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Crossing Bridges between Education Systems

The History and Relevance of the Lisbon Recognition Convention

01

Edited by Sjur Bergan, Chiara Finocchietti, Kees Kouwenaar, Luca Lantero and Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić

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SINCE 1984

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Abbreviations

AACRAO	American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers
ACE	Admissions & Credential Evaluation (ACE) section of EAIE
ANDISU	Italian Association of Organizations for the Right to University Education
APICE	Italian Professional Association of Credential Evaluators
BFUG	Bologna Follow Up Group
CBE	Cross-Border Education
CALOHEE	Measuring and Comparing Achievements of Learning Outcomes in Higher Education in Europe
CEPES	Centre Européen Pour l'Enseignement Supérieur /European Centre for Higher Education [UNESCO] (until 2011)
CHEA	Council for Higher Education Accreditation [US]
CIQG	International Quality Group of CHEA
CNVQR	National Coordination on the Evaluation of Refugee Qualifications [Italy]
CRE	Standing Conference of Rectors, Presidents and Vice Chancellors of the European Universities / Conférence permanente des Recteurs, Présidents et Vice-Chanceliers des Universités européennes (until 2001)
CRUI	Conference of Italian University Rectors
DEQAR	Database of External Quality Assurance Results
EAIE	European Association for International Education
ECA	European Consortium of Accreditation
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ELGS	European Law & Governance School
ENIC	European National Information Centres (Council of Europe and UNESCO)
EPLO	European Public Law Organization
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education

EQF	European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EU)
EQPR	European Qualifications Passports for Refugees (Council of Europe)
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA
ETINED	Platform on Ethics, Transparency, and Integrity in Education (Council of Europe)
EUA	European University Association
GER	Global Enrolment Ratio
ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
IHELG	Institute for Higher Education Law and Governance
IIEP	International Institute for Educational Planning (UNESCO)
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
LOUIS	Learning Outcomes in University for Impact on Society
LRC	Lisbon Recognition Convention
LRCC	Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee
MERIC	Mediterranean Recognition Information Centres (UNESCO)
MOOC	Massive Open Online Courses
NARIC	National Academic Recognition Information Centres (EU)
NEIC	National Equivalence Information Centre (Council of Europe, until 1994)
NIB	National Information Bureau (UNESCO, until 1994)
NUFFIC	Netherlands Universities Foundation for International Cooperation
ODL	Open and Distance Learning
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OERs	Open Educational Resources
QF-EHEA	Overarching Framework of Qualifications of the EHEA
TAICEP	The Association for International Credential Evaluation Professionals
TPG-LRC	Thematic Peer Group on implementation of the LRC in EHEA countries
UQP	UNESCO Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants
VALUE	Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education

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N. 01
September 2025

A Word from the Editors

Sjur Bergan, Chiara Finocchietti, Kees Kouwenaar, Luca Lantero, and Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić

The origin of this book is to be found in a discussion between two of the editors (Sjur Bergan and Kees Kouwenaar) of the importance of ensuring that the history of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) not be lost. They contacted Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, and thus the three individuals who had played the most central roles in the development of the LRC (see Chapter 1 The Road to Lisbon) launched a project the initial direction of which was down memory lane. Key to this initial impetus was age: all three have now retired, and they were – albeit reluctantly – lucid enough to realize that in a decade or two (hopefully not sooner) they might no longer be able to tell the story of the inception and development of the LRC. With them, an important part of the oral history of the LRC would be lost, even if its documentary history lived on.

The three initiators did not discuss for long before they realized that, important as safeguarding historical memory might be, a focus solely on the past would be unsatisfactory. This conclusion was reinforced through consultations with a broad group of past and present actors to check whether they found the initiative relevant, which they did. Almost three decades after it was adopted, the LRC is very much a living reality, not a document gathering dust in an inaccessible archive. From an initial focus on the past, the project quickly developed to encompass the present and the future.

The questions that have guided the work on this book include:

- How has the LRC influenced recognition policy and practice in the European Region since it was adopted in April 1997 and came into force in February 1999? We resisted the temptation to engage in counterfactual history and ask what recognition policy and practice would have been like had the LRC not been developed, or had the States Parties adopted a different and more traditional text.

- How has the LRC adapted to developments since 1997? These include issues that could not have been foreseen in the 1990s, such as the development of digital technologies/Artificial Intelligence and their impact on recognition, but also phenomena that existed in embryonic form in 1997 and have taken on much greater importance since then. Obvious examples are quality assurance, qualifications frameworks, and the development of a European system for the transfer of study credit (ECTS).[1]

[1] *The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system, accessed 20 February 2025.*

- Mention of ECTS points to a framework that is only a couple of years younger than the LRC and that has in many ways structured higher education policy in Europe since then: the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), launched as the Bologna Process in June 1999[2] and established as the EHEA[3] as of 2010.[4] Structural reforms were the most important early focus of the EHEA and remain essential. What role did and does the LRC play in the development and implementation of the EHEA, all the members of which are now parties to the Convention?[5]

- The EHEA was developed partly in response to broader political developments that made higher education cooperation across all of Europe both possible and attractive. How did the LRC respond to these developments, and how is it responding to today's political climate that is far less favorable to international cooperation? What is the role of the LRC in a situation characterized, on the one hand, by strong and sometimes armed conflicts between some States Parties and, on the other hand, a deepened cooperation within parts of Europe through the European Union?

- The EHEA is a European framework. Even if most of the States Parties to the LRC are European, some are not, at least beyond the fact that they are members of the UNESCO Europe Region.[6] How can a structured cooperation between most but not all States Parties to the LRC within the European Higher Education Area be combined with continued cooperation on equal terms with those States Parties, such as Australia, Canada, Israel, Kyrgyzstan, New Zealand, and Tajikistan, that are not EHEA members and are unlikely to be so in the future? How, for that matter, can such a structured cooperation be combined with continued cooperation on equal terms with the United States, which has signed but not ratified the LRC and therefore is not a State Party in spite of being an active member of the ENIC Network and an important cooperation partner for European higher education?

- In the framework of UNESCO, the LRC is one of five regional recognition conventions that have now been complemented by a Global Recognition Convention. What role does the LRC play in a global perspective?

- One of the effects of the EHEA has been to move recognition closer to the heart of higher education policy. Perhaps with some exaggeration, we could say that recognition has

[2] Launched in May 1998 for those who consider the meeting of four Ministers (France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom) at the Sorbonne as the starting point.
[3] For an overview of the EHEA, see its official website https://ehea.info/, accessed 20 February 2025.
[4] A declaration of bias may be in order. All the editors of this publication and many of the authors have been involved in the development of the EHEA in different ways. Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić represented UNESCO at the 2010 Ministerial conference of the EHEA, while Sjur Bergan represented the Council of Europe at all Ministerial conferences between 1999 and 2020 and was a member of the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) and of several working groups, including ones on structural reforms and qualifications frameworks, from mid-2000 until April 2022. Luca Lantero headed the Bologna Secretariat from 2018 to 2020, when the Secretariat was hosted by Italy, and now represents Italy in the BFUG. Chiara Finocchietti is also strongly involved with the EHEA, in particular as Co-Chair of the Thematic Peer Group on LRC.
[5] Greece was the latest EHEA member to accede to the LRC, on 13 September 2024. An updated overview of signatures and ratifications may be found at https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=signatures-by-treaty&treatynum=165, accessed on 20 February 2025.
[6] On July 22, the United States announced its withdrawal from UNESCO, effective as of end 2026. The manuscript was completed before the withdrawal was announced, and the chapters in the book therefore could not take account of this withdrawal.

developed from a matter for technical specialists to a key policy concern. Nevertheless, technical specialists continue to play an essential role in making it possible for students and graduates to have their qualifications recognized when they move across national borders – which in recognition terms could perhaps better be labeled a move from one education system to another. How do recognition specialists and policy makers interact, how are they made aware of each other's priorities and concerns, and how has credential evaluation developed into a profession with its own standards and body of knowledge and understanding?

- The LRC is a legal text but no legal text is stronger than the way it is implemented. How does the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee (LRCC) – the body of representatives of States Parties overseeing the LRC – make decisions? Does it manage to make decisions on recognition policy that go beyond the lowest common denominator of what its States Parties may be willing to accept? What is the relationship between formal decisions and actual implementation?

These were some of the questions that came up in our discussions. This book may not give satisfactory answers to all of them, but on the other hand it addresses several further questions that came up as our work developed.

Even with our initial questions, however, it quickly became clear to the initiators that, even if they have kept more or less abreast with developments in recognition policy and practice, they could not hope to answer all these questions convincingly by themselves. They needed contributions from younger colleagues who are still active in the field. The book needed contributions from both practitioners and observers. The list of contributors to the different chapters, who were drawn mainly from the broad group consulted on the relevance of the project, reflects the importance of both geographical diversity and the diversity of experience. In this book, the world of credential evaluators meets that of universities, staff representatives, and public authorities. The book could not have come about without the contributions of authors from many walks of recognition life, and we have in addition benefitted from discussions with people who in the end did not join us as authors but who nevertheless contributed valuable views, in particular in an early round of online discussion meetings.

This book would also not have come about without a publisher. Even if the LRC was developed in cooperation between the Council of Europe and UNESCO, none of the initiators is currently active in either organization. They therefore turned to the Italian ENIC-NARIC[7] not only because it is one of the most active recognition centers in Europe but also because its two key recognition policy makers – Luca Lantero and Chiara Finocchietti – are, at the time of writing, President of the LRCC and of the ENIC Network, respectively. Both supported the idea of a book enthusiastically. We quickly reached agreement that CIMEA would publish it and that Chiara Finocchietti and Luca Lantero would join the editorial team. All authors contributed free of charge but CIMEA financed the publication itself. We have also been able to benefit from Letizia Brambilla Pisoni's editorial assistance from her position at CIMEA.

[7] *National Information Center on the recognition of qualifications. The importance of the ENIC and NARIC networks is explained in the chapter on governance.*

The original idea of a focus on the history of the LRC is reflected in the first chapter, called The Road to Lisbon and written by Sjur Bergan, Kees Kouwenaar, and Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić. The history of the LRC deserves to be told, and we believe that the brief presentation of it in this book will both be of interest to those working with recognition policy and practice today and provide them with useful background information, even if they are more concerned with future developments than with how we got where we are today.

"A future for our past" has been a theme of UNESCO's work with the world's heritage,[8] and we believe the LRC is a modest example of the importance of looking toward the future based on an awareness of our past. This chapter outlines the considerations that led the Council of Europe and UNESCO to develop a new, joint convention to further the fair recognition of qualifications in Europe. It presents the main stages in development of the LRC and some of the considerations that led us to opt for certain solutions. The first chapter also sketches some of the challenges that had to be overcome, and we could not quite resist including some of the more folklore-like moments that inevitably occur in an undertaking like this. The anecdotes hopefully make reading the chapter more pleasant without overshadowing the fact that the history of the LRC is far from anecdotal. The chapter is based on solid historical sources as well as on our own experience and recollections as key actors. What we can perhaps not claim is critical distance.

The second chapter presents the key concepts of the Convention and, more broadly, of recognition policy and practice today. In doing so, it seeks to demonstrate how the LRC keeps adapting to take account of new concepts. Kees Kouwenaar explores these concepts and then places them in their proper context in his introduction to the chapter.

In §2.1 Helene Peterbauer discusses "substantial differences", a concept which is perhaps the key innovation of the LRC. It emphasizes that only some differences are important – or "substantial" – enough to justify not recognizing a foreign qualification. Many differences are unimportant to the purpose for which recognition is sought and may even add flavor to the qualification. In these cases, recognition should be granted. The emphasis on "substantial differences" has been paralleled by a development in the attitudes of credential evaluators. Those evaluators seeking to protect their own country's system by ensuring that no applicant whose qualifications could be thought even slightly less good than those of the evaluator's country (or, properly, system), have become reconciled to seeing differences as potential strengths and their task as credential evaluators being to ensure that those with foreign qualifications can use their experience and potential in new settings and countries. Only where differences are substantial should recognition be withheld, and even where differences may be substantial, total rejection should not be the first and immediate answer. In many cases, even if a foreign qualification cannot be recognized in full, part of it may be recognized so that the holder of a foreign qualification does not need to start from scratch. This is why "partial recognition" is another key concept of the LRC. Not least, it is no longer up to applicants to prove that their qualifications are worthy of recognition. It is rather up to the competent recognition authorities to demonstrate why a difference is "substantial" if they consider it to be so.

[8] *See, for example, https://www.unesco.org/archives/multimedia/document-1722, accessed 20 February 2025.*

The concept of "substantial difference" is pertinent only if qualifications are authentic, which means that they have been issued by the institution whose name appears on the document attesting the qualification to the person whose name[9] also appears. If a qualification is fraudulent, the question of recognition is moot but, as Chiara Finocchietti explain in §2.2, identifying fraudulent qualifications is not straightforward. Falsification of qualifications has probably been an issue as long as formal qualifications have existed, but the stakes of having formal qualifications are greater in modern, complex societies, and the methods for falsifying them have become more sophisticated and difficult to detect. Still too little is known about the true extent of the problem: how many attempts at fraud are we faced with annually, and are false diplomas a relatively marginal problem affecting forged documents from little-known institutions that fool few but the least experienced assessors, or are they to the contrary a widespread issue with many attempts at fraud that even experienced credential evaluators find it challenging and sometimes impossible to identify? Regardless of the answers to these questions, awareness of the need to verify and authenticate qualifications has also increased.

As Kees Kouwenaar explains in §2.3, the responsibility of public authorities extends to providing transparent and reliable information on their own qualifications and raising awareness among students, employers, parents, and other stakeholders of the importance of verifying study programs and the qualifications earned on the basis of them. Many students probably put greater effort into verifying the state of a used car before they buy one than on assessing the seriousness and suitability of a study program in which they are about to invest years of their lives and possibly substantial amounts of their own or their parents' money. Kees Kouwenaar therefore also explores the home and host authorities' responsibility for information and awareness raising.

In Chapter 3, Sjur Bergan and Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić place the LRC in a broader political and policy context. The LRC is a child of the 1990s, when the political changes often subsumed under "the fall of the [Berlin] Wall" gave reason for optimism about the future of both democracy and international cooperation in (but not limited to) higher education. Today, the international political context is far more challenging, and some States Parties to the Convention are even engaged in armed conflict with each other. Nevertheless, the broader political and policy framework remains important to the implementation and further development of the LRC, particularly in a period when there is much less reason for optimism.

Chapter 4 explores a number of new developments since the LRC was adopted and how the LRC can be adapted, through subsidiary texts as well as through innovative implementation, to respond to these developments, which Kees Kouwenaar outlines in his introduction.

Sjur Bergan and Erwin Malfroy then examine in §4.1 the uses of qualifications frameworks and their impact on recognition. Qualifications frameworks existed in other parts of the world – notably in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa – around the time when the LRC was adopted, but they were introduced in the European policy debate somewhat later and have now become an essential part of the structural reforms within the EHEA. They also facilitate recognition, and it is from this angle that the contribution explores and describes qualifications frameworks.

[9] *Most often the document includes also other personal information, such as date of birth, a personal identification number, or a number assigned to students by a higher education institution.*

"Automatic recognition" is a concept first brought into the European higher education policy debate through the Bucharest Communiqué of the EHEA (Bologna Process 2012a: 4–5), and the initiative came from the European Commission at a late stage of the drafting of this communiqué. As Chiara Finocchietti and Luca Lantero describe in §4.2, "automatic recognition" is a natural consequence of the tools developed within the EHEA and of the work of the ENIC and NARIC networks on the basis of the LRC. As such it is an important development in facilitating recognition. At the same time, at least to those not familiar with the world of recognition, the term promises somewhat more than it can deliver. The focus of automatic recognition is on access (as made possible by public authorities) more than on admission to specific courses or activities; this is not always clearly understood and should perhaps receive more attention. Recognition is greatly facilitated by qualifications frameworks, quality assurance, and a better developed understanding of substantial differences, but it is difficult to say if it will become fully "automatic" in the sense that no human assessment of any qualification will be required.

In §4.3, Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić and Robert Wagenaar describe the overall development of "micro-credentials", which have built on elements that were present already when the LRC was adopted. Study credit systems arose, most notably the ECTS (European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System), which was developed through a pilot project under the ERASMUS program in 1989–95 (Wagenaar 2019), to make it possible for students to have study credits transferred between universities, or – in terms of the LRC – to further the recognition of study periods abroad (Article V). The more recent development of "micro-credentials" aims at providing new possibilities for students to undertake shorter periods of learning, often building on their previous higher education qualifications. Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić and Robert Wagenaar explore how the recognition community could and should respond to this development with a view to giving students and learners fair recognition for the work undertaken, Chiara Finocchietti describes the European and international policy framework while Kateryna Suprun and Yurii Zuban describe the use of "micro-credentials" in the specific context of Ukraine.

In §4.4 Chiara Finocchietti and Serena Spitalieri discuss important new developments in digital technologies, including Artificial Intelligence, and outline some ways in which these could further recognition but also some potential pitfalls. In seeking to answer the key questions of whether, and to what extent, digitalization can support the fair recognition of qualifications in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the authors review the key reference documents for the LRC and also examine how these are implemented through activities and projects carried out by the ENIC and NARIC networks as well as, more broadly, within the European Higher Education Area. Chiara Finocchietti and Serena Spitalieri also provide a brief historical overview of how credential evaluators have made use of digital technologies in their work.

