of the internal review will be communicated within 60 days of receiving the request.

Regarding the nursing profession, Canada has implemented a comprehensive and accessible system – the National Nursing Assessment Service (NNAS) – through which foreign-qualified nurses are assessed and licensed. To be eligible for the NNAS, applicants must meet specific criteria: they must have completed post-secondary nursing education outside of Canada, never been licensed as a nurse in Canada, as well as hold a nursing license from a foreign jurisdiction.⁴¹ The application process is designed to be user-friendly: applicants begin by creating an online account in the NNAS application portal where they can complete the application form, including personal information, details about their nursing education and employment history. A fee – published in the NNAS Applicant Handbook – is required to proceed with the submission of the application.⁴²

The NNAS process emphasizes thorough verification of credentials. Most documents must be submitted directly by third parties, such as educational institutions and licensing bodies, with digital submission encouraged for efficiency. Applicants can monitor the status of their application in real-time through the online portal, allowing them to see when documents are received and their status in the review process. Once the document verification process is complete, an advisory report will be prepared by the NNAS within 5 days (express service) to 12 weeks (regular service) containing all verified documents, curriculum assessment, as well as any correspondence. This report is automatically sent to the regulatory body in the province of choice of applicants, who is advised to download a copy for their records.⁴³ After receiving their advisory report, candidates can proceed to take the assessment.

The assessment can be taken at domestic or international testing centres (for an additional fee).⁴⁴ The primary examination for nursing licensure is the NCLEX which is available for both Registered Nurses and Licensed Practical Nurses. It aims to assess knowledge and skills essential for safe and effective nursing practice, including with respect to the safety and effective care of the environment, health promotion and maintenance, psychosocial and physiological integrity. The NCLEX uses computerized adaptive testing (CAT) to administer the questions. The goal of CAT is to determine the ability of the candidate in relation to the pass standard: every

time the candidate answers an item, the computer re-estimates the candidate's ability by considering all the responses given so far.

Testing adjustments for otherwise qualified candidates can be provided only with the authorization of the nursing regulatory body.⁴⁵ For quality control purposes, every NCLEX test is scored twice: once by the computer at the test centre and then the result is verified after the examination record has been transmitted to the regulatory authority. Results are sent to candidates up to six weeks after taking the examination. In case of failure, the regulatory body sends a candidate performance report which identifies the candidate's relative strengths and weaknesses based on the test, with a view to guiding preparation before retaking the examination. Candidates are entitled to take the test eight times a year, and there must be 45 test-free days between each examination.

With respect to the opportunity for applicants to remedy deficiencies in the requirements to be authorized to practice a certain profession, one notable example is the EU. Under the EU Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications, applicants from other EU member states may be allowed to undergo compensation measures, such as an adaptation period of up to three years or an aptitude test, when their qualifications are found to be "substantially different" from those required in the host EU member state.⁴⁶ In such cases, the applicant must be duly informed through a decision, which explains the qualification required, the level held by the applicant, and the "substantial differences" in knowledge, skills or competences that justify the compensatory requirement.⁴⁷ The decision on compensation measures shall be made with due regard to the principle of proportionality and take into account the applicant's prior professional experience or validated lifelong learning.⁴⁸

The Recognition Act adopted by Germany offers a concrete example of how the EU Directive is implemented domestically, with the procedure for the recognition of foreign professional qualifications and related requirements made publicly available on the information portal of the German government.⁴⁹ For regulated professions, German authorities conduct an equivalence assessment of foreign qualifications against the German "reference occupation". If "substantial differences" are found, the applicant receives a notice which explains the differences in detail and informs the applicant of the compensation measures available. In regulated professions, applicants are generally given

the choice between completing an adaptation period or undergoing a knowledge or aptitude test in Germany. In some cases, the notice may also provide information about approved providers of the required training measures. Once the choice of the compensation measure is made by the applicant, it must be communicated to the competent authority.

Upon successful completion of this measure, a certificate is issued, which must then be submitted to the authority as part of the recognition process. Subsequently, any remaining requirements for authorization to practice are assessed. If authorization is granted, the applicant is then eligible to practice the profession. Notably, Germany has introduced a special "recognition visa" to support non-EU nationals who need to complete compensation measures in the German territory.⁵⁰ To be eligible, applicants must provide proof of partial recognition, meaning that the German competent authority has already issued a notice on available compensation measures. Additionally, the applicant must show confirmation of registration for an appropriate compensation measure with a recognized provider in Germany, such as a training institution or employer, which is responsible for delivering the required compensation measure. A demonstrable knowledge of the German language is also required, along with proof of financial means to cover living expenses for the duration of the stay.

