INTEGRATING ACADEMIC RECOGNITION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE: PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

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The project's Advisory Board included President of Intergovernmental Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee; representatives of ESU and EUA; and former member of the NARIC Advisory Board.

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Foreword

The present Recommendations are the result of the project "LIREQA: Linking Academic Recognition and Quality Assurance" co-financed by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union, actions aimed at support for policy reform initiatives. Partners included ENIC[1]/NARIC[2] centres, quality assurance agencies, several consultative members of the Bologna Process – the European Association for Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ENQA)[3], the European University Association (EUA)[4], the European Student Union (ESU)[5] – and independent experts.

The project consortium was coordinated by the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC), which acts both as ENIC/NARIC centre and external quality assurance agency in Lithuania, and comprised of a number of similar multi-function organisations – the Academic Information Centre (serving as the Latvian ENIC/NARIC centre and external quality assurance agency amongst other functions); the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), which also acts as the ENIC/NARIC centre; Nuffic (the Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education, by its profile – an ENIC/NARIC centre amongst other functions); then several quality assurance

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1   ENIC – European Network of Information Centres in the European Region. It was established to implement the Lisbon Recognition Convention and, in general, to develop policy and practice for the recognition of qualifications. Is supported by UNESCO and the Council of Europe, which jointly provide the Secretariat for the ENIC Network.

2   NARIC – National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union, created by the European Commission with the aim of improving academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study in the Member States of the European Union (EU) countries, the European Economic Area (EEA) countries and Turkey.

3   ENQA – the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. ENQA is an umbrella organisation of quality assurance organisations from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) member states. ENQA promotes European co-operation in the field of quality assurance in higher education and disseminates information and expertise among its members and towards stakeholders in order to develop and share good practice and to foster the European dimension of quality assurance.

4   EUA – the European University Association represents more than 800 universities and national rectors' conferences in 48 European countries. EUA provides opportunities for members to share best practices and to shape European policies and initiatives affecting higher education and research.

5   ESU – the European Students' Union is the umbrella organisation of 45 independent National Unions of Students (NUS) from 39 countries, through its members, representing almost 20 million students in Europe. ESU aims to represent and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at the European level.

agencies – the French Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur (CTI), the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain (ANECA), the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (AQU Catalunya); the Agency for the Quality of the Basque University System (UNIBASQ), and ENQA. The project's Advisory Board included the President of the Intergovernmental Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC)[6] Committee[7] (LRCC) in addition to representatives of the ESU, higher education institutions (coming from the EUA) and a former member of the NARIC Advisory Board.

The project, called "LIREQA: Linking Academic Recognition and Quality Assurance", aims to contribute to fair recognition by developing recommendations to demonstrate how to practically further develop linkages between academic recognition[8] and both internal and external quality assurance[9]. The project is devoted to better connect recognition and quality assurance within higher education institutions; to contribute to policy development regarding recognition on the European agenda; to identify current practices; to encourage cooperation between higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies, and ENIC/NARIC centres in the field of recognition; and to promote interactivity with other partners and networks in related fields.

Outcomes of this project offer a path to the implementation of the revised Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)[10] endorsed by Ministers of Education in Yerevan in May 2015, which contain a clear expectation under ESG 1.4 to align

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6   LRC – the Council of Europe / UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (ETS No. 165), concluded on 11 April 1997 in Lisbon (Portugal). Text available at: https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/165

7   A special committee was set up in 1999 to oversee the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. The Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee has members from each Party to the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and several other countries and organisations (e.g. the European Community and the President of the ENIC Network) can participate in the annual meetings. The Committee also has the right to approve recommendations related to the recognition of qualifications.

8   Academic recognition refers to determining the academic value of a qualification: it determines whether the foreign qualification, in principle, meets general academic requirements for a similar qualification in a host country, is comparable in the broad sense, without looking for strict equivalence; thus, it is about acceptance, not nostrification.

9   For the purpose of this document "quality assurance" is intended to cover all types of external review activity, including accreditation.

10   Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). (2015). Brussels, Belgium. Available at: http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/home/esg/

institutional recognition with the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and to foster cooperation to that end.

ESG 1.4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

Standard: Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student "life cycle", e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification.

Guidelines:

<...>

Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components for ensuring the students' progress in their studies, while promoting mobility. Appropriate recognition procedures rely on:

· institutional practice for recognition being in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention;
· cooperation with other institutions, quality assurance agencies and the national ENIC/NARIC centre with a view to ensuring coherent recognition across the country."

The LIREQA project builds upon work of the ENQA working group on recognition and quality assurance and takes note of results, which were summarised in materials of the seminar[11] and a publication[12].