As Kees Kouwenaar describes in §4.5, the development of learning outcomes is another important feature of higher education policy and practice both in Europe and globally over the past decade or two. Within the EHEA, the development of learning outcomes is closely linked to that of qualifications frameworks. In recognition terms, learning outcomes are both a good argument for and a help in shifting practice from a focus on process to a focus on results regardless of the education process through which the results were obtained. That is an important feature of the LRC, and the focus on "substantial differences" as a condition for withholding recognition further underscores the essential role of learning outcomes.

Chapter 5 explores three aspects of how the Lisbon Recognition Convention works in practice. In §5.1 Sjur Bergan, Chiara Finocchietti, Kees Kouwenaar, and Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić examine the governance of the LRC through its Convention Committee and also outline the important role of the ENIC and NARIC networks in developing sound practice in recognition. Revising an international treaty would be a very demanding undertaking, but the Convention Committee has been able to adopt a set of recommendations and other subsidiary texts to take account of some of the new developments described in earlier chapters. The authors also point to some challenges in the governance of the LRC and underline the importance of implementation in making the LRC a living reality.

Even if the LRC is an international treaty to which States, represented by their central government, acceded, and even if both the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee and the ENIC and NARIC networks are made up of representatives mandated by the competent public authorities, the role of stakeholders in higher education policy and practice is essential, as shown not least through the EHEA. In §5.2 Jens Vraa-Jensen explores the role of stakeholders – institutions, staff, and students – in the development of good recognition policy and practice under the LRC and considers how this considerable resource could better be used to ensure fair recognition in the European Region.

As Letizia Brambilla Pisoni, Chiara Finocchietti, Kees Kouwenaar, and Erwin Malfroy describe in 5.3, credential evaluation has developed into a profession with its own standards and its own body of knowledge and understanding. Professionalization of credential evaluation did not originate with the LRC, but it has been greatly furthered by the Convention and its implementation mechanisms, in particular the ENIC and NARIC networks. The authors consider the professional development of credential evaluators and their role in the implementation of the LRC, and Italy provides an example of how their professional development can be furthered at national level.

In Chapter 6, Sjur Bergan, Letizia Brambilla Pisoni, Chiara Finocchietti, Luca Lantero, Stig Arne Skjerven, and Kateryna Suprun examine a very specific case: the recognition of refugees' qualifications in cases where these cannot be adequately documented. The chapter focuses on the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR), developed by the Council of Europe and partners in response to the "refugee crisis" in Europe from summer 2015 onward. The EQPR was developed to help improve implementation of Article VII of the LRC and complements a recommendation adopted by the LRCC in November 2017 (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2017). This chapter also describes UNESCO's efforts to develop a similar instrument, the Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants (UQP), under the Global Convention. On the basis of the Italian experience, the chapter further describes how refugees' qualifications can be recognized at national level, how refugees can be given opportunities to undertake further studies or enter the labor market on the basis of the EQPR and, more broadly, how the EQPR can be integrated into national strategies for refugees. Not least, the chapter examines the case of Ukrainian refugees in the wake of the Russian invasion in February 2022. One specificity of this case is that the Ukrainian authorities themselves are playing a very active role in helping their own citizens who have had to flee the country, both to help them gain access to studies and employment in their host countries and to help them return to Ukraine when conditions allow.

The roots of the LRC lay in developments in Europe. Quite apart from that, the older recognition conventions (created within the frameworks of the Council of Europe and UNESCO) were now outdated.

At the same time, the LRC would concern Canada, the USA, several countries of Central Asia, and Israel, all members of the UNESCO Europe and North America Region, as well as Australia and New Zealand, as parties to some of the older conventions that the LRC was intended to replace. In Chapter 7, Kees Kouwenaar considers the LRC in a transatlantic perspective against the background of the longstanding discussions and cooperation between US and European recognition specialists, and he explores the role and implications of the LRC in and for the USA and European–US higher education cooperation. As well as being the only country which has signed but not ratified the LRC, the situation of the United States is of particular interest both because of the many Europeans who earn qualifications in the USA and *vice versa* and because of the particular characteristics of US higher education. These include a much more modest role for public authorities in higher education than is the case in Europe, the very limited competence of federal public authorities in this area, a correspondingly high degree of institutional autonomy, and the reliance on a set of regional and other recognition and accreditation agencies.

In Chapter 8, Stig Arne Skjerven and Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić consider recognition from a global perspective. In the UNESCO context, the LRC is one of five regional recognition conventions. As the oldest of what is often called the second generation of recognition conventions, the LRC has inspired the development of the other four conventions. However, these have been better able to take account of developments from the late 1990s until the mid-2010s, of which quality assurance is a prime example. In the early 2010s, UNESCO started work on a Global Recognition Convention, which was adopted in 2019, and which is now getting close to critical mass with more than 35 ratifications from all continents.[10] Stig Arne Skjerven and Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić detail the development of the global convention and the second generation of regional recognition conventions, and outline elements for further developments.

The bibliography, which is common to all chapters, includes the publications, articles, and other works referred to in this book. As such, it constitutes a good overview of relevant literature in the field, and it may also be approached as suggestions for further reading.

A newspaper, which shall remain unnamed, once stated that its aim was to provide "a solid background for developing opinions of one's own". This is also one of our aims with this book, strengthened by the fact that all its authors are convinced of the continuing importance of the LRC, even if they hold different views on some of the issues explored here, such as the degree to which developments have affected the importance of formal qualifications or the importance of automatic recognition or micro-credentials, or even some of the broader political developments that are important to the development and implementation of the LRC. All the authors have experience with recognition policy and/or practice, but in different positions and different areas of experience and expertise. Some are recognition specialists, while others are policy makers or approach recognition from the point of view of stakeholders. Some hold office in the governing bodies of the LRC, or have done so in the past, and others have been involved with the development and/or implementation of the LRC in different ways. All, however, write on their own behalf and from their own perspective. Each chapter and sub-chapter therefore expresses the views of its author(s) and not necessarily those of all authors of the book nor of CIMEA as publisher.

[10] *https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/global-convention-recognition-qualifications-concerning-higher-education?hub=70286, accessed 20 February 2025.*

We have also preserved the authors' preferences when it comes to certain terms, e.g. whether to use 'credential/credentials evaluator' in the singular or plural, and when it comes to their style of writing, including their preference for either US or UK English.

One other comment on terminology may be in order. Europe is rich in both governmental and intergovernmental institutions and organizations and in nongovernmental organizations, and sometimes a near similarity in names may cause confusion. For this book, it is particularly important to distinguish between the Council of Europe, which is an intergovernmental organization of 46 members[11] based in Strasbourg, and the Council of the European Union, often referred to for short – as in this book also – as the European Council which is the intergovernmental branch of the European Union, with headquarters in Brussels, providing the framework within which Ministers of EU Member States meet to conduct EU business.

The book outlines what we believe are the main aspects of the LRC and its contributions both to furthering international cooperation and to making life easier for students and holders of qualifications. Several chapters include specific recommendations as to how fair recognition could be improved, and we will not preempt readers' curiosity by detailing those recommendations here.

We believe the LRC has made and continues to make a difference in more ways than one, not the least of which is a changed attitude toward qualifications and the individuals whose lives are affected by whether their qualifications are recognized fairly or not. The LRC has contributed to making recognition more student centered – or, properly speaking, holder of qualifications-centered. It has also contributed to making qualifications and their recognition a key part of higher education policy. It is far from trivial that the European Higher Education Area, which came into being just a very few years after the LRC was adopted, has had structural reforms (recognition, qualifications frameworks, and quality assurance) as one of its lasting priorities, and that these priorities are at the heart of the peer learning groups that seek to further implantation of the commitments undertaken by EHEA Ministers through successive communiqués and declarations. The LRC has made and continues to make a tangible difference by providing a legal basis for recognition in the European region and thereby developing an approach to recognition that is broadly shared by credential evaluators and public authorities in its 57 States Parties.

While the LRC is and will, we are convinced, remain a cornerstone of recognition of qualifications in Europe, policies and practices evolve. The LRC has been adapted to policies and practices that have evolved through subsidiary texts as well as through the work of the LRCC, the ENIC and NARIC Networks, and countless policy makers and credential evaluators at higher education institutions, in public authorities, and among stakeholders. We hope that, together, all these actors will work to make recognition even more fair. An important next step could be to base recognition more firmly on a comparison between required and achieved competences. To do so, intuitively understandable and applicable descriptions of entrance requirements and learning outcomes are crucial, not just in the subject expertise but also in more general academic and personal competences. Ultimately, higher education should not only train highly qualified subject specialists but also educate intellectuals – people who are willing and able to put their subject-specific competences into a broader context, ask critical questions, and (not least) find answers to these questions.

[11] *It was 47 until Russia was expelled in March 2022 because of its invasion of Ukraine.*

The international context of 2025 makes recognition both more challenging and more important. A recent but deeply worrying development, which is addressed at least indirectly in this book, is an increasing disregard for and even contempt of the basic principle on which the LRC was founded: an international order governed by and respectful of the rule of law. International relations were based on a set of agreed legal norms that implied that States have mutual obligations and respect each other's integrity and dignity. Even if these principles were too often honored more in the breach than in the observance, they were at least not openly contested. These principles now seem to be openly challenged, with potentially dire consequences for citizens and for international cooperation. In a parallel and related development, a universal or at least Europe- and North America-wide aspiration toward democracy is openly challenged, including by prefixing the term democracy by terms that empty the root term of its meaning. "Illiberal democracy" has as much to do with democracy as "alternative facts" have to do with facts, and the results of democratic elections must be respected equally in defeat as in victory.

As we finalize the manuscript (March 2025), there are strong signs that transatlantic cooperation can no longer be taken for granted, and that there may be a serious political divide between the United States and most European countries. It is too late in the process to incorporate these considerations into the relevant chapters of this book. It is also too early to say exactly how serious this rift will be and how long it will last. We do, however, feel confident in asserting that higher education cooperation between the United States, with its strong civil society, and Europe will become even more important in the years to come and that the fair recognition of qualifications will be an important element in furthering this cooperation.

Recognizing each other's qualifications is also, in part, recognizing each other's value. As many of those who received the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees underlined, receiving this recognition was important for practical reasons as it helped them gain access to employment and/or further studies. It was also important for a deeper reason: being considered for the EQPR to them meant that they were being taken seriously and that they were seen as a potential resource to their host societies. We should, however, be under no illusions. Granting refugees fair recognition is essential but it cannot be a substitute for fair peace, whether in Ukraine or elsewhere.

As editors, we hope this book will be helpful in further developing recognition policies and practice, building on the Lisbon Recognition Convention. We hope to have succeeded in our aim of bringing together the past, the present and the future in an undertaking that may help the students and learners of today and tomorrow obtain better recognition of their qualifications across borders. We also hope to have succeeded in writing a book that will stimulate further reflection as well as providing at least a measure of pleasure in reading.

UNIVERSITAS QUADERNI

N. 01
September 2025

CHAPTER 1

The Road to Lisbon: The Making of the Lisbon Recognition Convention

Sjur Bergan, Kees Kouwenaar, and Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić

Why a brief history of the LRC?

The book you are reading focuses on the continuing importance and relevance of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Those considerations are in part informed by the 25+ years since the LRC was adopted and the 30 years that have passed since the first feasibility study for a new convention was adopted. Therefore, a description of "the road to Lisbon" – of how the LRC came about and was developed – will hopefully give an appropriate background for the discussions of the present day and the future role of the LRC. Part of that background is geopolitical: the changes in Central and Eastern Europe often referred to by the shorthand term 'the fall of the Berlin Wall' made pan-European cooperation not only desirable but also possible. New countries were established, sometimes relatively peacefully such as the independence of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania or the establishment of the Czech and Slovak Republics as separate, independent countries. Sometimes, however, these changes gave rise to and arose from armed conflict, most notably in former Yugoslavia (see Chapter 3 The LRC in a Broader Context). Our emphasis here is on the process leading up to the adoption of the Convention, with only a cursory treatment of subsequent developments, since these are largely covered by other chapters in this volume.

In writing this chapter, we also do a part of our duty to history, however small and insignificant this part may be in the greater order of things. We do not write from the detached perspective of historians reconstructing the past from archives and interviews with survivors, even if one of us (Kees Kouwenaar) is a historian by training. Rather, we write from the perspective of individuals who played a role in the development of the LRC: Sjur Bergan and Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, as the officials responsible for the development of the LRC in the Council of Europe and UNESCO respectively, and Kees Kouwenaar as Chair of the *ad hoc* Expert Group appointed to assist the two secretariats. We write, however, as individuals and not on behalf of our former employers. All three authors are now retired, and this is another reason for writing the history of the LRC: almost none of those most intimately involved in the process are still active in the field of recognition or even broadly in higher education policy, and some are sadly no longer with us. We see it as our duty to transmit the memory of an important process, and we leave it to others to add to this story from a perspective of greater critical distance and more intensive use of archives.

We have been greatly aided not only by our own memories but also by sources readily available to researchers, as well as some more difficult to come by. In particular, we have relied on an article that two

of us wrote in the run-up to the diplomatic conference in Lisbon that adopted the LRC on 11 April 1997 (Uvalić-Trumbić and Bergan 1996). We have reassessed some of the views we expressed then, and new elements have been added. The 1996 article remains valid, however, and we have used parts of it here. Some of the other contributions in this volume also cover aspects of the history of the LRC. We refer the reader to these, and in particular to Chapter 3 The LRC in a Broader Political and Policy Context. Our main sources for this chapter are listed in our references. We have also had to strike a balance between being complete and being readable. That is why more detailed information on some aspects of the process has been relegated to a set of appendices: the overview of the recognition conventions and other key texts at the time we developed the convention, the list of members of two *ad hoc* Expert Groups, the overview of successive drafts of the convention, the overview of subsidiary texts and other statements and documents adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee, and the overview of the presidents and co-secretaries of this committee as well as of the ENIC Network. It would have been a disservice to those who might be interested in the details of the genesis of the LRC not to include these documents, but including them in the main text would break up the narrative. Where relevant, we have, however, opted to include precise dates and references to meetings (such as the 27th Session of the General Conference of UNESCO) in the narrative itself.

Initiating a new convention

In the early 1990s, there was no shortage of international conventions regulating the recognition of higher education qualifications. The Council of Europe had five and UNESCO one for its Europe region in addition to its conventions for other regions of the world (Africa, Arab States, Asia-Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean) and one inter-regional convention for the Mediterranean states (see Chapter 8 A Global Perspective on Recognition). There were also several recommendations and subsidiary texts, and the European Union by then had developed a set of directives on the recognition of professional qualifications.[12] Appendix 1 gives an overview of these conventions and other relevant texts. There was also a text known as the Prague Convention, which was adopted in 1972 and came into force in 1975. It governed the recognition of qualifications between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe prior to the political changes around 1990, but by the time the discussion about the review of existing conventions was launched in 1992 it was no longer *de facto* in effect (Mohammed 1996: 106; Nemethy 1990; Sułkowska-Kuszteljak and Rżysci 1986). This convention is therefore not listed among the conventions the LRC was intended to replace.

The recognition challenge in the 1990s was clearly not that of a scarcity of legal texts. Rather, there were too many texts, the relationship between them was anything but clear, and some of the existing conventions were considerably older than the students they sought to help. The EU directives were a significant step forward, but belonged to a different legal framework which covered fewer countries and a specific set of qualifications for a specific purpose. There were good reasons to simplify the texts produced by the Council of Europe and UNESCO, and early in the 1990s the two organizations decided that this could best be done by writing a new convention to ultimately replace the older conventions.[13]

[12] *Understood as qualifications giving the holder the right to exercise a regulated profession.*
[13] *De facto, if not in a legal sense.*

Amending the existing conventions did not seem like an adequate response to the new situation that was a consequence of the political and educational changes in Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In particular, the 'fall of the Berlin Wall' meant that there was no longer a significant difference in membership between the Council of Europe and its Cultural Convention[14] and UNESCO's Europe Region.

In this context, the international conference 'Equivalences in Europe' of 2–4 October 1989 deserves special mention. This conference, organized by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research in cooperation with UNESCO/CEPES and the Council of Europe, was held partly in Vienna and partly in Budapest (Boichev *et al*. 1990). The timeframe was historic. On 11 September, Hungary had opened its border to Austria, allowing an estimated 13 000 East Germans to travel through Hungary and Austria to West Germany (Sarotte 2015). On 9 November – a little more than a month after the conference– the Berlin Wall was opened and eventually torn down.

The formal agreement to start work was reached through a classic instrument of inter-organizational cooperation: an exchange of letters between the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Catherine Lalumière, and the Director-General of UNESCO, Federico Mayor, between October and December 1992 (Council of Europe and UNESCO 1994: 27–28).

In addition to diminishing the possible confusion arising from a multiplicity of legal texts, another goal in developing a joint Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention was to avoid a duplication of effort. This concern was also reflected in the decision to establish a joint Council of Europe/UNESCO Network of national information centers on academic mobility and recognition. The ENIC Network (European National Information Centres on Academic Recognition and Mobility), established in June 1994 and hence antedating the LRC though not the process that led to it, replaced the separate networks of the two organizations. The ENIC Network developed close cooperation with the NARIC Network of the European Union[15] and has continued to play a prominent role after the LRC was adopted as one of its implementation instruments. In particular, it took the lead in developing subsidiary documents and recommendations that were then submitted for adoption by the LRCC. It was only some 10–15 years after the adoption of the LRC that the Convention Committee took on a more proactive role itself (see Chapter 8).

| The feasibility study

Developing a new joint convention between two international organizations is a major undertaking, and we therefore felt it was important to start this process by a feasibility study. If this study were to identify insurmountable issues, we would not go ahead. If it showed that a joint convention was likely to succeed, we would start developing it.