The same EU Directive also addresses the issue of recognizing qualifications via a third jurisdiction. Article 3.3 states that qualifications originally issued by a non-EU jurisdiction may be treated as valid within the EU/European Economic Area (EEA) provided that the qualification holder (an EU/EEA national) has acquired at least three years of professional experience in the relevant field in the member state that recognized the qualification, in accordance with Article 2.2. This experience must be certified by the host member state.⁵¹ In effect, the member state that first recognized the third country qualification assumes the initial evaluative burden and its recognition may serve as the basis for subsequent secondary recognition elsewhere in the EU territory.

An example of the implementation of the EU Directive can be found in Finland through its Act on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications (1384/2015).⁵² Under this Act, an EU/EEA citizen holding a qualification from outside the EU/EEA, may obtain recognition in Finland, if that qualification was first recognized in another EU/EEA member state and

the individual subsequently gained a minimum of three years of relevant professional experience in that member state. This means, for example, a Swedish engineer qualified in India, who became licensed in France and worked there for at least three years, could later apply to practice in Finland, relying on France's recognition as a basis for the secondary recognition.

Looking at the scope and procedure of the assessment examination in the UK, the General Medical Council (GMC) oversees the Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board (PLAB) test, which is designed to assess the competency of doctors who obtained their qualifications outside the UK, the EEA, or Switzerland.⁵³ Interested candidates have to create a GMC online account to apply for the examination and submit all the eligibility documents. The online account also serves for booking preferred exam slots (which are open approximately 11 months prior to the assessment period) and pay the necessary fees (the amount of which can be adjusted to special categories and needs).⁵⁴ The PLAB website includes detailed and comprehensive information on which qualifications and institutions are acceptable to sit the PLAB exam. Some qualifications are examined for eligibility on a case-by-case basis. Contact details for enquires are provided, together with an indication of what information interested candidates need to provide to facilitate faster responses.

Through the online portal candidates also receive the results of their exams (six weeks after the assessment date), ensuring all information for candidates is in one central location.⁵⁵ The examination consists of two distinct parts. The first component, PLAB 1, is a written examination. It is conducted quarterly, with sessions held in February, May, August and November at various international testing centres. The latter, often managed by the British Council, are strategically located in major cities worldwide and across the UK, ensuring widespread accessibility for candidates. The demand is monitored closely and where it exceeds existing capacity, extra places for examinations are generally made available in subsequent assessment periods to ensure more flexibility and responsiveness to candidates' interests. To be eligible for PLAB 1, applicants must possess an approved overseas medical qualification and demonstrate proficiency in English.

PLAB 2, the second part of the examination, is a practical assessment structured as an objective structured clinical examination (OSCE). This hands-on evaluation consists of 16 scenarios, each lasting eight minutes, designed to

simulate real-life clinical situations. Scenarios reflect real life settings and encounters that a qualified doctor may expect in their everyday work. Examiners mark candidates on 3 main domains, mainly data gathering and technical and assessment skills, clinical management skills and interpersonal skills.⁵⁶ Once both parts have been passed, foreign doctors can apply for registration with a licence to practise in the UK. In 2023, 21,916 candidates sat part 1 of PLAB from 23,500 assessment places offered, an increase of more than 7,446 candidates who took the exam in 2022. In a survey completed by 914 candidates in 2023, it emerged that satisfaction with the PLAB part 1 assessment is very high. It was noted that, from the application submission to delivery of results, candidate experience is at the fore of the assessment: information is easily accessible on the PLAB website, queries are dealt with promptly, and test centres operate efficiently.

In conclusion, despite the relatively limited number of specific and legally binding multilateral obligations, significant progress has been made in creating a more facilitative environment for the assessment of qualifications. The GATS requires WTO members to establish adequate procedures to verify the competence of foreign professionals and permits recognition of education, experience, licences or certifications obtained abroad. The SDR Disciplines and various recent services PTAs address the issue of assessment of qualifications directly and require competent authorities to schedule any examinations used at reasonably frequent intervals, provide reasonable time frames for applicants to request examinations, encourage the receipt of requests in electronic format, and consider electronic means in other aspects of examination processes. Some recent PTAs align with assessment-relevant SDR Disciplines, while others go beyond, including by exploring oral examinations and offering exams in the other parties' territories. Domestically, differences remain across jurisdictions and sectors, particularly in the application of substantive assessment criteria, procedures and recognition practices. However, various factors have contributed to improving the ease of qualification assessment. Technological advancements, including digital submission systems and remote invigilation, have enhanced efficiency and accessibility. The introduction of systems for the electronic submission of applications, online verification tools and automated assessment mechanisms have minimized procedural burdens, reducing delays and costs for foreign professionals. Emerging practices – such as structured opportunities to remedy identified deficiencies and, in