LIREQA activities included desk research and surveys of ENIC/NARIC centres, quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions on the status quo and future expectations; and development of a set of recommendations for helping ensure fair recognition via quality assurance mechanisms. Recommendations were discussed in consultations with representatives of ENIC/NARIC centres, agencies, and higher education institutions

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[11] https://enqa.eu/index.php/events/exploring-synergies-between-quality-assurance-and-qualifications-recognition/

[12] Teresa Sánchez Chaparro, Carme Edo Ros, Eva Fernández de Labastida, Marie-Jo Goedert, Kyrre Goksøyr, Esther Huertas, Maria Kelo, Niamh Lenehan, Rafael Llavori de Micheo, Aurelija Valeikiene. "Current Practices on External Quality Assurance of Academic Recognition Among QA Agencies". ENQA Occasional papers 25. Brussels, Belgium, 2017. Available at: https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Current-practices-on-EQA-of-academic-recognition-among-QA-agencies.pdf

Three types of recognition objects are referenced in the ESG, namely:
– higher education qualifications,
– periods of study, and
– prior learning (including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning).

LIREQA recommendations were developed with the view of three mentioned above, and also having in mind one type not explicitly mentioned in the ESG – foreign access qualifications, enabling progression from secondary education or vocational education and training (VET) onto higher education.

When drafting recommendations, the project partners discovered the need:
· to address each of the three target audiences – higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies, and ENIC/NARIC centres – separately, and
· to articulate important aspects of mutual relationships between the three target audiences and the role of public authorities and networks.

The present document covers both.

About the Recommendations

Recognition – of formal qualifications, study periods, non-formal and informal learning – or lack of it bears huge personal significance and is associated with high social impact and costs. Realisation of talents and boosted self-esteem, social inclusion, quicker progression in studies and in the labour market in addition to enhanced employability options are among the benefits. In light of increasing mobility of citizens, especially driven and supported by the European Union's Erasmus+ programme, full recognition is of the utmost importance for the realisation of the long term learning aims. In the absence of a fully functioning recognition system, such basic rights as free movement to study and work within Europe are hampered.

From the conclusion of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 1997, progress has been made, but despite a number of actions taken and tools developed, recognition is still among the major stumbling blocks in the Bologna Process, as we know from the Implementation Reports[13] and

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13   European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018. The European Higher Education Area in 2018: Bologna Process Implementation Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/european-higher-education-area-2018-bologna-process-implementation-report_en

other research. This appears to be even more surprising, knowing the LRC is the only legal instrument, adopted in the process of creation of the European Higher Education Area. To complement efforts, among the recent European Union initiatives is the European Commission's published proposal for a Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad.

In the search of effective remedy, quality assurance was identified as a key instrument to help advance recognition. Ministers of Education, by endorsing the ESG 2015, accordingly, sent a clear message that there are multiple owners responsible for ensuring fair recognition going forward: higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies, various networks and organisations, not least the governments themselves which, following the subsidiarity principle, assume public responsibility over higher education in their respective systems.

The present Recommendations rest on the principle of respect to the core values, such as diversity and autonomy of institutions, and a variety of approaches to regulation and implementation of both internal and external quality assurance. Thus, they are formulated in a way that is non-prescriptive. Recommendations should be taken as additional and complementary to existing national, regional, and international reference points and guidelines.

The definition of quality differs across states, institutions and per stakeholder group and inter alia includes the attributes or characteristics of the academic world that are deemed worth evaluating in the historical period of the development of a higher education system[14]. As there are a limited number of items to be effectively covered by any procedure, evaluation of some object (in the broadest sense) shows the value attached to it. There is a direct relationship between something being monitored and evaluated and in return shaped by this process of monitoring and evaluation. By the joint agreement of stakeholders who were involved in the drafting and revision process of the ESG to be finally endorsed by Ministers of Education, recognition was raised in importance to become the explicit rather than implicit object of evaluation. This is with a double aim, as identified in the ESG, for providing accounts on its implementation and further improvement.

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14   Quality Assurance and Accreditation: A Glossary of Basic Terms and Definitions. Compiled by Lazăr Vlăsceanu, Laura Grünberg, and Dan Pârlea. Bucharest 2007, UNESCO.

Different types of recognition – of full formal qualifications, study periods, and prior learning – possibly require different approaches to be most effective. It is understood, that over time institutions have developed their distinct profiles and there are traditional cooperation paths established. Surveys conducted for the LIREQA project identify further potential, thus the Recommendations are intended to broaden approaches and point to the possible benefits of new forms of collaboration for the advancement of fair recognition to current students and future learners. Recommendations are a reference instrument offering advice to quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions, and academic recognition and information centres with the aim of extending mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation.