At this stage, we also felt that the relevant bodies of the Council of Europe and UNESCO should

[14] *Which States are parties to, strictly speaking, rather than members of.*
[15] *For the activities of both networks, see https://www.enic-naric.net/page-homepage, accessed 11 February 2025.*

be consulted. In the Council of Europe, this was the CC-PU, the Standing Conference on University Problems. The CC-PU approved the idea of a feasibility study at its meeting on 24–26 March 1993, and in October–November of the same year the 27th Session of the General Conference of UNESCO followed suit and invited the Director-General[16] to carry out a feasibility study on the possible elaboration of a joint convention with the Council of Europe on academic recognition and mobility and then to present the results achieved to the Executive Board of UNESCO at one of its subsequent sessions. The draft feasibility study was also submitted to the 11th meeting of the national equivalence information centres (NEIC) Network (Strasbourg, 24–25 November 1993) for advice, and the national information bureaus (NIBs) which were not members of the NEIC Network were invited to participate in this meeting.[17] The advice of the national information centers on recognition, through the NEIC Network, was positive.

The name CC-PU was neither logical nor straightforward. The CC came from Convention Culturelle (Cultural Convention) – all Council of Europe committees at the time had French abbreviations – and PU came from Problèmes Universitaires (University Problems). The somewhat strange name arose some years previously when, in one of the regular reorganizations to which international bodies are as prone as other bodies, the Council for Cultural Cooperation, which was an umbrella committee for all aspects of the European Cultural Convention, decided to abolish all specialized committees (i.e. committees responsible for a specific field of activity, such as education). The committee responsible for higher education survived because those responsible for it at the time displayed a good dose of bureaucratic imagination and renamed it as a standing conference with an innocuous-sounding name. In 1994 this body was renamed the Higher Education and Research Committee, CC-HER, and was given new terms of reference, and the Council for Cultural Cooperation was itself eventually abolished because it was considered no longer to fulfill a useful function.

The two secretariats drafted a feasibility study and submitted this draft to an *ad hoc* Expert Group, appointed jointly by the two organizations, which met in Strasbourg on 3–4 February 1994, supplementing the input from the national recognition centers now working together in the networks (from June 1994 within a single network, the ENIC Network). In addition to the Feasibility Study (Council of Europe and UNESCO 1994), the Expert Group was presented with an overview of existing recognition instruments in Europe (Kouwenaar 1994). The *ad hoc* Expert Group approved the final version of the Feasibility Study. Already at this early stage, both the Council of Europe and UNESCO were conscious of the importance of seeking expert advice. The experts were appointed in their personal capacity with due regard to equitable geographical representation as well as inclusion of Ministry representatives, recognition experts, and representatives of the broader higher education community; the membership of the group appears in Appendix 2 to this book.

[16] *By adopting its resolution no. 1.13. at the 27th session of the General Conference, October–November 1993, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000095621 , accessed 11 February 2025.*
[17] *The NEIC Network was a Council of Europe Network that in 1994 merged with UNESCO's NIB network to form the ENIC Network. See Chapter 5.*

A good idea?

The Feasibility Study outlined the motivation for the proposal to develop a new, joint convention. In addition to the fact that the existing conventions were many and old, the increasing diversification of higher education in Europe was an important argument (Council of Europe and UNESCO 1994: 28). Non-university higher education and, at least to some extent, private provision were quickly and widely supplementing the traditional European model of higher education. Traditionally, qualifications were mainly granted by public, classic universities or private, non-profit institutions (such as Catholic universities) operating like the classic public universities. The Feasibility Study also pointed out that in 1953, when the Council of Europe convention on the recognition of qualifications giving access to higher education (Council of Europe 1953) was adopted, all potential partner countries had essentially equivalent systems of primary and secondary education and that there were no alternative ways of gaining access to higher education, such as life or work experience (Council of Europe and UNESCO 1994: 35). The increasing similarity between the membership of the Council of Europe and the UNESCO Europe region was another argument for a joint convention (*ibid*.: 29).

An achievable idea?

The Feasibility Study underlined that "the commitment to undertake a feasibility study was not synonymous with a commitment to elaborate a new convention. It was a commitment to investigate whether or not it will be possible to elaborate a new convention, given that the existing European legal framework for academic recognition is, in some respects, inadequate" (*ibid*.: 30). Not surprisingly, the study concluded that such a convention would be feasible not only from a content point of view but also legally and politically. It also considered various alternatives to a convention but concluded that a convention, which legally commits States Parties under international law, was the most appropriate form (*ibid*.: 32). Put briefly, the discussion of possible alternatives showed that there were none.

The Feasibility Study also recommended that the new text be a replacement convention (*ibid*.: 33), i.e. that the Parties to the new convention be bound by this rather than by any of the previous conventions in their mutual relations. As the number of States Parties to the new convention increased, the importance of the previous conventions would therefore diminish, and they would eventually be phased out entirely. The support in principle from Member States had of course been received through the decisions by the CC-PU and the UNESCO General Conference, and the Feasibility Study demonstrated clearly that there were no major educational obstacles to a new convention.

Principles

The Feasibility Study also suggested some principles for the new convention. In particular, it suggested that the new convention be based on a commitment to non-discrimination and that it include a provision requiring all States to consider fairly the substance of all requests for the recognition of foreign qualifications. It should further state clearly that the fair recognition of qualifications is an individual right, and all national authorities and institutions have a duty to consider the recognition of academic

qualifications from other signatory States (*ibid*.: 33).

The Feasibility Study also made a recommendation that would later be included as one of the key operational principles of the Convention, namely that a qualification giving access to higher education in the home country should give access to the same kind of higher education program in another country party to the convention, unless a given host country could demonstrate a substantial difference between the qualification in question and its similar qualifications. It is interesting to note that the Feasibility Study also gives specific and, for its time, quite progressive consideration to non-traditional qualifications, to qualifications held by refugees, and to international qualifications (*ibid*.: 37–38).

Accreditation

Not least, the Feasibility Study raised the issue of assessment or accreditation of higher education institutions and programs (*ibid*.: 41–42). These considerations ultimately led to Section VIII of the LRC as well as to the notion that institutions and qualifications belong to the education system of a State Party. As more private providers established offers that were not recognized by any competent national authority, whether an institution or program belonged to a national system became an important consideration for recognition. The later development of the European Higher Education Area and of quality assurance within it further underlined the importance of this notion and both were perhaps to some extent inspired by the LRC.

While the UNESCO Regional Convention for Europe had a convention committee, there was no similar body overseeing any of the existing Council of Europe conventions. The networks of national information centers of both organizations, which in June 1994 merged into the ENIC Network, were important bodies for the development of good practice and a common understanding of recognition issues, but they had no formal role when it came to legal instruments like conventions. The Feasibility Study therefore recommended that the new convention provide for the establishment of a committee of representatives of the Parties to oversee the implementation of the convention. It suggested that all States Parties be members of this committee and pointed out that this meant that the committee would, at first, have a quite limited membership since the ratification procedure in many States would take time (*ibid*.: 42–43). The convention committee would need to be a new body independent of the framework of either of the two sponsoring organizations, and the accession procedure and criteria (*ibid*.: 43–45) would also need to be specific to this new international treaty.

A conference devoted to the new convention

We have discussed the Feasibility Study fairly extensively because it identified and considered many of the issues that became prominent in the development of the new convention. With the decision in principle by both organizations to go ahead with the development of a new convention, and against the background of a Feasibility Study that outlined how such a new international treaty could be developed, the real work on the text could now begin.

The first step was an international conference gathering recognition experts and higher education policy makers from public authorities as well as higher education institutions. This was the CC-HER[18]Forum Role Conference on 'Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications: Challenges for the Next Decade', held in Malta on 26–28 October 1994. One of the main objectives of this conference was to make suggestions for the new convention, and the General Rapporteur, Chantal Kaufmann (1996), produced a report that, along with the Feasibility Study and the existing legal instruments of the two organizations, became one of the key reference documents in the work on the convention. The report provided suggestions for the formulation of the basic principles of the new Convention as well as practical recommendations in regard to implementation.

The book issued on the basis of this conference (Council of Europe 1996) contains a wealth of information that is still of some relevance today, and to which we will therefore devote a few paragraphs. In his chapter, based on his keynote presentation to the Malta conference, Kees Kouwenaar (1996) explores six propositions or options: (1) the need to distinguish good quality institutions and diplomas from "the bad ones"; (2) the possibility of setting up a "European Accreditation Agency"; (3) replacing the multitude of national degrees with a set of agreed European qualifications; (4) groups of academics and professionals in any given subject area reaching agreement on recognition through discussions in such groups; (5) national identity is essential but it has little to do with recognition or the organization of higher education programs and years; (6) recognition can be enhanced in spite of all existing differences. Kouwenaar further considers two options for recognition policy. One is what he calls "absolute and automatic recognition", while the other is "fair and accessible recognition" (*ibid.*: 37). He recommends the latter, which is of course the option on which the LRC was built. It is nevertheless interesting to see that the concept of automatic recognition, explored further in Chapter 4 New Developments in Recognition, had already been considered in the mid-1990s (see also Halimi 1996: 85). In the same vein, the reference to a possible "European Accreditation Agency" – which was considered impossible at the time – may be taken to foreshadow the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (Bologna Process 2015a) as well as the establishment of the European Association for Quality Assurance in higher education (ENQA)[19] and the European Quality Assurance Register for higher education (EQAR),[20] all of which were established within the European Higher Education Area.

The EHEA had of course not yet been established or even discussed – that would come five years later – but in his article, Pär Stenbäck, then the Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers, discusses European cooperation in a "common space for education" (Stenbäck 1996: 157; quotation marks in the original). In her article, Suzy Halimi, then the President of Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris III and later Chair of the CC-HER (1997–99) as well as a member of the *ad hoc* Expert group for the LRC, considers recognition as an individual right as well as a responsibility of society; she underlines the importance of mobility, mutual trust, and the demand for quality. Not least, she emphasizes the principle of non-discrimination, which she defines as "not making any distinction between nationals and foreigners in

[18] *As noted above, the Council of Europe steering committee for higher education had by then changed its name to the Higher Education and Research Committee, CC-HER. CC still stood for the Cultural Convention. Incidentally, the CC-HER was probably the first Council of Europe committee with an English abbreviation.*
[19] *https://www.enqa.eu/#, accessed 11 February 2025.*
[20] *https://www.eqar.eu/, accessed 11 February 2025.*

terms of recognition" (Halimi 1996: 88). At this time, work was also under way on a Council of Europe Recommendation on academic mobility, which was adopted the following year (Council of Europe 1995). Nizam Mohammed provides a broad overview of tools for good practice in recognition, drawing in part on Kouwenaar (1994). He emphasizes the role of the national information centers and the ENIC and NARIC networks and also explores the EU programs and other relevant factors, including the transatlantic context (see Chapter 5). He underlines that "[q]ualifications are an intrinsic part of our educational system which is itself a product of cultural, social, economic and historical forces" (Mohammed 1996: 104).

The Malta conference made a set of recommendations (Council of Europe 1996: 7–10) that played an important role in the further development of the convention, even if these recommendations were those of a conference and not of a decision-making body in either organization. The recommendations included:

- seeing the right to fair recognition of qualifications as a cultural right (see also Halimi 1996);
- stating that the States Parties to the Cultural Convention should encourage mobility (and regional mobility in particular; see also Stenbäck 1996);
- underlining that recognition of foreign qualifications should be considered a process for assessing the competence, experience, and knowledge acquired, while respecting differences between programs and teaching methods;
- avoiding all forms of discrimination and concentrating on an assessment of the candidate's academic and professional competence;
- replacing "equivalence" with the concepts of "fair recognition" and "acceptance";
- ensuring that recognition procedures be transparent, coherent, and reliable.

The conference also made a number of practical recommendations, including inviting parties to the European Cultural Convention to support and reinforce the ENIC Network (which had been established a few months earlier) and pleading for strengthened cooperation between the Council of Europe, UNESCO,[21] and the European Union in academic recognition.

The Malta conference introduced the concept of the right to fair recognition of qualifications as a cultural right. It underlined the importance of respecting diversity and differences in Europe and pointed to the need to avoid all forms of discrimination in the assessment of foreign qualifications. It also underlined the need for assessment practices to evolve away from a detailed examination of exact equivalences to a broader recognition of qualifications of a similar level and function, entailing a wider acceptance of differences between various systems. This development was already under way, but the conference

[21] The direct reference is to UNESCO/CEPES (UNESCO's European Centre for Higher Education/Centre Européen pour l'Enseignement Supérieur), set up in Bucharest in 1972 to promote cooperation in higher education among Member States of the Europe Region. CEPES, through Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, was the UNESCO body responsible for the work on recognition in the Europe Region. CEPES was discontinued in 2011.

underlined the need for it to be continued and accelerated. Mutual trust and the transparency of higher education systems had become important prerequisites for recognition. Furthermore, the conference recommended that recognition decisions be rendered within a reasonable time limit, that the reasons for the decision be given, and that the decision be open to appeal.

The conference also underlined the importance of practical measures that were needed to implement the convention. Therefore the role of the recently established ENIC Network, the significance of the development of criteria for the assessment of foreign qualifications, and the need to use codes of good practice and tools for transparency, such as credit transfer and the Diploma Supplement, were emphasized.

| Drafting the convention

The Council of Europe and UNESCO again appointed an *ad hoc* Expert Group to advise on and assist with the drafting of the new convention. As will be seen from the list of members in Appendix 3, the membership largely overlapped with that of the *ad hoc* Expert Group for the Feasibility Study. From the second meeting onward, Kees Kouwenaar chaired the Expert Group and became the key adviser to the secretariats on the drafting. Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić and Sjur Bergan remained the UNESCO and Council of Europe officials responsible for the drafting, and they received good advice and assistance from the legal departments of both organizations. The Council of Europe legal adviser, Roberto Lamponi, was particularly helpful in finding legal formulations that enabled us to convert desired policy into legal regulations. The UNESCO legal adviser, John Donaldson, ensured that UNESCO legal requirements were satisfied.

In all, the drafting group produced seven successive drafts between January 1995 and December 1996. For a detailed overview, see Appendix 4. The expert groups appointed a working party on definitions; it was chaired by Kees Kouwenaar and met in The Hague on 15–16 May 1995.

| Definitions

The fact that there was a separate sub-group on definitions is no accident. Experience shows that definitions can cause endless discussions in international contexts, where participants tend to believe that terms should mean the same thing in international texts as they do in their own national context. Using a term established in one or more national systems would orient the use and interpretation of the terms in ways that might not be universally accepted. The LRC underlines that the terms it defines are defined for the purposes of the Convention (Article I) and, by extension, these definitions do not prevent States Parties from using the terms differently in their own national contexts.

A particular challenge was finding a term that would encompass all kinds of qualifications and that would not be system specific. Recognition, yes, but of what? “Award” was considered but was rejected because the term is closely linked to the UK education system. “Degree” is not system specific, but the term denotes a completed qualification at higher education level, and the LRC would also encompass

qualifications giving access to higher education and partial studies. “Degree” therefore could not be used as a generic term for all qualifications covered by the LRC. As is well known, and as is evident even from this paragraph, we ended up choosing “qualification” as the generic term. However, this term was also not uncontested. The main objection came from French speakers, who argued that the corresponding term did not exist in French. This was, however, an advantage: the best generic term would be one that did not have precise connotations in any existing system. We are happy to see that qualification is now broadly used also in French.

Access and admission

Another difficult discussion concerned the crucial distinction the LRC makes between *access* and *admission*. Ultimately, we defined access as “the right of qualified candidates to apply and to be considered for admission to higher education” and admission as “the act of, or system for, allowing qualified applicants to pursue studies in higher education at a given institution and/or a given programme” (cf. Council of Europe and UNESCO 1997a: Article I). Put in less legal language, *access* denotes the right of qualified candidates to be *considered* for admission, whereas *admission* denotes the fact of actually obtaining a place of study.

Part of the difficulty arose from an ongoing Council of Europe project on “Access to Higher Education in Europe” (1992–96), which originally used the term “access” in a sense akin to both “access” and “admission” as discussed in the Definitions Working Group. The discussions with the Council of Europe colleague responsible for the project were difficult but we maintained that the distinction between access and admission is crucial for recognition purposes. This is more than nitpicking on an issue of terminology. We felt and still feel that the distinction between “not be rejected outright” and “actually getting in” is highly relevant. The choice of terms for those two concepts (access and admission) could perhaps have been different, but the distinction is now relatively well established and we considered it wise to stick to the legal terminology. We therefore argued that the planned recommendation on access would need to adapt to the language of the convention, which is a legal text of a higher order.

This is what happened in the end, and Recommendation R (98) 3 on Access to Higher Education in Europe states that it uses “admission” in the same sense as used in the LRC, which was incidentally adopted before this Recommendation. The Recommendation does not define “access” as such but rather gives the following definition of “access policy”:

> A policy that aims both at the widening of participation in higher education to all sections of society, and at ensuring that this participation is effective (that is, in conditions which ensure that personal effort will lead to successful completion). (Council of Europe 1998: I)

Non-discrimination

Beyond the definitions, we did not find it difficult to formulate the basic principle of non-discrimination. Article III.1.1 is succinct:

> Holders of qualifications issued in one of the Parties shall have adequate access, upon request to the appropriate body, to an assessment of these qualifications

whereas Article III.1.2 goes into considerably greater detail:

> No discrimination shall be made in this respect on any ground such as the applicant's gender, race, colour, disability, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status, or on the grounds of any other circumstance not related to the merits of the qualification for which recognition is sought. In order to assure this right, each Party undertakes to make appropriate arrangements for the assessment of an application for recognition of qualifications solely on the basis of the knowledge and skills achieved.

