

CRUS Recommendations for the Assessment of Foreign Upper Secondary School-Leaving Certificates, 7 September 2007

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1. Introduction

The basic requirement for admission to bachelor-level studies at Swiss universities (cantonal universities and federal institutes of technology; in the following: “universities”) is a federal or cantonal upper secondary school-leaving certificate (both federally recognised) called the maturity certificate (*gymnasiale Maturität / maturité gymnasiale*)¹ (in the following: “Swiss Maturity Certificate”). To ascertain whether foreign upper secondary school-leaving certificates can be considered equivalent to the Swiss Maturity Certificate, the Committee on Admission and Equivalency (KZA/CAE) worked out basic criteria and drew them up in the form of these recommendations, which were adopted by the plenary session of the CRUS on 7 September 2007 for the attention of all universities.

Criteria of this kind must be as generally applicable, understandable and transparent as possible, so that they can in future serve as the basis of the universities’ admissions requirements for applicants from specific countries. When drawing up these recommendations, the KZA/CAE’s stated purpose was to create uniform regulations for Swiss universities and to reduce differences in university admissions practice to a minimum. In many points, these recommendations are based on already existing regulations and take into account experience gained.

2. Starting point and course of action by the KZA/CAE

Switzerland ratified the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (ETS No. 165)² (in the following: “Lisbon Recognition Convention”) on 24 March 1998. Thereupon, under the central coordination of Lukas Bucher (University of Fribourg) a KZA/CAE working group on the Lisbon Recognition Convention prepared a report (in the following: “Bucher Report”) on assessment of upper secondary school-leaving certificates from signatory countries of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which was approved by the CRUS on 9 March 2001.

Additionally, in a resolution of 6 March 2003 the CRUS approved some basic provisions on recognition of upper secondary school-leaving certificates and on university admission in Switzerland.

On the basis of the Bucher Report and the criteria set down by the CRUS in the additional provisions, the KZA/CAE examined the upper secondary school-leaving certificates in the signatory countries of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and worked out corresponding admission requirements where ever possible.

In a second phase, the admission requirements were reworked for further countries that are not signatory countries of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, proceeding continent by continent (Asia, South America, Africa). It became apparent that the criteria formulated in the Bucher Report were only partly practicable. The KZA/CAE had to face the challenge of either drawing up separate criteria for the assessment of upper secondary school-leaving certificates from non-signatory countries of the Lisbon Recognition Convention or revising the Bucher Report to make the basic principles applicable to all countries.

As a result, the KZA/CAE decided to basically use the same criteria for all countries when assessing upper secondary school-leaving certificates. However, as there is no trust in the quality of the education systems in non-signatory countries of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (principle of trust), the admission requirements differ when it comes to the stipulation of additional requirements and possible compensation measures.

3. Principle of trust among signatory countries

With regard to the assessment of upper secondary school-leaving certificates and university admission in Switzerland, the individual countries can be divided into two categories based on prevailing international agreements: signatory countries of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the

¹ According to the Swiss Federal Council’s Ordinance on the Recognition of Maturity Certificates of 1995 and the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education’s identical Regulations on the Recognition of Matura Certificates (MAR).

² Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, 11 April 1997 (ETS No. 165).

Council of Europe Convention No. 15³ (in the following: “signatory countries”) and countries that are not party to the treaties (in the following: “non-signatory countries”).

3.1. Application of the principle of trust

The Council of Europe adopted five conventions on higher education, including the Council of Europe Convention No. 15. This was followed in 1979 by the similarly oriented UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees concerning Higher Education in the States belonging to the Europe Region. Switzerland became a party to these conventions in 1991. The Lisbon Recognition Convention of 1997 replaced all six of these conventions on higher education. As of today, not all signatory countries of the European conventions have ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention. However, as nearly all of these countries have at least signed the Lisbon Recognition Convention and ratification will therefore soon follow, the KZA decided to treat them in the same way as the signatory countries of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. That is why signatory countries of the European conventions and signatory countries of the Lisbon Recognition Convention are listed together in these recommendations. In these countries the structure and quality of the education systems are considered to be trustworthy (in the following: “principle of trust”).