While ESG calls for cooperation between quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions and ENIC/NARIC centres, obviously, there is a role to play for the networks of these stakeholders. The present Recommendations offer ideas to strengthen links between the networks of quality assurance professionals, recognition professionals, associations of higher education institutions and students.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) is a binding international agreement, which, if signed and ratified by a country in question, is also directly applicable to higher education institutions. The LRC establishes the main principles and criteria in recognition. Its implementation is supported by the subsidiary texts and the ENIC/NARIC networks, which develop practical tools and guidelines.

The EAR-HEI Manual is one of the most important tools developed by the ENIC/NARIC network; its significance is also acknowledged by EHEA Ministers of Education, who endorsed its predecessor, the EAR Manual, in 2015. Both the EAR and EAR-HEI Manual closely follow the provisions of the LRC and provide practical guidelines on how to implement them. The Manuals are updated to reflect ongoing developments and good practice in the field.

These tools and additional information are available on the website of the ENIC/NARIC networks (www.enic-naric.net).

1. RECOMMENDATIONS TO HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

1.1. Higher education institutions should establish and/or analyse and streamline their recognition procedures using the Lisbon Recognition Convention, its subsidiary texts, the European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions (EAR-HEI Manual)[15], and other tools developed by the ENIC/NARIC networks.

The ESG Standard 1.4 provides that higher education institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering recognition. The recognition procedures should rely on institutional practice for recognition being in line with the principles of the LRC. According to the LRC, recognition procedures and criteria should be transparent, coherent, reliable, and there should be a possibility to appeal.

The responses to the survey of higher education institutions show that, while the majority of them (80%) have a general institutional policy regarding recognition, only half of the institutions have a clearly established and documented recognition procedure. Only approximately 65% declared that the concept of substantial difference is applied while only 59% provide a possibility to appeal the decision.

Thus, an important finding of the project is that, at least in some higher education institutions, recognition procedures are under-developed and/or not differentiated from admission. As a result, it is possible that a substantial number of institutions still do not apply the main principles of the LRC.

The first urgent step to be taken by a number of higher education institutions is to establish and/or review recognition processes to ensure that they reflect good practice. This can be achieved with the help of various tools and documents aimed at recognition and implementation of the LRC (such as the LRC subsidiary texts, ECTS Users' Guide[16], the EAR-HEI Manual, etc.) in consultation with the national ENIC/NARIC centre, other higher education institutions, and quality assurance agencies.

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15   http://eurorecognition.eu/Manual/EAR%20HEI.pdf

16   http://ec.europa.eu/education/ects/users-guide/docs/ects-users-guide_en.pdf

Since different types of recognition decisions can be made by different structural units within the same institution, it is recommended to identify the common points of the recognition procedures and consider integrating them to ensure consistency, faster decision making, and capacity.

The decision-making process should ensure coherence. The procedures should also be flexible enough to incorporate various special cases, such as refugees or people in a refugee-like situation with insufficient or no documentation. There should be a possibility to appeal all recognition decisions.

In cases where higher education institutions outsource parts of recognition services to external bodies, they should ensure that the services are provided in line with the LRC and reflect good practice in the field.

1.2. Higher education institutions should make the streamlined recognition procedures subject to regular monitoring and review as part of their internal quality assurance system.

The project activities have demonstrated that some higher education institutions still do not have transparent recognition procedures. In addition to this, at least half of institutions, which have an internal quality assurance system, do not apply it to recognition.

It is important to stress that recognition procedures should be subject to regular internal monitoring, review, and adjustment as necessary. higher education institutions should work closely with quality assurance agencies and the ENIC/NARIC centres to develop a set of common indicators for tracking the workflow of this process. The indicators should be appropriate to allow verifying whether the procedure is transparent and reliable and the decision making is in compliance with the LRC. Consequently, the indicators should measure not only various aspects related to the procedure, but also the criteria outlined in the LRC, such as the concept of substantial difference and the way it is applied.

The monitoring should include the collation of feedback from all participants in the recognition process (the applicants, structural units and/or employees involved, academic staff, etc.) and acting upon this feedback.

> *An example of discussions regarding indicators for recognition*
> The FAIR project[17] under Erasmus+ Policy Experimentation programme aimed to improve recognition of foreign qualifications at higher education institutions. It streamlined recognition procedures of the participating HEIs and the outcomes were used to make recommendations on improving recognition.
>
> The participating Dutch higher education institutions discussed some key performance indicators to benchmark and measure the quality of recognition, which included:
> - Turnaround time of applications,
> - Consistency of decision-making,
> - Communication of substantial differences,
> - Transparency of the recognition process,
> - Public information provision,
> - Cooperation with other national partners and the ENIC/ NARIC centre.

1.3. *Higher education institutions should actively promote opportunities for all types of recognition, publish clear and easily accessible information about it, and ensure prompt communication with the learner during the recognition process.*

Higher education institutions should promote their recognition services to current and prospective students as they may not be aware that recognition is even a possibility. Clear and easily accessible information provided free of charge in different languages on all aspects and types of recognition should be publicly available and include processing times, documentation requirements, criteria, and appeal procedure.