It was important to be explicit about factors that could lead to discrimination because some of these causes could be an issue in some potential Parties. For the same reason, it was important to use a formulation that had already been accepted by these parties, or at least by the vast majority of them. We found it in the European Convention on Human Rights, which is also the main reason why gender identity is not included since it was not in the Human Rights Convention at the time. It was only a Protocol to the Human Rights Convention adopted in 2000 and in force from 2005, that removed this provision, which was by then seen as a limitation, and guarantees that no-one shall be discriminated against on any ground by any public authority (Council of Europe 2000, see also Council of Europe 2009).

| Substantial difference

It was also fairly easy to arrive at the principle of "substantial differences", which is the guiding principle of the whole LRC. This is formulated in Article IV.1:

> Each Party shall recognise 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.

There is similar wording in Article V.1 and VI.1 adapted to partial recognition and the recognition of higher education qualifications.

The convention had to take account of the fact that the potential Parties differed in their constitutional make-up. In particular, in federal states the public authorities at central level have limited competence over education matters. Our legal advisers helped us find language that takes account of this situation and at the same time does not absolve the central authorities of all responsibility for promoting the implementation of the convention in their countries. In the wording of Article III.2, they "shall take all possible steps to encourage the favourable consideration and application of its provisions", with "its" referring to the LRC.

In parallel to the draft text of the Convention, we also developed the draft Explanatory Report (Council of Europe and UNESCO 1997b). This text provides the background to the Convention and explains the various provisions of the legal text. It has the same function as what are known in some countries as "legal explanations", "legal preparations" or similar terms, and the Explanatory Report is an essential source for interpretation of the LRC.

Consulting potential States Parties

Even if the *ad hoc* Expert Group was essential, we needed to consult the potential States Parties at various stages of the drafting process. Hence, a Progress Report was considered by the Higher Education and Research Committee (CC-HER) of the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, 29–31 March 1995), by the UNESCO Executive Board at its 147th session (Paris, October 1995), and by the UNESCO General Conference at its Twenty-Eighth Session (Paris, October–November 1995). A text, which was in fact the third draft of the convention, was also considered by the ENIC Network meeting in Ljubljana on 11–14 June 1995.

In October 1995, the draft Convention and Explanatory Report were sent to the national delegations of the Higher Education and Research Committee of the Council of Europe and the UNESCO Regional Committee for Europe, with copies to the ENIC Network, in order to encourage national consultations in potential States Parties. The draft was also sent to NGOs involved in the educational activities of the Council of Europe. The draft Convention and Explanatory Report were submitted for consideration at the 1996 meetings of the Council of Europe Higher Education and Research Committee (Strasbourg, 27–29 March 1996) and the UNESCO Regional Committee (Rome, 16–17 June 1996).

Professional recognition

Overall, the feedback from the consultations was very positive but there were inevitably some points on which opinions diverged. One area was professional recognition,[22] where the comments and discussions clearly demonstrated that this issue is complex and that finding a compromise solution would be difficult. It should also be kept in mind that this is an area for which the EU already had Directives binding on the then EU 15 Member States (as of January 1995). While it was made clear that the reference in the draft text to recognition for professional purposes only concerned the educational components of qualifications submitted for such recognition, several delegations felt that any reference to recognition for professional purposes was inappropriate and should not be included in the Convention. Other opinions were voiced to the contrary, pointing to the importance of providing for the recognition of qualifications for employment purposes as well as for further study.

In the end, the LRC defined recognition as "[a] formal acknowledgement by a competent authority of the value of a foreign educational qualification with a view to access to educational and/or employment activities" (Article I), while the Explanatory Report makes it clear that "[t]he definition of recognition for employment purposes aims at recognition for the purpose of gainful employment activities in

[22] *Recognition of qualifications for the purpose of exercising a regulated profession.*

general and is not specifically directed towards recognition for the purpose of admission to regulated professions" (Council of Europe and UNESCO 1997b: 10). Today the LRC is generally considered not to encompass professional recognition. It may be worth noting that professional recognition later became a topic in the EHEA, where Ministers undertook a commitment to "establish a group of volunteering countries and organizations with a view to facilitating professional recognition" (Bologna Process 2015b: 4).

Various discussions pointed to the need for the further development of the term "substantial difference", which, as we saw, is a key term in sections IV, V, and VI. However, the idea that the convention could give a precise definition of the term was discarded, and it was accepted that a thorough understanding of the concept could only be developed through practice with implementation of the Convention. It was also noted that, under the Convention, Parties were required to make public what they considered as constituting substantial differences.
The concept was to be the topic of extended discussions in the LRCC and the ENIC Network over several years and also gave rise to a book (Hunt and Bergan 2009). This issue is treated in some detail elsewhere in this publication (see Chapter 2 Key Concepts in the LRC). It was only the 2019 UNESCO Global Convention that provided a definition of 'substantial differences', as "significant differences between the foreign qualification and the qualification of the State Party which would most likely prevent the applicant from succeeding in a desired activity, such as, but not limited to, further study, research activities, or employment opportunities" (UNESCO 2019a: Article I), and even that definition is open to considerable interpretation.

Article IV.5, which concerns recognition in cases where school-leaving certificates give access to higher education only in combination with additional qualifying examinations, had been the subject of much discussion, and the Expert Group was divided in its views on whether or not to include it in the draft. If the existence of separate, generalized, entrance examinations were considered to constitute a substantial difference, Article IV.1 would be sufficient. If, to the contrary, the existence of separate, generalized entrance examinations was considered an important formal characteristic of the education system, Article IV.5 ought to be included in the Convention. This difference of opinion, also evident in the national consultations, was voiced at both the Strasbourg and the Rome meetings in 1996. Certain delegations were strongly in favor of deleting this article, while others were strongly in favor of keeping it. The Article was kept, and in its final version it reads:

> Where, in the Party in which they have been obtained, school leaving certificates give access to higher education only in combination with additional qualifying examinations as a prerequisite for access, the other Parties may make access conditional on these requirements or offer an alternative for satisfying such additional requirements within their own educational systems. Any State, the Holy See or the European Community may, at the time of signature or when depositing its instrument of ratification, acceptance, approval or accession, or at any time thereafter, notify one of the depositories that it avails itself of the provisions of this Article, specifying the Parties in regard to which it intends to apply this Article as well as the reasons therefor.

Information responsibility

The importance of the provision of information on institutions and programs was underlined by the majority of States that responded. In this context, several delegations pointed to the significance of the Diploma Supplement, which they believed should be more widely used. They felt that particular attention should be given to providing information on the quality of higher education institutions and programs because of the growing problem of fraudulent and bogus diplomas (see also Chapter 2). This discussion antedated the review of the Diploma Supplement – undertaken jointly by the European Commission, the Council of Europe, and UNESCO – and the appeal by EHEA Ministers "to institutions and employers to make full use of the Diploma Supplement, so as to take advantage of the improved transparency and flexibility of the higher education degree systems, for fostering employability and facilitating academic recognition for further studies" (Bologna Process 2003: 5). A perspective on information responsibility that focuses more on learning outcomes is developed in Chapter 2.

Some delegations voiced concern about the competence of a signatory state to provide information on the assessment of higher education programs and institutions. They suggested that in many cases, non-State bodies could provide that kind of information. It was made clear that the draft convention recognizes differences in national laws and practices and that no Party would be required to provide information which is not accessible to it under its own laws. Hence, Article VIII.1 foresees two different cases.

In the first case, Parties have established a system of formal assessment of

1. higher education institutions and programs (and should provide information on the methods and results of any such assessment), and

2. the quality standards specific to
   a. each type of higher education institution granting qualifications, and/or
   b. programs leading to higher education qualifications.

In the second case, they have not established a system of formal assessment of higher education institutions and programs and should provide information on the recognition of the various qualifications obtained at any higher education institution, or within any higher education program, belonging to their higher education systems. In this matter, there was a rapid development not long after the adoption of the LRC, and the discussion was no longer of whether a country should have a formal quality assurance system but of what this system should look like. This discussion was largely answered by the adoption of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (Bologna Process 2015a).

There was also a concern among several potential Parties that the LRC be limited to the recognition of qualifications belonging to the education system of a Party. Therefore, a proposal to include a provision in regard to recognition of the International Baccalaureate (IB) and the European Baccalaureate (EB) on the lines of the basic principles of recognition of national school-leaving qualifications, put forward by the secretariats, was not accepted. Instead, the recognition of international qualifications became the subject of the first subsidiary text adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee (UNESCO and the Council of Europe 1999).

A final consultation before the diplomatic conference

Following the consultations in the separate frameworks of the two organizations, a small Editorial Group met in Paris on 10–11 July 1996 to undertake a detailed examination of the draft in both English and French as well as of all comments made by national delegations and NGOs in the course of the consultation process, whether in writing or during the meetings of CCHER and the UNESCO Regional Committee. The advice of the Editorial Group was taken into account in the development of both the draft of the Convention and the Explanatory Report that was submitted to a final consultation meeting open to all potential parties to the Convention. This meeting was held in the Hague on 27–29 November 1996, and 46 States participated (Council of Europe and UNESCO 1997b: 4).

In The Hague, many of the delegations underlined that the draft Convention represented a pioneering effort in cooperation between two international organizations. The wording of the draft Convention and Explanatory Report was adjusted in several Articles, and the discussions were important in preparing the diplomatic conference. Substantial progress was made in finding wording for Section VI, which would cover recognition of qualifications, both for the purposes of further study and for employment purposes, while excluding recognition for the purpose of access to regulated professions (cf. the discussion above).

In the Preamble, a reference to recognition of qualifications as a cultural right was replaced by a reference to fair recognition of qualifications as a key element of the right to education. Section II, on the competences of State authorities, was reworded to take into account the proposals made by countries with federal or otherwise decentralized systems of higher education.

The wording in the sixth draft providing for Parties to suspend the application of the Convention with respect to any other Party that was “seriously violating its principles” was replaced with a reference to the general provisions of international law and the concept of “material violation”.

Several delegations, while welcoming the invitation made to the European Community to accede to the Convention, considered that this accession should be alternative, rather than supplementary, to those of the individual member States of the European Community. In the absence of a representative of the European Community, this point could not be resolved. As of July 2024, the European Communities (the legal term) had not acceded to the LRC, arguing that it could do so after all EU member States had ratified it individually. Greece ratified the LRC in September 2024 (Bergan 2024a), as the last EU member State to do so. The EU has, however, so far taken no formal steps to ratify the Convention.

Views were still divided on the appropriateness of including, in Article IV.5, provisions covering cases in which school-leaving certificates give access to higher education only in combination with additional qualifying examinations (cf. the discussion above).

The diplomatic conference in Lisbon adopts the LRC

The decision to convene a diplomatic conference was taken by the 28th session of UNESCO's General Conference in October–November 1995[23] and by the Committee of Ministers' Deputies of the Council of Europe, at its meeting in January 1997. At the invitation of the Portuguese authorities, the diplomatic conference was held in Lisbon on 8–11 April 1997.

Our experience of the diplomatic conference was intense, and none of us is likely to forget it. We literally worked around the clock: one of us (Sjur Bergan) has recollections of sleeping four hours the first night, two the second night, and none at all the third and final night. An event like this also gives rise to several anecdotes that deserve to be transmitted. The conference was held at the Gulbenkian Foundation, which is a wonderful place with a large auditorium that we used for plenary sessions as well as several smaller rooms that we used for the Secretariat and for group discussions. However, the auditorium is literally cinema style, with very comfortable seats but no room for desks. At a time when delegates relied on paper copies of all documents rather than on storing and consulting them on laptops, this was not a trivial issue. The Portuguese hosts had had a kind of portable desk made, so each delegate could get a desk of his or her own, but their main effect was to make it impossible for anyone to move in or out of a row of seats. We had to scrap the desks.

The diplomatic conference was a joint undertaking by two international organizations, which were certainly full of goodwill, but which each had its own set of regulations and its small army of administrative staff that was not involved in the conference but that tried to make sure that the regulations of their organization would be applied to the letter. In our naiveté, we had assumed the Council of Europe could cover translation and interpretation for its official languages, English and French, and UNESCO cover for the two additional languages of its Europe Region, Russian and Spanish. This was overlooking the fact that each organization paid translators at its own rates and recruited interpreters[24] through different interpreters' organizations, again at different rates. In addition, when composing teams of interpreters, it is a great advantage to have as many interpreters as possible who can work in as many of the conference languages as possible. In the end, we found an agreement whereby UNESCO recruited the interpreters and the Council of Europe contributed to the costs.

> In the expert meetings we had simultaneous interpretation French/English, but at a certain moment we concluded that the passive competence in both languages was enough among all participants and thereafter did without interpretation.

The first drafts of the Convention and the Explanatory Report were in English only, which most of the experts involved read well, and which is also the first foreign language of all three of us. At a later stage, we translated both documents into French, in which two of us (Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić and Sjur Bergan) were proficient. Even if we had linguistic advice, it was important that those responsible

[23] *Resolution 1.9 at https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000101803, accessed 11 February 2025.*
[24] *The difference is that translation is written, whereas interpretation is oral.*

for the drafting could read the translation, all the more so as recognition is a quite specialized policy area, and those who provided linguistic advice were not necessarily familiar with the finer terminology of recognition. At the diplomatic conference, we added translations into Russian and Spanish, which UNESCO outsourced to freelance translators.

Sjur Bergan, whose home language is Spanish, pointed out that the Spanish translation used the term *equivalencia* (equivalence) instead of *reconocimiento* (recognition). This mistranslation in one fell swoop undermined an important aspect of the Convention, which intended to move from the narrow view of the comparability of qualifications that the term 'equivalence' implies to the broader view implied by 'recognition'. Indeed, the emphasis on substantial differences loses most of its relevance if one stays with the narrow view of equivalence. In addition, while *equivalencia* is a feminine noun in Spanish, *reconocimiento* is masculine, so that replacing one for the other also meant replacing all the articles and adjectives. However, the objections were swept aside by the translators until they were reiterated with force by the Spanish delegation at the diplomatic conference. Making the corrections there instead of prior to the conference cost us a full night's work.

Even if we had a reasonable understanding of Russian, none of us was fluent in the language, and we were unable to review the Russian translation with the same care. At the conference itself, the head of the Russian translation team pointed out that the Russian term chosen to translate "competent recognition authority" had connotations of the KGB and asked us what to do. To our recollection, we asked him to find a solution that he believed was viable. The final text of the LRC uses *Полномочный орган по вопросам признания* ('Polnomochnyi organ po voprosam priznaniya' – authorized body for recognition issues).

Even if the consultation meeting in the Hague had resolved many issues, some discussions were carried over into the diplomatic conference. The discussions continued until 10 April at lunch time, when all delegations were sent out to enjoy the wonders of Lisbon so that the secretariats could prepare the final versions of the Convention and the Explanatory Report in all four languages for adoption on the morning of 11 April. According to the recollection of one of us (Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić), despite the meticulous preparations and consultations described in the text above and our belief that most issues had been resolved at the 1996 consultation meeting, some 100 amendments were made by the participants at the Conference that needed to be considered for the final text of the convention. To say the afternoon, evening, and night were intense would be an understatement. In addition to the specific problems with the Spanish version, we needed to ensure that all amendments were adequately reflected in all language versions.

To appreciate the challenge, we need to recall that in 1997, word processing was considerably less advanced than it is now. Instead of track changes, we relied on italics, strike through, and different colors to indicate text that had been deleted, added, or amended. Delegations would receive both clean versions and versions that indicated the modifications made, not by e-mail but as printed copies. Even printing and copying took hours, and we had a moment of panic when the whole revised version in French came out in track changes. Luckily one of the technicians identified the problem as a transmission error between the computer we used for the French version and the corresponding printer, but the time until we identified the problem was tense.

Printing cannot be done without an adequate supply of paper. It turned out our stock was low, so late in the night the President of the diplomatic conference, Pedro Lourtie, who was also the Portuguese Director General for higher education, and one of the Vice Presidents, Pavel Zgaga, then Deputy Minister of Education of Slovenia and later one of the signers of the Bologna Declaration, trawled Lisbon for shops that sold paper and would still be open. Against all odds, they succeeded.

On the morning of Friday 11 April, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Daniel Tarschys, and the UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education, Colin Power, arrived and presided over the adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the closing session with the Portuguese Minister of Education, Eduardo Marçal Grilho. A long process had been brought to a successful conclusion, and the participating countries were invited to sign the Convention.[25] This ceremony was expertly organized by the protocol departments of both organizations and the Portuguese protocol department, but it presented a challenge and a surprise of its own.

At the time, the country that is now known as North Macedonia had to accept the name "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" in international contexts, including those of the Council of Europe and UNESCO. As it could not be seated under M, it insisted on making the absurdity clear to all by being seated under T. According to its own laws, however, it could not sign legal agreements as "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" but needed to do so under its own official name: Republic of Macedonia. Council of Europe rules allowed the country to sign a treaty on a separate sheet of paper with a declaration of its interpretation of the name issue, whereas UNESCO's rules did not offer this possibility. When "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" was called on to sign the Convention, its representative therefore did so on a separate sheet which was given to the Council of Europe Head of Protocol, whereas no signature was given to UNESCO. All other countries signed twice, once for the Council of Europe and once for UNESCO, and needless to say few people in the auditorium understood why Northern Macedonia had to do it differently.

For us, the adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention was the end of a long and intense professional journey. Our happiness at the conclusion of a successful effort was complemented by total exhaustion, and the closing ceremony presented a challenge of its own. We moved down from the stage where we had been during the whole conference to the comfortable seats in the Gulbenkian auditorium. Keeping awake through the closing ceremony was our final Lisbon challenge.