The Lisbon Recognition Convention was ratified by Switzerland on 24 March, 1998; today the Convention has entered into force in 43 countries.⁴ In the present recommendations, the criteria in chapters 4 and 5, according to which the upper secondary school-leaving certificates of other countries are to be assessed with regard to access to bachelor-level studies at Swiss universities, are essentially based on the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Art. IV.1 of the Lisbon Recognition Convention states: *“Each Party shall recognize the qualifications issued by other Parties meeting the general requirements for access to higher education in those Parties for the purpose of access to programmes belonging to its higher education system, unless a substantial difference can be shown between the general requirements for access in the Party in which the qualification was obtained and in the Party in which recognition of the qualification is sought”*.

According to the Lisbon Recognition Convention, recognition of an upper secondary school-leaving certificate can only be withheld if a substantial difference can be demonstrated. It is the responsibility of the party or institution refusing to grant recognition to show that the differences in question are substantial (according to the Explanatory Report to the Lisbon Recognition Convention) and, in accordance with Art III.5, to give information concerning possible compensation measures.

According to Article IV.5 of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, if in a signatory country access to higher education is only possible with an additional qualifying examination or other selective admission requirements (in the following: “complément local”), *“the other Parties may make access conditional on these requirements or offer an alternative for satisfying such additional requirements within their own educational systems”*. The Swiss universities may require the confirmation of a place at a university.⁵

3.2. No principle of trust in the case of non-signatory countries

There is basically no principle of trust with regard to the education systems of non-signatory countries.

However, the principle of trust can apply to a certain degree to certain individual countries having a similar cultural background and familiar education system. In these cases the admission guidelines can follow, but must not be more generous than, the guidelines for the signatory countries.

For upper secondary school-leaving certificates from countries whose school systems are not comparable to the Swiss school system but towards which the principle of trust applies (such as the United Kingdom and the United States), special admission requirements have been laid down in past years that are also oriented towards the criteria presented above. This approved practice is adhered to.

³ European Convention on the Equivalence of Diplomas leading to Admission to Universities, 1953, (ETS No. 15).

⁴ Status as of June 2007.

⁵ Depending on the university this may be required for a certain field of study.

4. Assessment of upper secondary school-leaving certificates in comparison with the Swiss Maturity Certificate

The basic principle in the Lisbon Recognition Convention is that qualifications giving the holder access to higher education in a party to the Convention should have the same rights in another party. As explained above in section 3.1, a party to the Convention can refuse to grant recognition of upper secondary school-leaving certificates if it can demonstrate a substantial difference between its own qualification and the qualification of the other party. In order that all countries can be treated as equally as possible, the criterion of a substantial difference was also adopted for non-signatory companies.

Therefore, criteria must be defined that enable a comparison to be made between foreign and Swiss upper secondary school-leaving certificates. Serving as the basis is the Swiss Maturity Certificate (*gymnasiale Maturität / maturité gymnasiale*). The requirements that a Swiss Maturity Certificate must fulfil for recognition by the Swiss Federal Department of Home Affairs (FDHA) and the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK/CDIP) are laid down in the Swiss Federal Council's Ordinance on the Recognition of Maturity Certificates of 1995 and the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education's identical Regulations on the Recognition of Matura Certificates (in the following: MAR).

4.1. Substantial difference

Based on the Explanatory Report to the Lisbon Recognition Convention, it was determined that when assessing upper secondary school-leaving certificates, attention should be paid to the following:

- Classification of the qualification: highest possible general education upper secondary school-leaving certificate (system)
- Total length of schooling in years (length of schooling)
- Core subjects (curriculum contents / range of subjects)

These three criteria provide a sufficient assessment basis for determining whether an upper secondary school-leaving certificate is equivalent or substantially different.

In parallel to the criteria that enable a comparison between a foreign and a Swiss upper secondary school-leaving certificate, it must be also be established how much tolerance will be allowed before a substantial difference is declared. If a substantial difference has been determined, the applicant can be asked to undertake additional compensation measures, or recognition of the upper secondary school-leaving certificate can be refused.