Timely communication (including any delays in processing time) with all applicants going through the recognition procedure should be ensured. Recognition decisions should be addressed separately from admission decisions and should be explained.

Recognition decisions should specifically be discussed with (prospective) students in the context of incoming and outgoing mobility. Students should be offered training before going abroad to facilitate awareness of how their qualifications may

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17   Additional information on the project available at: http://www.nuffic.nl/en/ subjects/fair-focus-on-automatic-institutional-recognition/

be recognised once they return or look to study further elsewhere. Recognition procedures should not involve additional expense for a learner.

1.4. Higher education institutions should ensure and support reliable and consistent recognition decision making with an appropriate institutional infrastructure.

The LRC indicates that recognition decisions should be made on the basis of appropriate information. Reliable and consistent recognition decision making relies on relevant and accurate information, which is shared within an institution, and on the competences of the staff involved.

The project survey has demonstrated that the main challenges cited by higher education institutions in their recognition activities are inadequate information, lack of time, and lack of institutional and/or strategic support. This might signal that the staff involved in recognition may not have access to sufficient support from their institutions.

The survey has also revealed that different departments are usually responsible for different types of recognition within the same institution. Recognition of qualifications is usually carried out by the international office or other central units of an institution, while recognition of periods of study and recognition of prior learning is usually done by the faculties or other academic units. This requires developing a common framework and effective internal communication for cooperation in recognition.

Higher education institutions should make fair recognition in their institutions one of their priorities, guarantee non-discriminatory approach for students from any type of non-traditional backgrounds, and ensure that adequate institutional resources and infrastructure are in place for efficient, fair, and consistent decision making.

The institutional infrastructure should encompass:
- Institutional strategic support for recognition activities, including clarification on allocation of responsibilities;
- Knowledgeable and trained staff that are given opportunities to network and learn;
- Access to appropriate external instruments for reliable decision making, such as databases or professional networks;
- Internal information management resources, which would allow the collation and sharing of relevant information, such as a shared database of previous recognition decisions, samples of documents, and information on various education systems, etc.

1.5. Higher education institutions should liaise with the national ENIC/ NARIC centre for information and capacity and consider how the services of credential evaluation provided by the ENIC/NARIC may best fit in with their own procedures.

The ESG 1.4 provides that appropriate recognition procedures rely on cooperation with other institutions, quality assurance agencies, and the national ENIC/NARIC centre with a view to ensuring coherent recognition practices and decisions across the country. Cooperation between the national ENIC/NARIC and higher education institutions is key to the successful implementation of the LRC.

The ENIC/NARIC centres play an important role in further developing recognition procedures and criteria, which are in-line with the LRC and reflect the latest trends and developments in education. The ENIC/NARIC centresoffer a variety of services tailored to institutions, including, but not limited to recommendations regarding recognition, training events, databases etc.

Higher education institutions should consider how to make the best use of the services offered by their national ENIC/NARIC centre for developing their institutional infrastructure, building capacity of their staff, updating criteria and procedures to reflect good practice. Where the relevant ENIC/ NARIC provides advice and/or a written evaluation regarding individual qualifications, higher education institutions should consider an efficient way of integrating it into their own recognition procedures.

1.6. Higher education institutions should cooperate with the recognition community of other higher education institutions to share information, knowledge, and good practice.

While the expertise and input of the ENIC/NARIC offices are important, the ESG also places importance on cooperation with other institutions. It should be noted that recognition processes within higher education institutions have a wider scope (e.g. include recognition of prior learning) and contain specifics that might not be covered by the expertise of the ENIC/NARIC centres.

Therefore, it is important that higher education institutions establish and cooperate in formal or informal associations and/or networks to share experience, good practice, and to develop instruments specifically aimed at them. higher education institutions could use these structures to influence policymaking, aid in developing appropriate national legal frameworks, and ensure effective communication on a strategic level with quality assurance agencies and ENIC/NARIC centres.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS TO QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

2.1. *Quality assurance agencies should include recognition in regular external quality assurance procedures as appropriate in the context of the higher education system in place and the relevant agency's profile.*

For the purposes of the inclusion of recognition in regular external quality assurance procedures, the Lisbon Recognition Convention, its subsidiary texts and the EAR Manual shall be taken into account and treated holistically as one set of documents laying out the principles and providing good practice for implementation. In the surveys conducted for LIREQA project, legislative frameworks being either too prescriptive or lacking were identified amongst the top obstacles for recognition. Thus, an initial analysis of current regulation and guidance documents setting the quality assurance framework and how it covers recognition is advised. Subsequently, proper transposition of the LRC, its subsidiary texts, and the EAR-HEI Manual into the national legislation and/or framework used by a quality assurance agency should be made. In this work it may be useful to consult ENIC/NARIC centres.