[25] *Ratification would follow later, subject to the laws of each country – in most cases, international treaties must be ratified by the national parliament.*

After Lisbon

As the saying goes, the rest is history, and we do not aim to give anything like an adequate account of how the LRC developed once it had been adopted. That is partly done in other chapters in this volume, and there is no shortage of literature on recognition.

Azerbaijan became the first country to ratify the LRC, on 10 March 1998, and the LRC entered into force on 1 February 1999 with the fifth ratification, which was that of Lithuania. This is unusually fast for an international treaty, and the total number of ratifications[26] as of February 2025 – 57 ratifications and one signature that is yet to be followed by ratification – is also very satisfactory. At the time of writing, the Parties to the LRC include all members of the Council of Europe or Parties to the European Cultural Convention as well as most countries of the UNESCO Europe Region, including Canada, Israel, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Australia and New Zealand acceded to the LRC as "out of region" countries by virtue of having been party to some of the conventions that the LRC replaces, in a *de facto* if not in a de iure sense. The United States signed the LRC but has so far not ratified it.

We knew that the LRC would need to be updated, and we knew that it would be very complicated to do so by amending the Convention itself. The LRC therefore foresees that the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee (LRCC) may adopt subsidiary texts (Article X.2.5). An overview of the subsidiary texts adopted so far may be found in Appendix 5. The LRCC developed into an important instrument for implementing the convention and met for the first time in June 1999, shortly after the LRC came into force.

Thereafter it met every two years for quite some time, and it now meets at three-year intervals, unless an extraordinary meeting is required. Such meetings have been called twice: in November 2017 to adopt a Recommendation on the recognition of refugees' qualifications and in February 2023 to consider the position of Russia and Belarus in the light of the role of both countries in the invasion of Ukraine. Appendix 5 provides a full overview of the texts adopted by the LRC, and Appendix 6 lists the Presidents and Co-Secretaries of the LRCC and of the ENIC Network so far. Appendix 7 presents some important contributors to recognition policy and practice in the European region who were, for the most part, not strongly involved in the development of the LRC.

In Lisbon, we felt great satisfaction and shared the belief that we had helped accomplish something important that would help generations of students and graduates. We could not foresee the development of the European Higher Education Area and the even more important political role which recognition would take on there. We also could not foresee the negative impact on higher education cooperation of the political developments from around 2010 onward, marked most characteristically by Russia's invasion of Ukraine but also by other international conflicts (see Chapter 3). We believe the LRC will continue to play a vital role in promoting the fair recognition of qualifications and, through this, in furthering academic mobility and international higher education cooperation. The time has come, however, for us to pass the relay to new generations.

[25] *For a continually updated overview of signatures and ratifications, see https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=signatures-by-treaty&treatynum=165, accessed 11 February 2025.*

UNIVERSITAS QUADERNI

N. 01
September 2025

CHAPTER 2

Key Concepts in the Lisbon Recognition Convention

Kees Kouwenaar

02

Introduction: The Concept of Qualifications

The focus of this chapter is on the key concepts that were used in the Lisbon Recognition Convention and subsidiary texts, such as 'qualification', 'substantial difference', 'burden of proof', and 'partial recognition'.

We give special attention to issues with the authenticity of the qualification and issues of breaches of integrity of either the qualification itself, or the institution that issued it, as well as issues with the identity of the person presenting the qualification.

The section on information responsibility – which was mentioned in the text of the Convention – is now placed in the context of the role of clear learning outcomes.

NB The distinction between recognition at system level and recognition for the purpose of admission to specific further studies or other activities is also a key issue. This is treated in Chapter 4 New Developments, as part of the section on automatic recognition.

In this introduction to Chapter 2, we examine the term 'qualifications': why it was chosen and what could be said about developments since 1997. In the following sections, we treat the key concepts one by one. We aim to shed light on the connection between each of these concepts and the Lisbon Recognition Convention: what the impact of the convention was on the phenomenon and how the phenomenon would impact the implementation practice of the convention, in past decades as well as in the future. Newer developments, like qualifications frameworks, automatic recognition and others, are considered in Chapter 4.

As discussed in Chapter 1 The Road to Lisbon, the term 'qualification' was used in the development of the Lisbon Recognition Convention to avoid confusion and debate over more current terms like 'degree', 'diploma' or 'certificate'. These words have different meanings in different higher education systems: a 'diploma' can be the most common or only term for a university qualification in one system but denote a sub-degree level of qualification in another. A certificate may be a neutral term in one system while referring to a specific type and level of programme in another system. Some terms, like "award", are specific to one or more systems, and we wanted to devise a neutral term that was not specific to one system or that was used differently in different systems. The same reasoning lay behind the choice of "first degree" cycle and "second degree" cycle rather than "bachelor's" or "master's" in the overarching qualifications framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). The more

neutral term ‘qualification’, signifying any kind of document as proof of completion of a programme of higher education studies (and by implication proof of attainment of the learning outcomes), was chosen to avoid such ambiguity.

However, it did not entirely resolve another kind of ambiguity: that between ‘qualification’ as a document proving completion of a programme of higher education studies and ‘qualification’ in the sense that a person has the qualities that are deemed necessary to conduct a specific profession or other set of activities. Individuals can be highly competent/qualified without ever having completed a formal programme of studies. Among those who completed the programme there will be individual differences in the competences and qualities actually acquired.

Another possible issue with the term “qualification” is connected to the increased diversification of learning paths through higher education. At the time of the adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the predominant pattern of higher education in continental Europe was still that of a straight path from secondary school to a university degree. Students typically chose their topic of studies (in many systems, one or two focal areas) and stuck to that focus throughout their studies, which typically lasted for what is now a combination of a bachelor’s and a master’s degree.

If one chose chemistry, one stuck with chemistry – with minor electives outside the main topic – and at the end one was supposed to have prepared for a number of job types: scholar in chemistry, professional chemist, or teacher in chemistry in secondary school. All this has changed with the introduction of the Bologna Process. Not only because many students who stick to ‘chemistry’ may now choose a master’s that focuses on either research or application, or education, but also because a wide range of inter-, multi-, and transdisciplinary master’s programmes has evolved, focusing on specific problems and often bringing together students from various disciplinary backgrounds. Master’s students may have come straight from a bachelor’s programme or may be returning to university after several years of work. This has had consequences both for the nature of the qualification (the paper at the end with the learning outcomes to which it testifies) and for the connection between the qualification and the preceding programmes of study. A holder of a “Master’s in Chemistry” may have focused on research, application or education; the learning outcomes of a graduate from a master’s in environmental studies may vary according to the preceding bachelor’s. Thus, while the qualification document will represent distinct and tangible learning outcomes, it has become less easy than before to gauge which learning outcomes it represents.

In other words: without more precise information on the programme and learning outcomes, the diversification of learning paths tends to loosen the connection between the qualification document and the set of achieved learning outcomes that one can trust the qualification holder to possess. Obviously, this has repercussions for recognition – not so much in terms of recognition within a qualifications framework, assigning a qualification to a given level, but more in terms of the activities to which the qualification gives access or admission.

The remaining sections of this chapter look at:
2.1. The concepts ‘substantial difference’, ‘burden of proof’, and ‘partial recognition’,
2.2. Assessing the authenticity of qualifications and institutions,
2.3. The information responsibility of home and host institutions and authorities.

2.1. Substantial Differences, Burden of Proof, and Alternative Recognition

Helene Peterbauer

| Substantial differences

This subchapter aims to explore how the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) relates to what is arguably its most prominent – and probably also its most elusive – concept: 'substantial differences'. The focus will be on the following key questions: to what extent, and how, has the LRC embedded this concept into academic recognition practices in Europe? And, approaching the topic from the opposite perspective, how has this concept influenced the practical implementation of the LRC today, and how might it continue to do so in the future?

In exploring the concept of substantial differences from different angles – from the viewpoint of closely related concepts such as the so-called reversed burden of proof, alternative recognition and the recognition of prior learning, among others – this subchapter attempts to provide a comprehensive yet concise overview of the meaning and history of a key element of recognition practices today. At the same time, the aim is to spark reflection and discussion about why recognition practices have evolved the way they have, and whether these practices are fit for the future.

[27] *Several EU directives pre-dating 1997 use the term, including Council Directives 89/48/EEC (EU 1989) and 92/51/EEC (EU 1992) on the EU's general system for professional recognition.*

| *Not all differences are substantial*

The concept of 'substantial differences' first appeared in the context of professional recognition in the European Union (EU 1989);[27] but, in the context of academic recognition, the term was legally established in recognition practice by the LRC. In this context it is applied to higher education qualifications, qualifications giving access to higher education, and qualifications arising from study periods abroad. The term is thus used in several parts of the LRC, yet always in words similar to the example below:

> Section IV – Recognition of qualifications giving access to higher education: Article IV.1[28]
> Each Party shall recognise 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** *[bold added by author]*. (Council of Europe and UNESCO 1997a: Art. IV.1)

In other words, substantial differences are "differences that are fundamental enough to justify the denial of recognition" (TPG-LRC Project Consortium 2021: 4). Substantial differences are thus a concept heavy in consequences – after all, they are declared as the only reason to justifiably deny the recognition of an otherwise legitimate qualification (though they are by no means an *obligation* to deny recognition).

Nevertheless, when it was adopted in 1997, the LRC did not specify in great detail what 'substantial differences' should or could constitute in practice.[29] This omission was rectified over subsequent decades, notably by the Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications first adopted in 2001 and revised in 2010 (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2001, 2010), and much more recently by the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education (UNESCO 2019a), or Global Convention in short, but also by dedicated and concerted efforts to establish good practice in implementing the LRC, as shown below.

Despite its limitations, the LRC constitutes a legally endorsed, international-level renunciation of previously widespread practices in recognition, which had aimed to achieve nostrification in the sense of establishing equivalence between qualifications from typically very different education systems. In contrast, the LRC strengthened an understanding that qualifications obtained in different countries are inevitably different and argued for a focus not on whether these differences exist in the first place, but whether they could be considered "substantial".

Yet when is a difference substantial? This question was not definitively answered by the LRC (or any other regional convention), which kept the door open to a diversity of interpretations. In contrast the Global Convention, which was adopted in 2019 and came into force in 2023, includes a – still very open yet undoubtedly more advanced – definition of 'substantial differences'. Section I "Definition of terms" states:

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[28] *Besides this occurrence, the term "substantial differences" is also used in Articles IV.3, V.1 and VI.1.*
[29] *Although the term "substantial differences" is not defined in the text of the LRC itself, the Convention's explanatory report does offer some further guidance. However, it also concedes that guidelines are needed, especially on how the concept of substantial differences relates to periods of study (Council of Europe and UNESCO 1997b: 17).*

> **Substantial differences:** significant differences between the foreign qualification and the qualification of the State Party which would most likely prevent the applicant from succeeding in a desired activity, such as, but not limited to, further study, research activities, or employment opportunities. (UNESCO 2019a: 2)

A very similar definition is provided by the European Area of Recognition (EAR) manuals, which outline common good practice in recognition procedures across the countries covered by the ENIC–NARIC networks and were recommended in 2012 by the Bucharest Communiqué as a common set of recognition guidelines for Europe (Bologna Process 2012a: 4). The latest version of the European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions (EAR-HEI) contains the following explanation:

> The core of the evaluation process is to consider the five elements of a qualification and determine whether the applicant will succeed in the purpose for which recognition is sought, or whether there is a substantial difference that may prevent the applicant from (fully) succeeding. (AR-Net Project Consortium 2020: 57)

In other words, a substantial difference is not a set list of benchmarks or thresholds, but anything that indicates that the individual applicant is unlikely to succeed in their desired further path. This definition is not much different from the one in the very first edition of the EAR manual, which differs from the EAR-HEI manual in that it mainly targets credential evaluators working at ENIC-NARICs (EAR Project Consortium 2012: 45). In this case, the legal texts and practical implementation have thus driven each other over a period of more than two decades and jointly helped to solidify the concept – at least in theory, whereas the practice at institutional level still reveals very different ways to implement it.

The purpose of recognition: access vs. admission

What exactly may reasonably or legitimately be considered a substantial difference will, at least to some extent, depend on the purpose for which recognition is sought. The LRC's subsidiary text *Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications* (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2010) introduced an important nuance to the concept of substantial differences. As a subsidiary text to the LRC, it is "only" a recommendation and thus lacks the LRC's status as a legally binding instrument. Nevertheless, it attached to the LRC the now common understanding of 'substantial differences' as needing to be defined against the individual purpose of the application: "The assessment should take due account of the purpose(s) for which recognition is sought, and the recognition statement should make clear the purpose(s) for which the statement is valid" (*ibid*: 8).

What this means is that the existence and nature of substantial differences both depend entirely on whether the application is for recognition for the purpose of accessing higher education, recognition of a period or periods of study, or recognition of a higher education qualification (Sections IV, V, and VI of the LRC, respectively). It may also depend on whether the application is for general recognition at a given level (e.g. recognition of a degree at the first cycle, like a bachelor's degree) or for a specific purpose such as access to a specific study programme or employment (including self-employment) in specific professions.

For example, if a person applies for a given job on the basis of a second cycle qualification (master's degree), the fact that they did not write a thesis for their degree may not be a substantial difference even if master's degrees in the country in which recognition is sought typically include a thesis, since many professions can be performed without any experience in thesis writing. On the other hand, if the same person applies for access to a doctoral programme, the lack of experience with writing a thesis may indeed prevent them from succeeding in the doctoral programme and thus be a substantial difference. In all cases, of course, this process requires that the recognising authority is able to clearly articulate which knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes a given applicant needs to have for a reasonable chance of success in their desired future path. The concept of learning outcomes plays a crucial role in this context, and will thus be explored in more detail below and in a separate chapter.

Based on the same rationale, a distinction is typically made between access and admission. This is in fact a very important distinction in the context of automatic recognition, which is dealt with in more detail in Chapter 4 New Developments in Recognition. Access means satisfying the general requirements for either higher education in general (e.g. after graduating from secondary education) or for a specific programme, i.e. being qualified for consideration. Admission, on the other hand, means actually getting a place of study, where there might be a selection among qualified candidates. A qualification may thus well give an individual applicant the right to access higher education in general or at a specific study level, but may not render them qualified for every single study programme on offer.

Thus, in the case of an individual applicant the recognition processes need to consider both access and admission, with potentially different outcomes. This is also the reason why ENIC-NARICs typically deal with access rather than admission, and higher education institutions typically deal with admission rather than access. Access rights have been greatly facilitated and harmonised by the common European efforts to create more transparent and comparable higher education systems, whereas study programmes with all their disciplinary specificities will inevitably remain very distinct from one another and thus in the domain of the institutions holding the subject-specific expertise.

The burden of proof

If a substantial difference exists, it can only have an impact on the recognition decision once it has been clearly identified, and the LRC established in no uncertain terms whose responsibility this is: that of the recognition authority. Through the formulation "unless a substantial difference can be shown" in LRC Article IV.1 and the even clearer statement in Article III.3.5 that "[t]he responsibility to demonstrate that an application does not fulfil the relevant requirements lies with the body undertaking the assessment", the LRC introduced another concept that was considered revolutionary at its time: the reversed burden of proof. In other words, by clearly stating that recognition can only be denied if a substantial difference between the presented qualification and the equivalent required qualification in the destination country is discovered, the LRC introduced the notion that the primary task of recognition authorities – which in Europe are typically higher education institutions, ENIC-NARICs or other public authorities – is to grant recognition, not to prevent it. In addition, the LRC clearly states that, in cases where a substantial difference exists, it is the responsibility of the authority assessing the qualification to demonstrate in what sense a qualification is substantially different and thus likely

to prevent the applicant from succeeding in the further learning path they are applying for. By doing so, the LRC removed the legal basis for practices requiring the applicant to prove the equivalence of their application with a similar one from the destination country. Even though it does not use those exact words, the LRC thus reversed the burden of proof (i.e. of the applicant's aptitude for their desired continued learning path), by moving it from the applicant to the recognition authority.
The concepts of reversed burden of proof and substantial differences are two sides of the same coin, so to speak. Substantial differences between two corresponding qualifications cannot exist without anybody pointing to them, and an applicant will naturally not take on this task, thus leaving it with the recognition authority.

By introducing the concept of substantial differences and implicitly opening the door for the concept of reversed burden of proof, the LRC in essence established what is today the common understanding of "fair and transparent" recognition procedures in European higher education. These two concepts require that the recognition authority first defines internally and then clearly articulates to applicants what the benchmark is for establishing whether a substantial difference exists – ideally following indicators and rules that are consistently applied in all cases, yet always with due consideration for the individual characteristics of the qualifications at hand, as explained in more detail below. In this sense, the LRC introduced (more) transparent recognition procedures, since it no longer allowed recognition decisions to be taken in a black box.

Yet today's understanding of the LRC, and in particular of its "substantial differences" concept, was not naturally born out of the text of the Convention itself. Instead, it took many years and the concerted efforts of various key actors and stakeholders as well as other, contemporaneous major developments in European higher education to get to where we are today. The section below offers a closer look at this evolution.

A cultural shift: consolidating milestones and contributing factors

As outlined at the beginning of this section on substantial differences, the LRC had introduced the concept as the only possible reason to deny recognition but left ample room for interpretation of what 'substantial' could possibly be. The Global Convention in contrast had given further direction, so what happened between the adoption of the LRC in 1997 and the Global Convention more than 20 years later?