4.2. Additional requirements for non-signatory countries

With regard to non-signatory countries there is no trust in the quality of the attained matriculation standard. That is why there are always the following additional requirements for general education upper secondary school-leaving certificates recognised in a non-signatory country:

- Minimum grade average (passing grade plus one grade higher)⁶ and
- Passing grade on the Swiss university entrance examination for students with a foreign upper secondary school-leaving certificate (in the following: "Fribourg Exam") in addition to the *complément local* (if required in the country of origin)

⁶ Example: In Morocco, a passing grade is 10/20 (*passable*), and one grade higher is 12/20 (*assez bien*).

5. Criteria for assessment of upper secondary school-leaving certificates

Assessment of foreign upper secondary school-leaving certificates is based on the following criteria:

- A foreign upper secondary school-leaving certificate must, as a qualification giving access to higher education, give general access to all university-level branches of study, and it must represent the highest possible upper secondary level school leaving certificate in the issuing country;
- It must comprise a total of 12 years of schooling, with at least three years of schooling at the upper secondary level;
- It must certify general education with a broad range of subjects. In addition to the subjects defined as general education (see Section 5.3, Core subjects), a foreign upper secondary school-leaving certificate can also contain further subjects. But the proportion of general education subjects must not fall below 80%-85%.

In accordance with these criteria, neither too highly specialised diplomas (such as sports, music, or art diplomas) nor professionally-oriented certificates can be deemed equivalent to the Swiss Maturity Certificate. They therefore do not give access to Swiss universities.

5.1. Highest possible qualification

According to MAR Art. 2, the Swiss Maturity Certificate is the university entry qualification and entitles the holder to admission to all Swiss universities.

Art. 2 MAR⁷

The recognized maturity certificates certify matriculation standard.

In particular, they entitle holders to:

a) Admission to the Federal Institutes of Technology according to the ETH Law;

b) Admission to the federal medical examinations in accordance with the "Allgemeine Medizinalprüfungsverordnung" [Regulations for Medical Examinations in Switzerland] and admission to the federal examinations for food chemists governed by the "Lebensmittelgesetz" [Food Law]

c) Admission to the cantonal universities in accordance with the relevant cantonal and inter-cantonal regulations.

With regard to admission to Bachelor level studies at Swiss universities, the Swiss Maturity Certificate is the highest possible upper secondary level school-leaving certificate.

5.2. Length of schooling (total schooling in years)

Art. 6 MAR – Duration⁸

¹ *For the maturity certificate a total of at least 12 years of schooling is required.*

² *At least the last four years must follow a course specifically designed as preparation for the maturity examination. A three-year course is possible, if at the lower secondary level a matura school-preparatory course was completed.*

³ *At adult matura schools the course specifically designed as preparation for the maturity examination must have a duration of three years. A suitable portion of this course must be completed in face-to-face instruction.*

According to MAR Art. 6 Par. 1, the Swiss Maturity Certificate is attainable after a minimum of 12 years of schooling. The upper secondary level begins after compulsory education, with a duration of at least three years.

It is basically expected that foreign upper secondary school-leaving certificates are attained after a total length of schooling of 12 years, including at least three years at the upper secondary-level. If this expectation is not met, the following principles apply:

Signatory countries

- School-leaving certificates that were attained after 11 years of schooling are recognised as equivalent, provided that schooling included at least three years at the upper secondary-level.
- School-leaving certificates attained after 11 years of schooling that included only two years at the upper secondary-level as well as school-leaving certificates after ten years of general

⁷ English Translation by the CRUS

⁸ English Translation by the CRUS

education, are substantially different and are regarded as partially recognised.

- School-leaving certificates that were attained after less than ten years of schooling are not equivalent and are not recognised.

Non-signatory countries

- School-leaving certificates that are attained after 11 years of schooling are recognised as equivalent, provided that schooling includes at least three years at the upper secondary-level.
- School-leaving certificates attained after 11 years of schooling with only two years at the upper secondary-level or after ten or fewer years of schooling are not equivalent and are not recognised.