As a rule, there are a number of external quality assurance instruments applied by a quality assurance agency (more assurance or enhancement-oriented), and several stakeholders contributing to their functioning. Likewise, there are a variety of approaches to carrying out recognition: having these services centralised on the country level, de-centralised or in a mixed model, where many actors on state and institutional levels are involved. Considering this diversity, when determining the external quality assurance framework for a given higher education system, quality assurance agencies should jointly with ENIC/NARIC centres, higher education institutions and other stakeholders discuss and decide how in their unique context, recognition should be best addressed.

Quality assurance agencies should ensure that the standards and processes used by the agency cover all recognition procedures performed by the higher education institutions: full formal qualifications (qualifications giving access to higher education and qualifications placed at higher education levels), periods of study, and prior learning. These types of recognition may require a differentiated approach and may not be the same: on which level, by which activities, and by what level of detail quality assurance agencies cover them.

An overview of procedures, run by external quality assurance agencies in Europe, which are full members of ENQA demonstrate that while the majority of agencies implement activities both on institutional and programme levels, some focus solely on programmes, and a small number of agencies only review institutions.

A variety of approaches regarding recognition could be applied, among them: recognition covered in each and single external evaluation procedure (both programme and institutional level); a holistic view adopted and focus on the institutional level; targeted surveys and analysis of selected recognition services; a thematic evaluation of recognition infrastructure and its functioning, to name a few.

As recognition is a complex issue, an incremental approach depending on the situation in a given higher education system might be needed, possibly starting with a scoping exercise and then proceeding to the development of regular evaluation activities.

2.2. External quality assurance procedures should evaluate if recognition is included in internal quality assurance and if recognition is in compliance with the LRC.

Via external quality assurance mechanisms it should be ensured that recognition as a process is included in the internal quality assurance procedures of higher education institutions; the criteria being:

- established policies and standards in line with the LRC, its subsidiary texts, and the EAR-HEI Manual,
- timeframes set,
- responsibilities allocated,
- the concept of substantial difference is applied,
- learning outcomes in focus as much as possible,
- grounded decisions (both regarding recognition and admissions) are issued and properly communicated,
- applicants are informed about the right to appeal and appeals are effectively administered,
- the ENIC/NARIC centre is consulted respecting its status, remit, and scope of services.

Within institutions, recognition processes should be regularly reviewed and improved as appropriate to ensure it remains fit for purpose and up

to date with national and international good practice; external quality assurance should give evidence towards that effect.

While there are common principles in recognition, there is also specificity depending on the type of recognition – whether it is formal qualifications, informal qualifications, or periods of study – thus, proper consideration should be given.

As a general rule for external evaluation, quality assurance agencies should rely on information supplied by higher education institutions in their self-assessment reports or equivalent submissions that in turn, address all types of recognition procedures performed by them or on their behalf. Student feedback, gathered independently from institutions may offer important additional perspective. The ENIC/NARIC centres may be consulted to provide their outlook on recognition services within higher education institutions.

2.3. *Quality assurance agencies should build capacity of peer-review experts in recognition and/or consult recognition specialists to identify key issues related to recognition and produce relevant recommendations for improvement.*

ESG 2.4 require that among peer review experts, academic staff and students are necessarily invited. Additionally, many external quality assurance agencies also include in teams representatives from the fields of work: private businesses, public institutions, and non-governmental organisations. While members of each stakeholder group contribute with their professional understanding and voice the interests of a relevant community regarding quality of teaching and learning in higher education, they may or may not have had prior extensive exposure to and knowledge of recognition matters.

To help ensure consistency and that all panel members are prepared to tackle recognition, quality assurance agencies should offer peer-review experts appropriate support, e.g. by briefing, training and providing relevant materials. These could be developed in close cooperation with ENIC/NARIC centres and other recognition professionals who have the necessary knowledge and expertise in the field.

The survey of ENIC/NARIC centres indicated that in some cases their staff would be willing to join groups of peers in external quality assurance procedures. Quality assurance agencies should establish or further develop contacts with ENIC/NARIC centres and other organisations to discuss how expertise of recognition specialists could be best used.

External review reports, written in a light academic style and easily accessible to wide audiences, as expected by ESG 2.6, should include recognition as a

constant topic. This will help raise awareness and promote recognition within the academic community and administration of higher education institutions, and assist (potential) students in having access to fair recognition.

2.4. Quality assurance agencies should engage in thematic analysis across the higher education sector and recognition could be among the topics chosen with the aim of identifying and promoting good practices and addressing areas of persistent difficulty.