The Bologna Process

For one, a seminal milestone in European higher education policy took place shortly after the launch of the LRC:

> Along with the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the **Bologna Process** *[bold in the original]* represents another milestone in recognition that during the last twenty-five years has paved the way to consider the recognition of qualifications on a larger scale than was applied previously. (TPG-LRC Project Consortium 2021: 9)

The Bologna Process[30] was launched in 1999, with the goal of making higher education systems across

[30] *For further information, see https://ehea.info/, accessed 20 February 2025.*

Europe more transparent and coherent, thus – so the participating countries hoped – enhancing the attractiveness of European higher education and facilitating the mobility of students. This was a reaction to a major trend at the time. In the years leading up to the launch of the Bologna Process, Europe did indeed see clear signals that there was a growing demand for mobile study experiences. Since mobility can have different aspects (e.g. outward versus inward, credit versus degree) and definitions (e.g. based on student's nationality versus host country of their previous education), it is difficult to give a brief yet coherent summary of the full development of student mobility numbers here.

Suffice it to say that, within Europe, the number of Erasmus students rose almost consistently throughout the 1990s, with only a little dip in the programme year 1996/97, from 27 906 in 1990/91 to 100 666 in 1999/2000 (EU 2014: 2). Also in terms of global study mobility numbers, Europe proved to be a heavyweight. UNESCO's *World Statistical Outlook on Higher Education: 1980-1995* found that in 1995 the UK, US and Germany together hosted half of all foreign students globally, and France, Russia, Belgium and Austria were among the top ten host countries at that time (UNESCO 1998: 20). There was thus much to be gained for the European higher education systems from creating a coherent, transparent and – thus was the hope – attractive common higher education area.

The Bologna Process' objective of facilitating student mobility implied a significant leap forward for the cause of recognition. Conceptually speaking, mobility and recognition, including the concept of substantial differences, depend on and drive each other. There cannot be mobility without recognition and vice versa, but for the purpose of this chapter it should also be explicitly highlighted that from an individual and skills' development perspective there is little to be gained from mobility if there is virtually no difference in the learning experiences along that journey. While the Bologna Process' goal of facilitating mobility thus implied a need to respect and maintain a certain level of differences between higher education systems in order to ensure that learner mobility is actually enriching, it still needed to facilitate system compatibility and the creation of transparency tools in order to support admissions officers and credential evaluators in deciphering foreign higher education systems and better understanding the qualifications emanating from them. The goal was and still is thus to ensure diversity within a broad common framework.

To achieve this goal, the Bologna Process introduced common tools and structural reforms like the three-cycle degree structure, which increased the alignment of higher education qualifications. At the same time, it supported an understanding of the different European higher education systems as inherently different while also fostering their readability abroad, for example through the joint commitment of EHEA ministers to develop national qualifications frameworks compatible with an overarching European framework (Bologna Process 2003: 4) and the introduction of the framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) in 2005. Qualifications frameworks are so relevant to adequate implementation of the LRC that a separate subchapter in Chapter 4 New Developments in Recognition is devoted to this topic.

Another important feature of the Bologna Process is that it ensured the use of a common quality assurance system, notably in 2005 through the adoption of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) updated in 2015 (Bologna Process 2015a) and, a couple of years later, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). Note that

many developments under the Bologna Process were greatly enhanced by concurrent work in the EU. However, the EU has only a supporting competence in education matters, as can be exemplified by the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), created by the EU to facilitate Erasmus student exchanges but readily adopted by the Bologna Process as a common European currency to quantify learning effort. Similarly, the EU, together with UNESCO and the Council of Europe, developed the Diploma Supplement, which today is a key instrument of the EHEA, supporting admissions officers and credential evaluators in understanding individual qualifications.

The LRC and the Bologna Process are thus closely linked: they were both initiated in the spirit of fostering transparency, trust and mobility. What is more, the Bologna Process has since its very beginning promoted the LRC, as is evident from several ministerial communiqués. The Bergen Communiqué, for example, "urge[s] those that have not already done so to ratify the [Lisbon Recognition] Convention without delay" (Bologna Process 2005a: 3), while the Paris Communiqué established compliance with the LRC as one of the Bologna Process' key commitments that are considered "crucial to reinforcing and supporting quality and cooperation inside the EHEA" (Bologna Process 2018: 2).

Today, the LRC is perfectly embedded in the Bologna Process: they share the same objectives and rely on the same transparency and comparability tools, while the ratification and implementation of the LRC itself continue to be key commitments of the Process (Bologna Process 2024a: 3). The LRC and its implementation can thus not be adequately understood without taking into account the Bologna Process, and the broader cultural shift that these two milestones brought about in European higher education.

Towards applicant-centred recognition processes

Taken together as a package, substantial differences, the reversed burden of proof and all other related LRC concepts can be considered emblematic of a cultural shift in recognition practices from an institution-centred to an applicant-centred approach. Taking inspiration from the well-established concept of student-centred learning, which the EHEA website defines as "an approach to education, which aims at overcoming some of the problems inherent to more traditional forms of education by focusing on the learner and their needs, rather than being centred around the teacher's input",[31] the idea of an applicant-centred recognition procedure can be understood as taking the perspective, needs and rights of the applicant, not of the institution or staff member conducting the procedure, as a basis.

In other words, the concepts of substantial differences and reversed burden of proof are applicant-centred because they require the recognition authority to take the potential of the applicant to succeed, i.e. their competences and the individual purpose of their application, as a basis for the recognition decision, rather than encouraging the authority to base that decision on their own regionally or nationally specific perspective and experiences, which might inevitably focus more on differences than similarities.[32] Put in even simpler terms, recognition processes that apply these two concepts take the individual applicant's qualifications as a starting point, instead of the transcript of records of an entirely theoretical, statistically standard student. Another way of looking at this shift is as a move from an input- and procedures-based approach to an output- and results-based approach. In this context, it should

[31] *Definition on the EHEA website: https://ehea.info/pid34932/student-centred-learning-2009-2012.html, accessed 20 February 2025.*
[32] *The EAR-HEI manual puts this frankly: "This means you should not insist upon foreign qualifications being identical to those offered in your country. You should rather accept non-substantial differences" (AR-Net Project Consortium 2020: 57).*

also be mentioned that LRC-compliant recognition follows the same principle and basic procedure as recognition of prior learning, even though this latter type of recognition is not covered by the LRC.

One central implication of the applicant-centred, results-focused recognition procedure introduced by the LRC is that quantitatively graspable and formal differences – such as the number of ECTS credits or semesters, or individual course titles – need to be supplemented by those qualitative elements of a qualification which are meant to more accurately grasp what the achieved competences enable their holder to do. These include learning outcomes as well as the profile of the obtained qualification – for example, whether it is research oriented or professionally oriented. This is indeed also the recommended practice. The EAR-HEI manual, a European level handbook for admissions officers in the EHEA (AR-Net Project Consortium 2020), distinguishes five elements of a qualification, first developed at some length more than a decade earlier (Bergan 2007: 69–142):

1. level (i.e. in the national or a European-level qualifications framework)
2. workload (e.g. in ECTS)
3. quality (e.g. the applicant's grades, or the accreditation and/or quality assurance status of the institution or programme)[33]
4. profile (e.g. the specific subject, highly specialised or broad, academically or labour market oriented)
5. learning outcomes (i.e. statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do at the end of a learning experience).

While the manual highlights that "all [five elements] have relevance and need to be considered when assessing a qualification, especially in establishing whether there are substantial differences between the foreign qualification and the required one", it nevertheless concludes that "[l]earning outcomes are becoming the most important factor, the evaluation of which is aided by the other indicators" (AR-Net Project Consortium 2020: 20).

In this context, it is worth noting that both ideological shifts – towards student-centred learning on the one hand, and towards applicant-centred recognition on the other – are indeed closely linked to the concept and use of learning outcomes. It is thus worth investigating their evolution, use and potential for recognition purposes in more detail (for which, see Chapter 4 New Developments in Recognition). Another closely related concept that is investigated in more detail in that chapter is automatic recognition. For the purposes of this chapter, it should suffice to add that the concept of automatic recognition builds on today's understanding of 'substantial differences' and how the five elements of a qualification outlined above ought to be used in a recognition process, by differentiating between generic or system-level recognition on one side and specific recognition, or recognition for admission to a specific programme, on the other side. In doing so, automatic recognition supports today's understanding of 'substantial differences' by highlighting the need to consider the individual applicant's desired future path, rather than standardised formal elements like the submitted qualification's cycle level.

[33] *The consultation of the issuing institution's position in a university ranking is another practice that may fall under this category and, as indicated by the first LRC implementation monitoring report (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2016a: 47), a handful of countries do indeed use rankings as a criterion for recognition decisions, or at least did so at the time of data collection for that report. This is, however, not considered good practice (see, e.g., AR-Net Project Consortium 2020: 22 and Peterbauer 2020).*

| Alternative recognition

Another indicator of a cultural shift towards applicant-centred academic recognition is the tendency to urge recognition authorities to adopt a pro-recognition attitude by default, i.e. to want to recognise. This development was also likely inspired by practices in professional recognition established by the EU and then adopted for academic recognition by the LRC and developed further from there. The Global Convention, for example, which was created to strengthen and complement the regional conventions rather than replace them, introduces the "principle of precedence" by stating that "[n]othing in this Convention shall be interpreted as modifying the rights and obligations of the States Parties under the regional recognition conventions and any other treaties to which they are parties" (UNESCO 2019a: Art. XIX.3). As highlighted by the authors of the I-AR project report *The Global Recognition Convention Going Local?*, this means that "whenever a recognition body faces discrepancies between the Global Convention and other conventions and/or treaties, the provision that is more favourable to the applicant should always be given precedence" (I-AR Project Consortium 2023: 8). The same ethos has in practice also been applied to the concept of substantial differences. While constituting the only legitimate reason to deny recognition, they do not oblige a credential evaluator or admissions officer to deny recognition, as highlighted by the EAR-HEI manual:

> You have no obligation to deny recognition of the foreign qualification even if a substantial difference exists; however, this does not imply that you should open the gates for non-qualified applicants. You should ensure that the applicant is offered a fair chance of succeeding (e.g. by providing a student support system which would enable the applicant to quickly catch up and progress with the programme) and that the quality of the programme is not at risk. (AR-Net Project Consortium 2020: 57)

It is worth highlighting how also in this example concepts like 'qualified' (versus "non-qualified") and 'applicant success' are closely linked with the concept of substantial differences.

An even more interesting observation in this context is that the pro-recognition attitude exemplified above also gave rise to the concept of alternative recognition, meaning alternative to *full* recognition. The LRC did not explicitly introduce this concept (while also not discouraging it in any way), since it uses the word "recognition" in absolute terms, meaning recognition can be either granted or not, depending on whether substantial differences exist or not. Offering an alternative to full recognition, conversely, acknowledges that there are different degrees of substantial differences, ranging from minor stumbling blocks (leading to alternative recognition) to insurmountable walls (leading to no recognition), and it offers the applicant a chance to overcome stumbling blocks.

The concept of alternative recognition opens up several courses of action when an applicant is deemed *almost* sufficiently prepared for the path ahead. For one, there is conditional recognition, which means that recognition is granted on the condition that certain requirements are fulfilled before or at the beginning of the applicant's continuing studies, such as the completion of a specific bridging course. Another option is partial recognition, by which the applicant is still obliged to enrol in a programme on a level equivalent to their qualification before continuing to the next level, but a portion of credits from their submitted qualification are recognised, thus dispensing that applicant from having to repeat virtually identical courses. Finally, another potential course of action is granting alternative recognition,

by which the applicant is offered admission to a programme or level different from what they applied for (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2010: 9; AR-Net Project Consortium 2020: 61–63). Even though such practices were not explicitly prescribed by the LRC, they are nevertheless in line with the LRC's applicant-centred, pro-recognition approach and could thus be seen as a logical continuation of this attitude.

In addition, the exchange of information and the synergies between actors in academic and professional recognition in the context of the EU, the Council of Europe and UNESCO have positively impacted the approach to recognition policy and practice. For example, Articles 14.2 and 14.5 of EU Directive 2005/36/EC state:

> If the host Member State makes use of the option provided for in paragraph 1, it must offer the applicant the choice between an adaptation period and an aptitude test. [...] 5. Paragraph 1 shall be applied with due regard to the principle of proportionality. In particular, if the host Member State intends to require the applicant to complete an adaptation period or take an aptitude test, it must first ascertain whether the knowledge acquired by the applicant in the course of his professional experience in a Member State or in a third country, is of a nature to cover, in full or in part, the substantial difference referred to in paragraph 4. (European Union 2005).

The phrasing of the Directive obliges Member States to offer applicants alternatives in case full recognition cannot be deemed the most suitable outcome, based on the provided documentation, notably a choice between an adaptation period to obtain vital but missing competences, or an aptitude test to prove the existence of these competences.

(Other) key actors

On a more operational level, a common understanding of good practice in implementing the concept of substantial differences was also gradually consolidated through shared practice and the concerted efforts of central actors in the European recognition landscape, notably the ENIC-NARICs, the European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNESCO. The key role of international cooperation in developing today's implementation of the LRC is considered in Chapter 5 Governance and Implementation, but the special role of the ENIC-NARIC networks in consolidating the concept of 'substantial differences' should be briefly highlighted.

In the early 21st century, these networks, in collaboration with the other actors listed above, organised a series of conferences, meetings and working groups whose aim was to develop something akin to European-level good practice in recognition. The publication *Substantial Differences: A Glimpse of Theory, Practice and Guidelines* by the Italian ENIC-NARIC CIMEA, for example, points to the efforts of the ENIC-NARIC Working Party in the period 2005–08 in developing common principles for implementing the 'substantial differences' concept. The result remains valid until this day:

- It is the obligation of the competent authority, and not of the applicant, to provide evidence for the existence of a substantial difference.
- Substantial differences are a valid reason for non-recognition, but they do not imply an obligation not to recognise.

- A difference should be considered substantial only in relation to the function and purpose of the qualification.
- A difference in formal terms only is an insufficient argument for denying recognition.
- The identification of a substantial difference should be based on the 5 elements of a qualification (level, workload, quality, profile, learning outcomes).
  (TPG-LRC Project Consortium 2021: 8)

Other milestones on the way to a common understanding of what may constitute a substantial difference and what the concept may mean for the practical recognition process are the book *Developing Attitudes to Recognition: Substantial Differences in an Age of Globalisation* published by the Council of Europe (Hunt and Bergan 2009), and the meetings and discussions, mainly within the ENIC and NARIC networks, which inspired its creation. Even today, the book provides an invaluable and timeless breakdown of what substantial differences mean in theory and in practice, by first providing a thorough analysis of the concept's theoretical implications and, second, making a solid case for a flexible case-by-case, instead of a one-size-fits-all, approach to establishing substantial differences.

The development of a shared understanding among practitioners across Europe of what might constitute a substantial difference, though not yet codified in legal documents before the adoption of the Global Convention, can also be observed in the first of the LRC implementation monitoring reports. These reports, published by the LRC Committee, provide a periodical check of how the LRC is implemented across its States Parties and issue recommendations for improvement. The first of these reports (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2016a) summarises findings on the implementation of the LRC's ten main provisions.[34] The survey results revealed that the majority of responding countries did not have an explanation of what is understood by the term "substantial differences" at national level – this situation is unlikely to have changed today, as the concept is highly embedded in practice and thus requires, at least to a certain degree, a case-by-case approach.

What is more interesting in this context, though, is that the survey also showed a "relatively common understanding" (*ibid.*: 49) of what may constitute a substantial difference in practice, despite the lack of a clear definition or list of examples in the LRC and a widespread absence of national-level definitions. For example, the majority of countries listed differences in access requirements, differences in nominal programme duration of more than one year, and a lack of institutional or programme accreditation covered by the qualification submitted for recognition. The answers to the survey may not always reflect what is considered good practice today, but they do constitute a valuable testimony to an emerging common understanding of the 'substantial differences' concept. The survey results also demonstrate that several countries did not use a single element or criterion to identify potential substantial differences, but rather a combination of several such elements or criteria. This practice was promptly taken up as a recommendation by the report – though in a very tactful wording[35] – and is also in line with the cultural shift towards applicant-centred recognition procedures outlined above.

[34] *The second monitoring report (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2022) presented data from 2020, but focused only on three provisions not covering 'substantial differences' and thus provides no comparable data.*
[35] *"It is recommended that the competent recognition authorities carefully consider whether a single criterion in the recognition decision can constitute a substantial difference which is sufficient to justify withholding full recognition" (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2016a: 49).*

What will be substantially different in the future?

Finally, with the findings above in mind, it is worth taking a moment to consider the temporal and geographic context in which the shift towards applicant-centred recognition procedures was made possible. In Europe, this occurred to a great extent because of the confluence of several seminal developments in higher education (e.g. the development of the Bologna Process), meaning it happened at the right place at the right time. Yet what implications might this have for the future development of recognition procedures and how they approach the concept of substantial differences? The author is in no position to provide an answer, but hopes to offer a few questions for reflection and further observation.

Looking ahead, a key question that arises is how the concept of substantial differences will be implemented and will perhaps evolve further in the future. The evolution of the concept has moved from something fairly open, with no clear definition in the LRC, to an unmistakable call to take individual applicants and their aptitude to succeed in their desired future learning path as a basis for the recognition decision. This current understanding of substantial differences can still differ very much in how it is implemented in practice, but there is a clear move towards seeing learning outcomes as more indicative of an applicant's potential to succeed than, for example, the years and hours they put into achieving their qualification.