some cases, recognition via a third jurisdiction – are creating additional pathways. Furthermore, increased international cooperation, regulatory harmonization efforts and bilateral or multilateral arrangements have also played a crucial role. The expansion of MRAs and sector-specific arrangements contributes to greater predictability for service suppliers seeking

cross-border qualification recognition. Taken together, these developments reflect a growing commitment to balance regulatory rigour with practical facilitation, so that qualified professionals can supply services across borders more efficiently while safeguarding the pursuit of public policy objectives.

Annex

Overview of GRPs in the area of assessment of qualifications

Principle of non-discrimination

- No distinction in substantive requirements between foreign and local professionals, unless explicitly included in WTO members' schedules of specific commitments. Different substantive requirements which would be regarded as incompatible with GATS Article XVII would include higher educational requirements for foreign professionals than for nationals, requirements for longer working experience, prior experience requirements, or occupation in certain companies (e.g. A-listed companies) in the host jurisdictions.
- No distinctions in substantive requirements between foreign professionals from different WTO members, unless specific preferences for foreign professionals of specific jurisdictions are explicitly provided for in MFN exemption lists or PTAs (GATS Article II).

Substantive assessment requirements

- Assessment based on transparent and objective criteria related to the skills and qualifications required for the profession (GATS Article VI:4 and VI:5; SDR Disciplines, paragraph 22(a)).
- Assessment focused on the actual skills, knowledge and abilities required for the profession, rather than just the form or origin of the qualification. It should exclude subjects not relevant to the activities for which authorization is sought.
- Eligibility to undergo assessment not more burdensome than necessary and containing only relevant requirements to ensure the quality of service (e.g. minimum prior presence or residence in the country to be eligible to undergo assessment).

- Requirements for language proficiency based on a legitimate public policy objective, such as consumer safety, ensuring services quality, or language working knowledge essential for practice. Whether language skills are required should depend on the nature of the profession and the level of client interaction. Authorities should assess whether full proficiency of the language is required for all services and in all circumstances. For example, some jurisdictions allow professionals to practice if they have basic or intermediate proficiency and can demonstrate that they can communicate sufficiently to perform their duties.⁵⁷ However, they may be required to improve their language skills over time. Authorities should consider granting authorization on the condition that the professional ensures effective communication with clients, which can include hiring interpreters or working with colleagues who can communicate fluently in the local language.

- Facilitation of recognition via third jurisdiction ("triangulation") (for example, 2024 EU-Canada MRA, Article 4.3).⁵⁸

Assessment procedures

- Information on the procedures for verifying qualifications and competence clearly outlined and accessible to foreign professionals. This includes information readily available on how to apply, what documentation is required, timelines for processing and criteria for assessment (SDR Disciplines, paragraphs 7(a) and 13).
- Appropriate guidance mechanisms established to provide support for foreign professionals through

clear instructions, help desks, or guidance on meeting local requirements. (GATS Article IV:2; SDR Disciplines, paragraph 20).