ESG 3.4 expects quality assurance agencies to engage in thematic analysis of findings generated by different external quality assurance procedures across the higher education system, encompassing institutional, national and international contexts. Recognition is a complex and vast subject, and choosing it as a topic for scrutiny may require expertise beyond the present scope of quality assurance agencies. Therefore, effective cooperation with ENIC/NARIC centres, representatives of higher education institutions and other organisations may be very fruitful.

Thematic analysis of recognition is proposed as a multi-purpose tool, starting from initial diagnosis of the situation in a particular area concerning recognition, and enabling in-depth understanding of hindering forces from the point of view of various stakeholder groups (such as administrators, academics, and students), and the identification and communication of good practices.

Results of thematic analysis could subsequently be used in a variety of pre-defined ways. They could be considered as one source of information in addition to self-evaluation reports by higher education institutions in regular external quality assurance procedures. Thematic analysis could also be a tool to inform and improve institutional and national policies.

2.5. Quality assurance agencies should promote dialogue and contribute to dissemination of good practices in recognition.

Quality assurance is one of the key commitments in the Bologna Process and a feature of any modern developed higher education system. Independent quality assurance agencies play an important role in their respective higher education systems and this enables them to facilitate policy dialogue among stakeholders regarding internal and external quality assurance and recognition.

Surveys conducted for the LIREQA project revealed that in some cases quality assurance agencies appear well positioned to help improve visibility of ENIC/NARIC centres and their outreach toward higher education institutions. Joint events and joint communication of good practice could be amongst the activities implemented.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ENIC/NARIC CENTRES

3.1. *ENIC/NARIC centres should analyse and contribute to the streamlining of national procedures and structures for academic recognition and actively organise and facilitate cooperation between all national stakeholders to ensure a coherent and well-functioning recognition system.*

The ENIC/NARIC centres are referred to in the ESG as one of the parties that higher education institutions should cooperate with a view to ensuring coherent recognition across the country. This reflects the important role that ENIC/NARIC centres play in recognition on a national level.

The ENIC/NARIC centres should actively contribute to the development of fair, transparent, and cohesive national recognition systems and structures, which allow proper implementation of the LRC. This requires a proactive role of the national ENIC/NARIC centre in reviewing and revising national policies to ensure that they are fully aligned with the LRC, its subsidiary texts, and the EAR Manuals.

The ENIC/NARIC centres should also make continuous efforts to familiarise and be aware of the procedures applied by the recognition making bodies, including higher education institutions, within their system and the main challenges they face. The national ENIC/NARIC centre should aim to identify when the national procedures and structures do not contribute to mobility or even obstruct it and should initiate discussions among the national stakeholders, as well as suggest and recommend adjustments. While doing this, it should actively raise awareness and capacity of all the stakeholders in recognition and create a platform for the recognition community to discuss, develop, and share good practice.

As much as it is within the capacity of the ENIC/NARIC centre, it should provide clear and transparent information regarding situation within the national system to all external stakeholders, including the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in various recognition decisions.

3.2. ENIC/NARIC centres should actively and systematically:
- *develop and disseminate relevant information, tools, and documents on recognition to higher education institutions and provide training on how to use them;*
- *develop or fine-tune efficient services for credential evaluation aimed at higher education institutions.*

Increasing international student mobility and updates of the ESG, which directly connect recognition and quality assurance, raise expectations for higher education institutions to follow the LRC and apply good practice in their recognition activities. According to the results of the project surveys and the desktop research conducted for this project, recognition practices within higher education institutions show great variations and may require further development and refinement.

The ENIC/NARIC centres are well placed to contribute to the development of good recognition practice in higher education institutions The centres can effectively and appropriately disseminate information about the recognition of foreign qualifications, recognition tools, and information resources, such as databases, documents, etc.

The surveys have demonstrated that most of the ENIC/NARIC centres already offer a wide variety of services to higher education institutions (information provision, training, etc.) and see them as one of the most important recipients of their services. However, there are centres where interaction is still limited. In addition to this, even frequent interactions may not always result in improved institutional practices if they are not part of systemic efforts. While improved practices in higher education institutions will take more than efforts by the ENIC/NARIC centres alone, their services have the potential to significantly contribute to the development of streamlined and fair institutional policies and procedures.

It is recommended that the ENIC/NARIC centres review and/or develop their services to higher education institutions. The services should preferably include the following:

- Development and dissemination of relevant information and guidelines (links to sources of information, databases of recommended decisions, country profiles, etc.);
- Training and seminars on how to use the information and guidelines;
- Consultation and/or credential evaluation services tailored for higher education institutions;
- Advice on how to implement a fair and transparent institutional recognition procedure.

The ENIC/NARIC centres should consider the best possible ways to actively disseminate relevant information to HEIs. This should also be done in a proactive way, for example, by participating in HEI networks or organising specific targeted events.