5.3. Core subjects (curriculum contents / range of subjects)

According to MAR Art. 5, the schools provide [...] *a balanced and coherent education with a wide range of school subjects and not field-specific or professionally-oriented programmes.*

Art. 9 MAR – Maturity school subjects

²*Core subjects are:*

- a) *First language;*
- b) *A second national language;*
- c) *A third language (a third national language, English or a classical language);*
- d) *Mathematics;*
- e) *Natural sciences including the compulsory subjects biology, chemistry and physics;*
- f) *Humanities and social sciences including the compulsory subjects history, geography and introduction to economics and law;*
- g) *Art and/or music.*

It must be certified that the core subjects set down in MAR Art. 9 Par. 2 were a part of the curriculum throughout the entire duration of the upper secondary level.

Art. 11 MAR states the proportions of the different subject and elective areas:

The portions of time allotted

a) *For the core subjects:*

1. *Languages: 30–40%*
2. *Mathematics and natural sciences: 20–30%*
3. *Humanities and social sciences: 10–20%*
4. *The arts: 5–10%*

In Switzerland the core subjects form the common basis of Matura school education and make up 80–85% of instruction time.

General education subjects must outweigh other subjects, that is, they must make up 80–85% of the total schooling in the last three years of school. The Swiss Maturity Certificate requirements for three languages and three natural sciences would be too much to be required of school leaving certificates from other countries. And as the subject area “the arts” (art or music) is not required for most school leaving certificates, it is not made a requirement.

Curriculum contents are judged sufficiently general education in nature and the core subjects are rated as fully fulfilled, provided that at least six subjects in the following categories were studied throughout the entire duration of the last three years of school:

Category	Subjects
1 First language:	First language (native language)
2 Foreign language:	Foreign language
3 Mathematics:	Mathematics
4 Natural sciences:	Biology, chemistry, physics
5 Humanities and social sciences:	History, geography, economics/law
6 Elective:	An additional subject from category 2, 4 or 5

Where there are several subjects to choose from in a category, such as is the case for categories 4 to 6, it is permissible to take different subjects from that category during the three years (for example, for category 4, biology may be taken in the first two years and chemistry in the third year).

These requirements refer to the upper secondary level and should be applied to this level only. For school systems with a duration of 13 and more years and an upper secondary level of 4-5 years, the requirements must be met only during 3 of the 4 or 5 years.

The following principles apply:

Signatory countries

- School-leaving certificates attesting to at least six subjects in the categories listed above throughout the last three years of school ("6x3") and thus completely fulfilling the core subjects, are recognised as equivalent. Also recognised as equivalent are school-leaving certificates where one of the six subjects in the categories listed above was studied throughout only two instead of three years ("5x3 + 1x2").
- If in the last three years of school only five subjects in the categories listed above were studied throughout the last three years of school and thus the core subjects are fulfilled only partially, the school-leaving certificates show a substantial difference and are regarded as partially recognised.
- School-leaving certificates attesting to less than five subjects in the categories listed above throughout the last three years of school and thus not fulfilling the core subjects are not equivalent and are not recognised.

Non-signatory countries

- School-leaving certificates attesting to at least six subjects in the categories listed above throughout the last three years of school ("6x3") and thus completely fulfilling the core subjects, are recognised as equivalent. Also recognised as equivalent are school-leaving certificates where one of the six subjects in the categories listed above was studied throughout only two instead of three years ("5x3 + 1x2").
- School-leaving certificates that do not fulfil the principles for recognition of the core subjects are not equivalent and are not recognised.

6. Compensation

Article III.5 of the Lisbon Recognition Convention states that if recognition of an applicant's school leaving certificate is withheld, information must be given to the applicant concerning possible compensation measures the applicant may take in order to obtain recognition at a later stage.

6.1. Signatory countries

If an upper secondary school-leaving certificate contains a substantial difference with regard to length of schooling or core subjects, it is partially recognised and can be compensated by completing two years of university-level studies. University-level studies are defined as successfully completed academic studies.⁹ The university must be located in a signatory country and be recognised by the Swiss university concerned.

According to the Explanatory Report to the Lisbon Recognition Convention concerning Art. IV.5, if a complément local is lacking, it can be compensated by passing an examination of a similar nature, in this case the Fribourg Exam.

Assessment of upper secondary school-leaving certificates from signatory countries results in recognition, partial recognition, or no recognition.