- Possibility to submit applications to demonstrate compliance with qualification requirements to only one competent authority (SDR Disciplines, paragraph 4).
- Procedures for the assessment of foreign professionals conducted within established and reasonable time frames (SDR Disciplines, paragraph 7).
- Provision of information on result of examinations, including deficiencies in applications and possibility to rectify this (SDR Disciplines, paragraph 7).
- Provision of information on reasons of failure of examination, with possibility for re-applying (SDR Disciplines, paragraph 7).
- Possibility for review of assessment decisions (GATS Article VI:2).
- Acceptance of authenticated copies in place of original documents (SDR Disciplines, paragraph 6(b)).
- Impartial and independent procedures with respect to all applicants (SDR Disciplines, paragraphs 10 and 22(d)).
- Procedures not excessively burdensome or disproportionate to the nature of the profession (SDR Disciplines, paragraph 22(c)).
- Reasonable and transparent fees charged for qualification procedures (SDR Disciplines, paragraph 9). Fees should not be higher than the approximate costs incurred by the competent authorities, including those for supervision of the relevant service (e.g. EU-Georgia Association Agreement, Article 95 on licensing and qualification procedures).⁵⁹
- Assessment typically includes practical tests, interviews or professional exams. Authorities should consider allowing foreign professionals to demonstrate their competence not only through formal qualifications but also through relevant professional experience, supervised work periods, references or portfolios of work. The possibility of fulfilling such requirements should not *a priori* be restricted to host country institutions, unless there are justifiable reasons.⁶⁰ If membership in a relevant professional association or registry is indicative of the level of competence or the extent of experience of the applicant, such membership should also be taken into account.
- Examinations held at reasonably frequent intervals (SDR Disciplines, paragraph 10). Depending on the examination, this could be on a rolling basis, or in multiple fixed sittings a year. Applications for examinations open sufficiently in advance of the examinations to allow participants sufficient time to apply and prepare, including logistics (SDR Disciplines, paragraph 10).
- Possibility for remote examinations to be offered in the home jurisdiction and at international test centres (electronically or paper-based).
- Possibility for electronic examinations in the host jurisdiction (rather than paper-based examinations).
- Possibility for remote examinations on personal computers.
- In case of deficiencies in the qualifications, applicants are informed of requirements to meet the deficiencies (including through course work, examinations, training or work experience).
- Facilitate access to international assessments and examinations, by considering implementing supportive visa measures for foreign candidates. These could include accelerated processing and the acceptance of verification letters from recognized examination bodies to confirm the purpose of travel.
- Authorities may consider the use of automated tools or AI-assisted review mechanisms to process qualification documentation or support decision-making, while ensuring transparency and the possibility of human oversight in cases of doubt or appeal.

ENDNOTES

- 1 GATS, Article VI:6.
- 2 EFTA-Hong Kong, China FTA (2012), Annex VII, Article 6.
- 3 GATS, Article VII:1.
- 4 GATS, Article VII:2.
- 5 GATS, Article VII:2.
- 6 GATS, Article VII:3.
- 7 For more information on standards, see subsection 2.9 on “Standards in Services”.
- 8 SDR Disciplines (WTO, 2021), para. 22(a) and footnote 17.
- 9 SDR Disciplines (WTO, 2021), para. 13.
- 10 GATS, Article IV:2; SDR Disciplines (WTO, 2021), para. 20.
- 11 SDR Disciplines (WTO, 2021), para. 22(b).
- 12 SDR Disciplines (WTO, 2021), paras. 7 and 8.
- 13 SDR Disciplines (WTO, 2021), para. 4.
- 14 SDR Disciplines (WTO, 2021), para. 10.
- 15 For example, for the popular New York Bar Exam, for the end of July sitting, the application filing period is March 1–31, <https://www.nybarexam.org/examdates/examdates.html>; for Canada’s CFE, registration closes around 15 weeks ahead of the exam, <https://www.cpaweb.ca/current-learners/cpa-pep/schedules/cfe/>.
- 16 Chartered status is granted through a competency-based assessment, including documentation review and professional interview.
- 17 For more details about the benefits of electronic of procedures, see subsection 2.2 on “Electronic Submission of Applications”.
- 18 For example, foreign-qualified lawyers aiming to sit for the South African Legal Practice Council (LPC) can submit their initial applications online, including proof of qualifications and relevant experience. Candidates must physically submit certified copies of their degrees, transcripts and proof of work experience.
- 19 For an example, please see <https://www.cpaaustralia.com.au/your-cpa-program/exams-and-assessment/schedule-your-exam/online-proctored-exam>.
- 20 CPTPP (2018), Article 10.8.6.
- 21 RCEP (2022), Article 8.15.8.
- 22 Pacific Alliance Additional Protocol (2016), Article 9.9.5.
- 23 Hong Kong, China-New Zealand CEPA (2011), Annex III to Chapter 13, paragraph 29.
- 24 UK-Australia FTA (2023), Article 8.8.
- 25 USMCA (2020), Article 15.8.2.
- 26 USMCA (2020), Article 15.8.2.
- 27 USMCA (2020), Article 15.8.3(c).
- 28 USMCA (2020), Chapter 16: Temporary Entry for Business Persons, Annex 16-A, Appendix 2.
- 29 USMCA (2020), Chapter 16: Temporary Entry for Business Persons, Annex 16-A, para. 1 of Section D: Professionals.
- 30 It is important to note that Article 15.9 of the USMCA also provides mutual recognition agreements “[f]or the purposes of fulfilment, in whole or in part, of a Party’s standards or criteria for the authorization, licensing, or certification of a service supplier”. Annex 15-C of the USMCA prescribes voluntary principles for the negotiation of a mutual recognition agreement.
- 31 USMCA (2020), Chapter 16: Temporary Entry for Business Persons, Annex 16-A, para. 3 of Section D: Professionals.
- 32 Indonesia-Australia CEPA (2020), Chapter 9, Articles 9.8.9 and 9.8.10.
- 33 Singapore–Australia FTA (2003), Chapter 7, Articles 11.9 and 11.10.
- 34 Arrangement between the Commonwealth, States and Territories of Australia and New Zealand Relating to Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition (TTMRA) (1996), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/ttmra.pdf>.
- 35 European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security, “EU adopts first ever Mutual Recognition Agreement for professional qualifications” (10 October 2024) https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-adopts-first-ever-mutual-recognition-agreement-professional-qualifications-2024-10-10_en.
- 36 EU–Canada CETA (2017).
- 37 European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security, “EU adopts first ever Mutual Recognition Agreement for professional qualifications” (10 October 2024), https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-adopts-first-ever-mutual-recognition-agreement-professional-qualifications-2024-10-10_en.
- 38 EU, Decision No 1/2024 of the Joint Committee on Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications of 10 October 2024 setting out an agreement on the mutual recognition of professional qualifications for architects [2024/2873], OJ L, 2024/2873, 14 November 2024, Article 4.3, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec/2024/2873/oj>.
- 39 Engineers Canada, “Practising engineering in Canada”, <https://engineerhere.ca/practising-engineering-canada/how-apply-licensure>.
- 40 Engineers Nova Scotia, “Internationally Educated Engineers”, <https://engineersnovascotia.ca/registration/internationally-educated-engineers/>.