While information and capacity building exercises form an important base, institutions are faced with recognition issues every day. Thus, on demand credential evaluation and/or consultation services for higher education institutions are an important factor in improving recognition. This aids consistency of decision making on the national level and helps higher education institutions in their practices. Many of the ENIC/NARIC centres already provide credential evaluation services to higher education institutions. For others, this should be considered by taking due regard of their remit and available resources. Possibilities of modern technologies (such as digitalised databases and digitalised sharing of information) should be explored to maximise the efficiency and sustainability of services.

> The ENIC/NARIC centres should develop their services in consultation with higher education institutions by considering the following:
> - What is the national recognition system and how is responsibility allocated between the various stakeholders in terms of recognition?
> - What are the needs of higher education institutions?
> - What services have already been developed? Are they appropriate and reflect the needs of institutions?
> - Which types of services are required to ensure systemic support to institutions? What resources will they require?
> - How can information technology be used to increase efficiency, sustainability, and availability of services?

The ENIC/NARIC centres as a network have already developed several overarching tools for higher education institutions, including the EAR-HEI Manual, which serves as a benchmark of good recognition practice in Europe. With the ESG 2015, the ENIC/NARIC network should also consider developing common tools aimed at the quality assurance of recognition in higher education institutions in addition to the present recommendations.

3.3. *ENIC/NARIC centres should collaborate with quality assurance agencies in adapting quality assurance procedures to address recognition, including the development of appropriate indicators.*

In many systems, the ENIC/NARIC centres and quality assurance agencies have a tradition of cooperation, especially in light of the increasing internationalisation of higher education. In some cases, the quality assurance agency and the ENIC/NARIC may be part of the same office. Nonetheless, the level of collaboration varies. According to the survey of the ENIC/NARIC centres, while there are some common activities mostly in terms of exchange of information, none of the responses specifically refer to current cooperation regarding recognition in higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies. However, due to the ESG 2015, some of the offices are starting to consider such cooperation in the future.

The surveys and interviews within the project have shown that in some cases, even when quality assurance agencies declare that they have implemented the ESG article 1.4 and their external quality assurance processes encompass recognition, this is usually limited only to specific types of recognition (e.g. periods of study or RPL) and is touched upon unsystematically (e.g. by applying a problems–based approach). Therefore, there is a certain discrepancy between the experience of the quality assurance agencies, which may state that there are no problems with recognition in their system's higher education institutions, and the actual state of recognition, which may be largely underdeveloped (as was demonstrated by the survey of higher education institutions, student responses and other desk research).

The ENIC/NARIC centres, on the other hand, are knowledgeable about good practices in recognition and they are aware of the recognition practices within their respective countries on the national level. Some of them have also developed experience in quality assurance of recognition through their external peer review quality assurance exercises within their own network (through various projects, such as SQUARE[18], IMPACT[19], etc.).

Thus, cooperation between the ENIC/NARIC centres and quality assurance agencies is important in setting up appropriate and effective external quality assurance procedures that enable the identification and advancement of the practices of higher education institutions in recognition. The ENIC/NARIC centres should provide consultations and support to the quality assurance agencies to make sure that:

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18   https://www.enic-naric.net/square-quality-assurance-for-the-enic-naric-networks.aspx?srcval=SQUARE

19   https://www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/impact/

- the national context and the role of higher education institutions is taken into account during external quality assurance procedures;
- indicators used by the quality assurance agencies reflect good recognition practice and are appropriate in identifying compliance with the LRC, subsidiary texts, and the EAR-HEI Manual;
- there is an increased understanding and awareness regarding recognition and related issues and improvement takes place as appropriate.

The ENIC/NARIC centres should also consider providing support during individual external quality assurance procedures, such as training of experts or providing additional information regarding specific practices of higher education institutions, if required.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE STAKEHOLDERS

4.1. Networks of quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions, ENIC/NARIC centres and student organisations should assure awareness on current developments and disseminate good practices by constantly including recognition and quality assurance among the topics discussed.

Project surveys revealed certain mismatches in understanding how ENIC/NARIC centres and quality assurance agencies work and their reciprocal expectations, but also showed the need for capacity building in order to bridge the gaps and use the potential of cooperation for the future. Consultations with the project's Advisory Group, consisting of the European level Bologna Process consultative partners also showed the need to promote recognition and better assure current and prospective student rights to fair recognition.

It is recommended to constantly include a specific aspect of recognition (full qualifications, periods of study, RPL) and of quality assurance (internal and external) on the agenda in stakeholder forums: meetings of higher education representatives of institutions, quality assurance professionals, students, and ENIC/NARIC centres. This would help increase visibility and the perceived importance of the topics, contribute to expanding the knowledge base and capacity building and assist in properly addressing challenges in recognition in terms of improvement of policies and practices.