Yet learning outcomes themselves are a broad concept that can be considered to be in flux. Generally speaking, learning outcomes state what a learner should know, be able to do and understand at the end of a learning process or sequence. Yet this can range from very subject-specific knowledge gained through one particular course to highly transversal skills gained over the course of an entire study programme. In practice, learning outcomes can range from fairly abstract to very precise articulations of what students can do and understand at end of a learning experience. In addition, societal expectations with regard to learning outcomes, as well as students' and stakeholders' understandings of what kind of learning outcomes are relevant, are changing – as discussed in detail in Chapter 4 New Developments in Recognition. The Council of Europe has, for example, developed a Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC), which additionally lists attitudes and values as types of learning outcome (Council of Europe 2018a, b, c). As a consequence of such changing societal attitudes towards the desired outcomes of learning, the description of learning outcomes will, for lack of a better feasible alternative, inevitably (need to) change too. The question is whether in the future the learning outcomes and their descriptions will be equally aligned across different countries, or whether learning outcomes will face the same fate as qualifications, with the packaging losing in relevance vis-à-vis its content as they become less reflective of each other.

Developing this idea further, one may also wonder how recognition procedures themselves will continue to evolve. The concept of substantial differences, as it is understood today, implies that the evaluator compares the applicant's competences – as demonstrated by their documentation – with the defined competences that are required for the applicant's desired path ahead. If the formal, standardised elements of qualifications are already losing in relevance for the identification of substantial differences, and at the same time written learning outcomes might become just as formalised and eventually no longer reflect the applicant's actual competences, will the role of documentation itself in the recognition process diminish in the future? In this still entirely hypothetical scenario, a future

procedure could look similar to the alternative evaluation methods currently used for applicants with incomplete or no documentation at all (e.g. refugees), for example through background papers and interviews (see Chapter 6 Refugees' Qualifications). This option certainly has its virtues, since it might more accurately grasp individual applicants' prior experiences and potential. It would, however, require different expertise from admissions officers and credential evaluators, including for example in methods for recognition of prior learning. Yet even with this particular issue solved, the scalability of such an approach would remain unclear. A recently conducted survey among higher education institution staff responsible for recognition procedures revealed prevailing misunderstandings in the implementation of the LRC's Article VII, as well as concerns over the increased workload associated with an adequate implementation (TPG-LRC CoRE Project Consortium 2024: 23–25, 44). In the not so distant future, Artificial Intelligence may play a key role in supporting admissions officers and credential evaluators and thus reduce their workload, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 New Developments in Recognition. However, at the time of writing this, the reliability of the outcomes of such assessment procedures still remains to be seen.

In this context it might also be worth returning to the point raised earlier in this chapter about the role of the Bologna Process and the EHEA in moving towards a common, applicant-centred recognition practice. This observation forms somewhat of a contrast to what Sjur Bergan wrote back in 2009 in his chapter 'Substantial differences: exploring a concept' in the book *Developing Attitudes to Recognition: Substantial Differences in an Age of Globalisation*. The chapter refers to two cultures in European higher education and how these two cultures manifest themselves in attitudes to recognition and, therefore, the concept of substantial differences:

> [O]ne [culture or attitude] can be characterised as emphasising the needs and interests of individual applicants, which would entail a propensity to recognise applicants' qualifications to the fullest extent possible, whereas the other can be characterised as emphasising the need to uphold and protect the education system and standards of the home country, which would entail a propensity not to recognise foreign qualifications, unless the credentials evaluator is absolutely convinced they are equal to the corresponding qualifications of the home country. (Bergan 2009: 25)

It would be very interesting to revisit the idea of these two cultures or attitudes to see whether and how they have aligned through the experience of the past 15 years of collaboration and peer exchange in the EHEA, and try to identify a potential future trajectory on that basis, both for Europe and the globe. Especially in the face of changing demographics, with diminishing working populations in much of Europe and at the same time greater needs for highly qualified professionals, one might well wonder whether these needs will eventually disincentivise protectionist approaches to recognition and instead encourage more liberal ones.

Another question that arises is what the ratification of the Global Convention by more and more countries will mean for the continued implementation of the LRC's concepts. As this chapter has shown, the current, applicant-centred understanding of the concept 'substantial differences' was developed over the years through an interplay of legal frameworks, international policy coordination and exchange of good practice. The Global Convention is built on the same key principles as the LRC, but opens them to the entire globe. Will learning outcomes retain their validity and usefulness in recognition processes

when evaluating qualifications from vastly different higher education systems, which may not all have systematically adopted the use of diploma supplements and learning outcomes (as is also still the case in some European countries)?

More importantly, though, as higher education systems are necessarily integrated in their countries' labour markets, people's understandings of what a relevant learning outcome is and how it can be described will inevitably differ – not least between higher education and labour market representatives. Will this circumstance help to further develop the concept of substantial differences, or show its limits and lead to vastly different practical implementations, as in the early days of the LRC? Finally, the history of how the concept of substantial differences developed and was solidified through exchange of practice and peer learning across Europe highlights the defining role of the LRC's key actors, notably the ENIC and NARIC networks, in this process. Would such a network be possible on a global scale and, if it was not, would the concept of substantial differences evolve further, or return to its more blurry original state?

The next chapters, which explore concepts such as learning outcomes, the global dimension and international collaboration in recognition in more detail, help to shed light on these questions.

2.2. Assessing the Authenticity of Qualifications, Institutions, and Identity

Chiara Finocchietti and Luca Lantero

Verifying the authenticity of qualifications is an essential element of the work of credential evaluators. Looking at this book, it is clear how credential evaluators can on the one hand be gate-openers, perhaps by giving a positive assessment even if the educational documentation is missing, in a legitimate situation in which a person has a qualification but does not have the related documentation, as could happen for instance for refugees. On the other hand, credential evaluators also play the role of gatekeeper when the documentation related to a qualification is ostensibly presented, but the knowledge and skills that the document is supposed to certify are absent or at least not demonstrated because the document is counterfeit or 'bought'.

| Terminology and classification

The dimension of education fraud is broad. In its general meaning it is defined as a "behaviour or action occurring in the field of education intended to deceive and obtain an unfair advantage" (Council of Europe 2022: 9) and encompasses phenomena such as academic misconduct, plagiarism and contract cheating, in a domain that we can refer as 'teaching and learning'.

Fraudulent qualifications

In this chapter we refer mainly to the domain of fraud related to educational documents and qualifications, even if this could be linked to other forms of fraudulent practices. The concept of 'fraudulent qualification' encompasses a number of different cases, such as authentic documents forged for instance to inflate the grades, completely 'invented' qualifications that do not have any correspondence with existing ones, or copies of documents similar to parchments of famous universities (Council of Europe 2022; Council of the European Union 2022a: 192). It also includes authentic documents used in an illegal or irregular way, such as impersonation and/or misrepresentation, that is, using a genuine document that has not been awarded to the person claiming it as his or hers, or a genuine document fraudulently obtained (Council of the European Union 2022a).

Diploma mills

This set of issues includes 'diploma mills', institutions that are not accredited but claim to be so and that award fraudulent qualifications with no academic value (CIMEA 2018a; Council of Europe 2022). In recent years, a majority of countries have put in place policies targeting the implementation of quality assurance procedures in higher education. Through recognition and accreditation, higher education institutions and programmes are evaluated against defined standards, guaranteeing the quality of the education provided. Accreditation of higher education institutions and programmes may be conducted by a government organisation or an institution recognised by the government. In some systems, for instance in the USA[36] and some other English-speaking countries, the quality of institutions, programmes and qualifications is managed through a decentralised system of accreditation. Unrecognised higher education institutions are generally those that operate without any formal status of accreditation, authorisation, or recognition. Many of them might be legitimate and bona fide, but for various reasons are not accredited or recognised by competent authorities (CIMEA 2018a).

Among unrecognised institutions there is a distinct group of organisations that operate as diploma mills. According to the Council of Europe's definition, "A diploma mill (also known as a "degree mill") is an institution or organisation which is not recognised by national competent authorities or organisations as an institution accredited or authorised by the law of any member State to confer awards or qualifications, and which purports, by means of misrepresentation, to issue such awards or qualifications" (*ibid.*: 9).

> Among the schools without recognized accreditation, there exists a continuum, from those that are undeniably fake to those that have various levels of acceptance [...]. Each person, each organization, each agency, each decision maker, and each gatekeeper must decide where to draw a line on a continuum saying in effect that "those on one side meet my needs, and those on the other side do not". (Ezell and Bear 2012)

The spectrum of institutions is quite wide, ranging from clearly accredited and recognised institutions to the other side, i.e. diploma mills.

[36] *For accreditation in the US, see https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/higher-education-laws-and-policy/college-accreditation, accessed 4 March 2025.*

It is not always black and white: there are many nuances of grey, from legitimate institutions that are simply not interested in formal accreditation, for instance because their qualifications are already well valued by the labour market, to different forms of international and transnational institutions, where it is more challenging to identify who should be the competent authorities for accreditation, and institutions in conflicts and territories 'disputed' by two countries where the accreditation by one jurisdiction or another could be challenged by political conflicts and/or tensions.

Many policies and practices have been developed, from a recognition perspective, to detect diploma mills and bogus institutions, such as checklists (CIMEA 2018a; NUFFIC 2023), publications (CHEA and UNESCO 2009; Draper *et al.* 2023), training and information sharing. To be more specific, a few 'red flags' are qualifications offered almost solely on the basis of life experience; a strong emphasis on fees and payment options, credit card logos on the website, discounts if you take a bachelor's and master's "degree" together; courses of very short duration (a few days for a bachelor's); or a long list of 'national', 'international' or 'worldwide' accreditation.

From a theoretical perspective, fraudulent qualifications and diploma mills are two different phenomena. *Strictu sensu* the documents awarded by diploma mills are authentic, because they have been awarded by the institution, but they are academically meaningless, being offered without the necessary study path behind them and with no real acquisition of the learning outcomes they are supposed to certify. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to investigate which requirements are needed or are considered fundamental in defining an academic study path; further considerations on learning outcomes may be found in Chapter 4 New Developments in Recognition.

For the scope of this chapter, the issue of the authenticity of qualifications is presented in its broader concept, covering both fraudulent documents and diploma mills. While these are conceptually two different phenomena, they both lead to non-authentic qualifications, not attesting any authentic acquisition of knowledge and competence. In its etymology, 'authenticity' refers to the concept of authorship, and to the accomplishment of something on its own.[37] In the common meaning, something authentic is worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact.[38] It is possible to say that qualifications are authentic when the holder is the 'author', i.e. the person who has accomplished the study path and really acquired the knowledge and competences certified by the qualification.

Why we should care: the impact of education fraud

Fraud has an obvious impact on the quality of education systems and their programmes and institutions, but also on society at large. It directly impacts the right to quality education and the principle of equity if a person with a fraudulent qualification is enrolled in a higher education course or takes a place in a public competition instead of somebody else with an authentic qualification. In this sense it is also very clear why verifying the authenticity of qualifications is part of the principle of 'fair recognition' stated by the Convention, even if this aspect is not explicitly mentioned in the text. The verification of authenticity

[37] *"From αὐτο- (auto-, "self") +*ἔντης *(*héntēs "to prepare, work on, succeed"), cf. https://www.etymonline.com/word/authenticity, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[38] *See https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authentic, accessed 28 February 2025.*

and efforts to counter fraud are seen as a way to support UN Sustainability Development Goal (SDG) 4 on quality education (United Nations 2024a).

The use of non-authentic qualifications represents a direct risk to the health and well-being of citizens if a medical doctor practises the profession using a fake qualification, and the same would apply to an engineer, architect, teacher, or anyone practising a regulated profession, which is regulated precisely to protect the basic rights of citizens. Organisations selling fraudulent qualifications, or claiming to be legitimate and accredited institutions when they are not, not only undermine trust in the entire education system but are often profitable businesses that move large sums of money away from a quality education to a dubious one. Often diploma mills do not operate in isolation, but are part of a chain of fraud reinforcing each other such as visa mills, accreditation mills, and recognition mills (Council of Europe 2022). So efforts to verify authenticity are also a way to support UN SDG 16 (United Nations 2024b), especially in the field of combatting forms of organised crime, reduce corruption, and build effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels.

Old phenomenon, new threats

Fraud in education is not a new phenomenon. Ever since universities came to exist in Europe in the Middle Ages, there have been cases of selling fraudulent diplomas. In 1491, the University of Padua accused the universities of Ferrara, Parma and Piacenza of having signed an agreement (*fedus*) against Padua and of selling (*venalia*) the degree of master (*magistralia insignia*) at a very low price (*obolo*) (Moulin 1992: 188). The University of Cesena, founded in 1570, was well known for awarding degrees very easily and for its low prices: it was mockingly defined as “the university of the two hams” (Pini 1993: 167). Recent developments in technology, in the internationalisation of education systems, in the widespread use of internet and of social media, bring new perspectives and new challenges for verification of authenticity and countering document fraud. The web offers a worldwide market and huge low-cost possibilities to sell degrees. Technological development could be like the two-faced Roman god Ianus, allowing for very easy forging of documents at low cost, but on the other side also providing effective tools that support verification of authenticity.

The profile of diploma mills has changed over recent years, in some cases moving to multinational business (Ezell 2023; Finocchietti *et al.* 2023). Recent research shows that the profile of the ‘fraudulent degree industry’ is changing, with mega-corporations emerging that sell fraudulent qualifications but also ‘services’, such as student impersonation and fraudulent research and academic writing. These different types of industry are often connected, with diploma mills related to other mills, such as visa mills, accreditation mills, credential evaluation mills, and also contract cheating, admission fraud, and scholarly paper mills, in a unique ‘chain of fraud’ offered by one or more ‘parent companies’, probably in certain cases linked to money laundering and organised crime. Business is related not only to the fake degree industry in itself, but also to some ‘upsells’ like blackmails and extortion, used to extract more money from previous buyers (Eaton *et al*. 2023; Ezell 2019; Finocchietti *et al*. 2023).

A related issue is the difficulty of having reliable data and statistics, in view of the complexity and constantly evolving nature of the degree mill world (Draper *et al*. 2023; Eaton *et al*. 2023). However,

over the years estimates have been made by experts. For diploma mills, the number of 'institutions' monitored by the Council of Europe and then by the ENIC-NARIC Network was 700 in 1986, 1300 in 1996, and around 2150 in 2018 (see below). In 2022, the fake degree industry was estimated to have over 7 billion USD in global revenue, while one organisation alone was estimated to have grossed 70 billion USD between 2011 and 2022. The same organisation has by now sold over 9 million qualifications. The price of a fake diploma can range from 199 to 25 000 USD (Eaton *et al*. 2023; Finocchietti *et al*. 2023). An analysis (carried out in one country only) found that 44% of all CVs had discrepancies in education claims with 10% of those having false grades. Research by Higher Education Degree datacheck (HEDD) found that only 20% of employers verify applicants' qualifications with the awarding body, relying instead on CVs or certificates and transcripts (HEDD 2017). Still, as outlined above, more data – including data on prevalence patterns – are needed.

Countering document fraud: the role of the LRC and the ENIC-NARIC networks

In this evolving landscape, the ENIC-NARIC centres and the co-secretariats of the Lisbon Recognition Convention have a long-standing commitment to monitoring and information sharing, to prevent and minimise document fraud.

In 1986, the Council of Europe published a list of institutions awarding qualifications that were not officially recognised in Europe. The document, intended as confidential and entitled "Provisional list of institutions of higher education the diplomas and degrees of which are not in general officially recognised in Europe", was drafted in preparation for the meeting of national experts from the national centres for information on academic recognition in December 1986. The document contained 700 non-recognised institutions operating in the higher education sector. The Council of Europe established a working party on non-recognised higher education institutions, which presented a preliminary report, with a set of recommendations, at the second joint meeting of ENIC and NARIC networks in 1995. In 1996 the Council of Europe published a second list, still for internal use only, in which the total number of institutions doubled: from 700 to almost 1300 (Finocchietti *et al*. 2023). The 1996 list included some 60 legitimate and recognised institutions that had been placed there by mistake. After this, the approach shifted to the concept of a public 'whitelist', i.e. giving information on the accredited or recognised institutions rather than publishing a 'blacklist' of unaccredited ones. The cultural and conceptual shift to the 'whitelist' approach was due not only to the potential risk of inaccuracies in the 'blacklist' but also to a number of other factors such as the modus operandi of diploma mills, which could change their name and pop up with a different one, which would then not be included in the blacklist, and they would use this to claim their supposed legitimacy. A 'whitelist' of institutions and programmes that are accredited, or otherwise recognised by the competent public authorities, is a more reliable tool than a list indicating non-recognised institutions, which tend to change their names often. Neither solution is, however, perfect, and both are time sensitive, so that lists have limited validity in time and need to be updated frequently, preferably annually.

In 2006, UNESCO organised a meeting of a consultation group to discuss the proposal of an 'International Information Tool on Recognised Higher Education Institutions', outcomes of which were presented the following year at the 2007 ENIC-NARIC Joint Meeting in Bucharest (UNESCO 2006). In 2016, the UNESCO

International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) and the International Quality Group of the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA/CIQG) joined forces to convene an expert meeting in Washington DC, on 30–31 March 2016, and published 'a call to action' for international practice in combatting corruption and enhancing integrity (UNESCO IIEP and CHEA 2016).

In the years after 1996, the landscape evolved with the adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 1997 and the launch of the Bologna Process in 1999. As detailed in Chapter 1 The Road to Lisbon, the discussion in the ENIC and NARIC networks evolved in parallel, expanding from diploma mills as such to the discussion of quality assurance, (quality) transnational education, transparency and accessibility of reliable information, and online education.