⁹ Some Swiss universities may require subject-specific studies.

The following principles apply:

- Recognition: If an upper secondary school-leaving certificate is recognised, the complément local (if required in the country of origin) must be fulfilled. The complément local can be compensated by passing the Fribourg Exam.
- Partial Recognition: If recognition is partial, successful completion of two years of academic university-level studies can be required in compensation.¹⁰ The university must be located in a signatory country and be recognised by the Swiss university concerned.
- Recognition Withheld: If an upper secondary school-leaving certificate is not recognised, admission is only possible with an academic university-level degree (bachelor's degree) attained after a minimum of three years of study. The university must be recognised by the Swiss university concerned.

6.2. Non-signatory countries

Assessment of upper secondary school-leaving certificates from non-signatory countries results in either recognition or no recognition. Compensation through other measures and alternatives is therefore not possible.

Referring to the principle defined in point 4.2 above:

- As no principle of trust applies, additional requirements must always be met:
- Minimum grade average (passing grade plus one grade higher)¹¹ and
 - Passing grade on the Swiss university entrance examination for students with a foreign upper secondary school-leaving certificate (in the following: "Fribourg Exam") in addition to the complément local (if required in the country of origin)

If these additional requirements are not met, there can be no admission to a Swiss university.

If university entry qualifications are not recognized, admission is only possible with an academic university-level degree (bachelor's degree) attained after a minimum of three years of study. The university must be recognised by the Swiss university concerned.

6.3. Special cases

For university upper secondary school-leaving certificates from countries whose school systems are not comparable to Switzerland's school system but towards which the principle of trust applies (such as the United Kingdom and the United States), special admission requirements have been laid down in past years that are also oriented towards the criteria presented above. This approved practice is adhered to.

7. Outlook

These recommendations were worked out by representatives of the cantonal universities and CRUS in the KZA¹² and they take over many tried-and-tested solutions and findings of previous efforts (Bucher Report, KZA meetings and workshops). Compensatory measures and alternatives, such as two-year university-level studies in the case of partially recognised upper secondary school-leaving certificates or the Fribourg Exam¹³ where a complément local is lacking (signatory countries), were already used previously, as were also the definitions of minimal length of schooling and range of subjects (core subjects).

¹⁰ Some Swiss universities may require subject-specific studies.

¹¹ Example: In Morocco, a passing grade is 10/20 (*passable*), and one grade higher is 12/20 (*assez bien*).

¹² The KZA notes with regret that when applying the Lisbon Recognition Convention the two Federal Institutes of Technology (ETH) chose to follow a different path than the cantonal universities and utilise their own criteria for admission of foreign students.

¹³ In the place of the Fribourg Exam, the University of Lugano (USI) uses its own admission regulations.

Application of the new criteria explained in these recommendations to the upper secondary school-leaving certificates of signatory countries has revealed that the assessments deviate only very slightly from the previous practice of the cantonal universities based on the Bucher Report. For some upper secondary school-leaving certificates the new assessment is slightly more favourable, but mostly it has been found that an upper secondary school-leaving certificate not recognised previously owing to a substantial difference still cannot be deemed equivalent to the Swiss Maturity Certificate. Trust in the general level attained through an upper secondary school-leaving certificate has been reinforced, because the emphasis was shifted from counting the number of school lessons to examining the range of school subjects on the basis of the core subjects.

Above all, the new criteria are very advantageous for the non-signatory countries: In cases where it was not possible to obtain the classes schedule of the upper secondary-level,¹⁴ the certificates will be easier to evaluate in the future, since each applicant should be able to provide evidence for the school subjects studied in the last three years. This means that applicants will no longer be at the mercy of information arbitrariness of their country of origin, and thus the principle of non-discrimination is better guaranteed.

The new criteria are generally applicable for upper secondary school-leaving certificates from both signatory countries and non-signatory countries. They are understandable and transparent for both applicants and staff at Swiss universities. By applying them, the Swiss universities have - with just a few exceptions - identical admission requirements, and therefore convey to other countries a coherent picture of admission practice to university studies at the bachelor-level in Switzerland.

These recommendations replace the Bucher Report.

¹⁴ This was a comparison criterion in the Bucher Report.