- 41 National Nursing Assessment Service (Canada) (NNAS), "Application Process & Timeline", <https://www.nnas.ca/application-process-timeline/>.
- 42 National Nursing Assessment Service (Canada) (NNAS) (2022), p. 11.
- 43 National Nursing Assessment Service (Canada) (NNAS) (2022), p. 9.
- 44 National Council of State Boards of Nursing (US) (NCSBN), 2024 NCLEX Examination Candidate Bulletin, https://www.nclex.com/files/2024_NCLEX_Candidate_Bulletin_English_FINAL.pdf.
- 45 National Council of State Boards of Nursing (US) (NCSBN), 2024 NCLEX Examination Candidate Bulletin, https://www.nclex.com/files/2024_NCLEX_Candidate_Bulletin_English_FINAL.pdf.
- 46 Consolidated text: Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications (Text with EEA relevance) (Directive 2005/36/EC), OJ L 255, 30 September 2005, as last amended on 10 July 2025, Article 14.1, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2005/36/2025-07-10>.
- 47 Consolidated text: Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications (Text with EEA relevance) (Directive 2005/36/EC), OJ L 255, 30 September 2005, as last amended on 10 July 2025, Article 14.6, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2005/36/2025-07-10>.
- 48 Consolidated text: Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications (Text with EEA relevance) (Directive 2005/36/EC), OJ L 255, 30 September 2005, as last amended on 10 July 2025, Article 14.5, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2005/36/2025-07-10>.
- 49 Federal Government of Germany, Anerkennung in Deutschland, "How do I get recognition?", <https://www.anerkennung-in-deutschland.de/html/en/getting-recognition.php#module3855>.
- 50 Federal Government of Germany, "Visa for the recognition of foreign qualifications", <https://www.make-it-in-germany.com/en/visa-residence/types/recognition>.
- 51 Consolidated text: Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications (Text with EEA relevance) (Directive 2005/36/EC), OJ L 255, 30 September 2005, as last amended on 10 July 2025, Article 3.3, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2005/36/2025-07-10>.
- 52 Finnish National Agency for Education, "Recognition of professional qualifications gained within the EU/EEA", <https://www.oph.fi/en/services/recognition-qualifications/recognition-professional-qualifications-gained-within-eueea>.
- 53 General Medical Council (UK), "Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board", <https://www.gmc-uk.org/registration-and-licensing/join-the-register/plab>.
- 54 General Medical Council (UK) (2023).
- 55 General Medical Council (UK) (2023).
- 56 General Medical Council (UK) (2022)
- 57 For example, several EU member states require B1 or B2 level to practise in the medical field, whereas lower levels of proficiency are required in other areas, such as engineering or IT.
- 58 European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security, "EU adopts first ever Mutual Recognition Agreement for professional qualifications" (10 October 2024), https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-adopts-first-ever-mutual-recognition-agreement-professional-qualifications-2024-10-10_en.
- 59 EU-Georgia Association Agreement (2016).
- 60 For example, where practical experience with regard to specific host country processes, protocols, or standards is required, such experience cannot be obtained outside the host country.



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