Surveys of higher education institutions and ENIC/NARIC centres identified insufficient information as a key challenge for recognition. Public authorities, when developing national higher education systems, should bear in mind the need for transparent information to facilitate recognition of their qualifications.

Clear and transparent information on current and pre-Bologna education systems, lists of recognised and legitimate providers, qualifications awarded, quality assurance mechanisms and their coverage, and credit systems are vital. Increasingly, there is no monopoly on information, but there are also many untrusted sources. Therefore, joint activities on the national level in addressing the information shortage are necessary in order to create reliable resources, raise awareness of their existence, and give training on proper usage.

Networks of ENIC/NARIC centres, higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies can facilitate access to or share information about existing and newly developed resources.

In some systems, higher education institutions, public authorities and other stakeholders have developed and enacted codes of conduct for internationalisation. These codes often include commonly agreed standards that higher education institutions should apply for information provision and student admission. As taking decisions on acceptance of formal and informal qualifications and periods of study is a necessary step in the admissions process, clear references for recognition aligned with the Lisbon Recognition Convention, its subsidiary texts and the EAR–HEI Manual are advised. Such amendments to codes for internationalisation of higher education should be made as soon as possible.

As national legislation and other reference documents are powerful instruments guiding recognition, public authorities should engage with ENIC/NARIC centres, higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies, students and other organisations in the revision and improvement of the legal framework.

Countries should aim to implement automatic recognition, and the ENIC/NARIC centres with higher education institutions should be supported in their efforts to achieve this. Among other approaches to automatic recognition, this could include the drafting and agreement of multilateral treaties.

Additional resources might be needed for all three parties concerned – higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies and ENIC/NARIC centres – to implement measures for the proper linking of internal and external quality assurance and recognition. Public authorities should assist in the allocation of those resources.

5. LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Recommendations to higher education institutions*

   1.1. *Higher education institutions should establish and/or analyse and streamline their recognition procedures using the Lisbon Recognition Convention, its subsidiary texts, the European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions (EAR–HEI Manual), and other tools developed by the ENIC/NARIC networks.*

   1.2. *Higher education institutions should make the streamlined recognition procedures subject to regular monitoring and review as part of their internal quality assurance system.*

   1.3. *Higher education institutions should actively promote opportunities for all types of recognition, publish clear and easily accessible information about it, and ensure prompt communication with the learner during the recognition process.*

   1.4. *Higher education institutions should ensure and support reliable and consistent recognition decision making with an appropriate institutional infrastructure.*

   1.5. *Higher education institutions should liaise with the national ENIC/NARIC centre for information and capacity and consider how the services of credential evaluation provided by the ENIC/NARIC may best fit in with their own procedures.*

   1.6. *Higher education institutions should cooperate with the recognition community of other higher education institutions to share information, knowledge, and good practice.*

2. *Recommendations to external quality assurance agencies*

   2.1. *Quality assurance agencies should include recognition in regular external quality assurance procedures as appropriate in the context of the higher education system in place and the relevant agency's profile.*

2.2. External quality assurance procedures should evaluate if recognition is included in internal quality assurance and if recognition is in compliance with the LRC.

2.3. Quality assurance agencies should build capacity of peer-review experts in recognition and/or consult recognition specialists to identify key issues related to recognition and produce relevant recommendations for improvement.

2.4. Quality assurance agencies should engage in thematic analysis across the higher education sector and recognition could be among the topics chosen with the aim of identifying and promoting good practices and addressing areas of persistent difficulty.

2.5. Quality assurance agencies should promote dialogue and contribute to dissemination of good practices in recognition.

3. *Recommendations to the ENIC/NARIC centres*

3.1. ENIC/NARIC centres should analyse and contribute to streamlining of national procedures and structures for academic recognition and actively organise and facilitate cooperation between all national stakeholders to ensure coherent and well-functioning recognition system.

3.2. ENIC/NARIC centres should actively and systematically:

- *develop and disseminate relevant information, tools, and documents on recognition to higher education institutions and provide training on how to use them;*

- *develop or fine-tune efficient services in credential evaluation aimed at higher education institutions.*

3.3. ENIC/NARIC centres should collaborate with quality assurance agencies in adapting quality assurance procedures to address recognition, including the development of appropriate indicators.

4. Recommendations to the stakeholders

4.1. *Networks of quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions, ENIC/NARIC centres and student organisations should assure awareness on current developments and disseminate good practices by constantly including recognition and quality assurance among the topics discussed.*

4.2. *Public authorities and ENIC/NARIC centres should ensure transparency of their systems of education for the purposes of recognition for all stakeholders.*

4.3. *Stakeholders should review and amend codes of conduct for internationalisation, where available, so that these codes explicitly refer to recognition and the necessity for compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention.*

4.4. *Public authorities should engage in revision of the recognition framework where required and provide support to those involved in its implementation.*