In 2012 the European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual was published, with the main aim of providing transparency and clarity regarding recognition practices in all European countries and also contributing to a joint recognition area of higher education, in which all European countries would have a harmonised approach to the recognition of qualifications, based on commonly agreed standards and guidelines. The EAR manual (EAR Project Consortium 2012), adopted as a European tool in the EHEA by the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué (Bologna Process 2012a: 4), contains a chapter on 'Diploma and accreditation mills'.

The topic of diploma mills was debated at a number of joint ENIC-NARIC meetings and was brought up again at the ENIC-NARIC meeting in 2008, partly due to the proliferation of bogus providers facilitated by the development of the web, again in 2010, and for workshops at the ENIC NARIC Joint Meetings between 2016 and 2019, and in 2022, 2023 and 2024. On this last occasion the results of a number of Erasmus+ co-funded projects on countering education fraud were presented, such as Lantero *et al*., CIMEA *against the mills*, the FRAUDOC guidelines, FraudSCAN database and FraudS+ project. The FRAUDOC project provided an updated 'blacklist' of diploma mills from the experience of ENIC-NARIC centres and available to them only as an internal tool, recording a total of 2 150 'institutions'.

Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)18 on Countering Education Fraud (Council of Europe 2022) was one of the achievements of its platform on Ethics, Integrity and Transparency in Education (ETINED). The recommendation shed light on four pivotal elements in combatting education fraud – prevention, prosecution, international cooperation and monitoring – aiming at a comprehensive understanding of these phenomena at all levels, including vocational education and training. Further, the explanatory memorandum defined education fraud, plagiarism and the different types of providers of fraudulent documents, such as diploma, accreditation and visa 'mills', and essay banks.

The recommendation has been a significant step forward. Firstly, it provides shared definitions of terms, as the basis for a common understanding, monitoring and cooperation at international level. Secondly, it develops a holistic approach to all forms of education fraud and the different actors and stakeholders involved. While focusing on the education sector, it outlines the impact of education fraud on society at large. Thirdly, it suggests a number of directions for action, recalling the need for more data and research and the essential role of international cooperation. In this way, the ETINED platform acts as an important forum for the sharing of information and best practice and for developing knowledge and preventive measures. One outcome of the activity of the ETINED platform and of the recommendation

is the proposal to establish a Centre to Prevent and Counter Education Fraud in Europe.[39] In July 2025, The Council of Europe and the Italian Information Centre on Academic Mobility and Equivalence (CIMEA), acting under the mandate of the Italian Ministry for Universities and Research, have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to establish in Italy the Centre[40]. Countering education fraud was also one of the priorities that were presented in the 2024 ENIC-NARIC Joint Meeting as part of the Council of Europe call for projects for ENIC centres.[41]

In parallel to the need for transparency tools, quality assurance mechanisms and accurate and reliable information, the discussion on digitalisation as a strong way to counter fraud has been growing exponentially in importance since 2012. From a recognition perspective, the use of digital tools and the secure exchange of digital student data has been seen as a way to prevent and minimise areas of actions for the circulation of fraudulent qualifications. For instance, the authenticity of a qualification of which metadata are saved in blockchain is easy to verify in a quick and secure way. Another example is the use of online databases against which it is possible to verify authenticity, such as the case of the Ukrainian Unified State Electronic Database on Education (EDEBO) (Lantero *et al*. 2022; Johansson and Finocchietti 2023).
It can nevertheless be argued that modifying a digital document might be easier with the free and online tools available nowadays, reinforcing the paradox of digital transformation, which is a two-edged sword. Technological developments and the evolution of what can be defined as the 'level of digital maturity of a qualification', from an image of the document, for instance a PDF, to a fully mature digital qualification with comparable data (NUFFIC 2020a) brought an expansion in the possibilities of verifying qualifications.
While with analogue documents the model is mostly[42] the one of 'trust in verification', i.e. verification carried out through online digital portals or databases available at national or institutional level, with advancing levels of digital maturity in qualifications it is possible to use the model of 'trust in delivery', in which 'digitally native credentials' (credentials issued directly by institutions through such channels as blockchain or other online platforms), can be verified by accessing the credential itself (Johansson and Finocchietti 2023).

Awareness of the importance of digitalisation for countering education fraud is reflected by a number of documents, starting with the UNESCO Global Recognition Convention, in which "States Parties commit to adopting measures to eradicate all forms of fraudulent practices regarding higher education qualifications by encouraging the use of contemporary technologies and networking activities among States Parties" (UNESCO 2019a: Article III.8). It would be interesting to verify, maybe through future monitoring of the Global Convention, whether and to what extent the use of digital technologies has contributed to reducing document fraud.

[39] *https://www.coe.int/en/web/ethics-transparency-integrity-in-education/-/8th-etined-plenary-meeting-advancing-integrity-and-transparency-in-education, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[40] *https://www.coe.int/en/web/ethics-transparency-integrity-in-education/-/council-of-europe-and-cimea-join-forces-to-launch-new-centre-tackling-education-fraud, accessed 18 July 2025.*
[41] *https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/call-for-projects-2024-learners-first-support-for-the-enic-centres-, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[42] *US institutions' "official Transcript of Record" was an early example of analogue 'trust in delivery'.*

As indicated earlier in this section and in the Authenticity section of Chapter 2 Key Concepts, more information is needed on how big the problem in terms of numbers and patterns (from and to which countries, which kinds of qualifications, which kind of assessors, e.g. specialists, HEIs, companies).

Assessment of the cost-effectiveness of approaches to prevent and detect fraud needs to have a basis in such data.

In implementing the LRC, in the framework of the second monitoring exercise, the LRCC Bureau decided to add a section on digitalisation, which was (reasonably) not covered explicitly in the 1997 text. The use of digital tools for verification of authenticity is part of the monitoring questionnaire, and among the recommendations are:

- the application of agreed and secure systems of digital certification and communication, such as blockchain, should be encouraged;
- digital solutions should ensure that information and student data are shared in a secured, reliable and simple way;
- verification of authenticity and of the identity of the holder should be possible in a trustworthy manner (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2022: 48–49).

Thirdly, the 2023 edition of the EAR Manual contains a chapter on 'Diploma and accreditation mills', as did the 2012 edition, but also new chapters on 'Authenticity' and 'Digital student data and digital processes' (EAR Project Consortium 2023). The latest EHEA ministerial communiqués make reference to the use of digitalisation as a way to facilitate secure, efficient and transparent exchange of student and institutional data (Bologna Process 2020), but they also underline that it risks facilitating the activities of accreditation mills, fraudulent qualifications and academic cheating services (Bologna Process 2024a; for the focus on digitalisation, see Chapter 4).

In the 2010 introduction to the publication *CIMEA Against the Mills*, the then President of the ENIC Network, E. Stephen Hunt, wrote that legal efforts to combat diploma mills are often handicapped by the very factors that are the strengths of democratic societies, such as respect for privacy and the tradition of the judiciary staying away from academic matters. In many situations, bogus entities have become the price paid for allowing freedom, much as hate speech and intolerance have often been the price that societies pay for laws promoting free expression (Hunt 2010). Like democracy, preventing and countering education fraud is a continuous exercise, to protect education as a common good and not a private commodity to be sold in a global market, ignoring the economic and financial impact behind it (Eaton *et al*. 2023).

2.3. Information Provision: The Responsibility of Home and Host Authorities

Kees Kouwenaar

Purpose of this section

Article III.3.3 of the LRC stipulates that the institution that has issued a qualification has a duty to provide information that is needed in the recognition process.

> Notwithstanding the responsibility of the applicant, the institutions having issued the qualifications in question shall have a duty to provide, upon request of the applicant and within reasonable limits, relevant information to the holder of the qualification, to the institution, or to the competent authorities of the country in which recognition is sought.

Clearly an important part of the information responsibility lies on the shoulders of the applicant. As this subchapter argues, there is a need – in the context of developments in higher education and in society since 1997 – to think again about the information responsibilities of the institution that is asked to grant admission (to studies or other activities) on the basis of a foreign qualification.

In this part of the chapter, we look at information responsibility in terms of who, what and when:

- the 'home institution', i.e. the institution that has issued the qualification in question and is responsible for the programme of studies and the learning outcomes that the qualification attests;

- the 'host institution', i.e. the institution from which a decision is sought to grant admission to studies or other activities;
- the nature of information that should be available as the basis of a fair and transparent recognition/admission decision, and
- when such information should be available for the same reasons of fairness and transparency.

Then we explore what impact may be expected from a proper assumption of this information responsibility on key aspects of recognition like 'substantial differences', 'burden of proof' and 'partial recognition'.

| Who, what, when

The basic premise of fair recognition/admission decisions is that these should be based on the assessment of whether applicants have the competences that are required to succeed in the activities to which they seek admission. From this basic premise, it follows that applicants should not be required to learn again things which they already have mastered. In order to meet these premises, these competences need to be clear, not only in terms of what people have to be good at – in terms of knowledge, skills, understanding, attitude – but also in terms of how good people have to be at it. These levels of competence need to be distinct from the next lower (not as good) and higher (better) levels of competence in the same dimension of the knowledge, skills, understanding or attitude involved.

NB This articulation of what people are (or have to be) good at and of how good they are (or have to be) at it, is the subject of more elaborate discussion in the section on 'learning outcomes' in Chapter 4 New Developments in Recognition.

These basic premises lead directly to an information responsibility of both the home institution and the host institution:

- The home institution should provide the graduate – immediately on graduation – with specific enough information on what competences (knowledge, skill, understanding, attitude) holders of the qualification possess, and on what level of competence they possess.
- The host institutions should have articulated what competence and what level of competence applicants need to demonstrably have; they should do that for themselves, to ensure quality and fairness, and for the outside world, to ensure transparency.

We argue here for an information responsibility of both the home and the host institution. The text of the LRC explicitly mentions the ENIC Network and centres as key actors. The individual ENICs and the ENIC Network indeed have a key role to play as information brokers and as stimulators of home/host institutions to fulfil their respective information responsibilities. But the onus of articulating the details – (a) what competences are required for the activities to which admission is sought (host) and (b) what

competences at what competence level can be trusted to be attested by a qualification – can only lie on the home and host institutions themselves.

If home and host institution do – as we recommend – provide clear information on the competence and competence level achievements of graduates, and the competence and competence level requirements for admission, this would have an important positive impact on recognition practice and in particular on the application of key concepts like 'substantial difference', 'burden of proof' and 'partial recognition'.

| Substantial difference

It stands to reason that relevant substantial difference can only be sought in differences between the achieved and required competences and competence levels. Duration of studies, perceived level of the institution and composition of the course modules are proxy indicators for the actually achieved competences. If the required competences and competence levels have clearly been achieved, no difference in duration, perceived level of the institution or programme or specific subject content can be seen as a valid reason to withhold recognition or deny admission: after all, the applicant has the knowledge, skills and understanding (and, where appropriate, the values and attitude) that are required.

| Burden of proof

If and when home and host institution have fulfilled their information obligation, a decision on whether to admit a holder of an international qualification to a programme of studies can be based on a proper comparative analysis of the required knowledge, skills and understanding with those possessed by the applicant.

Arguably, host institutions have a right to convince themselves that seemingly similar expressions of competence/level by home and host institution are indeed similar in reality. They can ask the applicant to give them what they need to make that comparison. It can be in the form of adequate written information; or applicants can simply be asked to demonstrate the specific skill. With adequate precision in the expression of those required entrance competences, this will in practice be fairly simple.

| What could be the result of this?

On the one hand, it might occur that the applicant's qualification according to all written material should have led to the required competence – but the applicant proves quite unable to demonstrate it. In such a case, we might argue that it is in neither the applicant's interest nor that of the host authority to grant admission: the applicant would be doomed to fail.

On the other hand, it might occur that the applicant successfully demonstrates the required competences, even though the documents of the qualification give rise to serious doubts. In such a

case, we might argue that it is in neither the applicant's interest nor that of the host authority to refuse admission: the host institution would be missing an excellent student.

In other words: where host and home institution assume their information responsibility – using an adequate and suitable tool to tangibly express the competences at hand –there may really not be so much of a 'burden' and the 'proof' may be easily obtained and very useful for all stakeholders concerned.

Partial recognition or conditional admission

Partial recognition is not treated by the Lisbon Recognition Convention itself. It is one of the general principles of the "Criteria and Procedures" document. Article III.3 of the Criteria and Procedures document (2010 version) states:

> Where, after thorough consideration of the case, the competent recognition authority reaches the conclusion that recognition cannot be granted in accordance with the applicant's request, alternative or partial recognition should be considered, where possible (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2010: para. 8).

In the "Criteria and Procedures" document, partial recognition clearly is intended to apply to cases in which the host authority feels that full and unconditional recognition cannot be granted. In those cases, 'partial recognition' is presented as a better alternative to 'full rejection' i.e. 'no recognition at all'. 'Partial recognition' represents an acknowledgement that the applicant has achieved part – but not all – of the learning outcomes deemed necessary to grant full recognition.

Partial recognition is consistently mentioned as something that host authorities should grant – rather than flat rejection – in cases where differences are considered to be too substantial to allow for full recognition.

If and when the home and host institutions have fulfilled their information obligation, it then becomes easy to identify minor gaps in the achieved competences or competence levels compared to the required ones. In effect we recommend that, whenever possible, host institutions grant partial recognition in terms of the yet-to-be-demonstrated competences and competence levels, rather than in terms of educational course modules or (parts of) the programme yet to be completed.

UNIVERSITAS QUADERNI

N. 01
September 2025

CHAPTER 3

The Lisbon Recognition Convention in a Broader Political and Policy Context

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Introduction

Chapter 1 The Road to Lisbon describes the context and considerations that made the development of the LRC possible, as well as the process that led to its adoption in 1997. The broader political and policy picture is an important part of that story, which for obvious reasons concludes with the adoption of the LRC in 1997 and its coming into force in February 1999, with the fifth ratification. The remaining chapters in this book consider various aspects of the LRC from more of a recognition viewpoint, or at least in an education policy perspective.

This chapter aims to bridge these two perspectives by considering how the broader political and policy context has impacted on the initiation, adoption, implementation and governance of the LRC since its entry into force. A retrospective view – back to the 1990s – is included here because it sheds light on developments that led to the adoption of the LRC. It is followed by a consideration of the evolving policy and political context after the LRC came into force. While a description of key political developments is required to make our consideration of the importance and role of the LRC complete, the purpose of this chapter is to assess their impact on recognition rather than provide a detailed account and broader assessment.

The assessments of these developments and the opinions expressed are those of the authors of this chapter and do not necessarily reflect those of the other authors and editors of this book nor of CIMEA as publisher.

Europe in the 1990s

Like so many policy initiatives as well as persons, the Lisbon Recognition Convention is a child of its age. Looking back now, three decades after work on the convention was launched,[43] we may remind ourselves how different the context of the 1990s was from the mid-2020s.

The political changes symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall started in earnest in the 1980s with the Solidarność (Solidarity) labor movement in Poland and the regime's ultimately unsuccessful attempts to suppress it by violence. The border between the two Germanies was opened in the evening of 9 November 1989,[44] and in 1989–90 the independence movement in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania gathered

[43] *As outlined in Chapter 1: The Road to Lisbon, the proposal for a joint Council of Europe/UNESCO recognition convention for Europe was made and accepted in late 1992. The feasibility study for a new convention was submitted in 1994.*
[44] *See https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/deutsche-einheit/die-mauer-ist-offen--403858#:~:text=November%201989%20%2D%20Auf%20dem%20Weg,Grenz%C3%BCbergang%20Bornholmer%20Stra%C3%9Fe%20%C3%BCberqueren%20k%C3%B6nnen, accessed 15 March 2025.*

speed and force. Shortly after USSR President Gorbachev dispatched troops to Latvia and Lithuania in a misguided attempt to reimpose Soviet rule in January 1991, many countries followed Iceland in recognizing the independence of all three countries. The regimes in Central and Eastern European countries formerly allied with the Soviet Union started falling in 1989. The change of regimes was partly peaceful, but sometimes bloody, with the fall of the Ceauşescu regime in Romania in December 1989 as the most dramatic. In East Germany (DDR), the Communist regime was ousted in fall 1989 and a year later, on 3 October 1990, Germany was reunified.

The resulting feelings of hope were not confined to the eastern part of our continent. In western Europe, the 1992 Maastricht Treaty provided a new foundation for European integration by establishing the European Union.[45] The EU at that time still had only 12 Member States, but the Maastricht Treaty laid the ground for rapid expansion. Austria, Finland, and Sweden joined the EU in 1995, and in 2004, ten new countries joined: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Bulgaria and Romania then joined in 2007 and Croatia in 2013,[46] so that the EU then had 28 members until the United Kingdom withdrew, effective as of the end of January 2020 (Brexit).

The political developments in Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s were reflected in vastly increased opportunities for truly European cooperation, including in education and higher education. With an impeccable sense of timing, the European Commission had launched the ERASMUS program in 1987 to "promote closer cooperation between universities and higher education institutions across Europe".[47] ERASMUS is the acronym for the European Community Action Scheme for Mobility of University Students,[48] but the fact that the acronym is also the name of a European Renaissance philosopher is hardly a coincidence. What became the most successful exchange program ever was followed by several smaller scale initiatives, such as the Austrian-led CEEPUS[49] and the Nordplus program, launched in 1988–89 for the Nordic countries and expanded in 2008 to include the Baltic countries.[50] CEEPUS opened academic exchange and cooperation between countries in Central Europe that had previously been on opposite sides of closed borders, and some of which had engaged in armed conflict as Yugoslavia fell apart.

Higher education institutions also sought new partners across what had until recently been a divided continent. One of us (Sjur Bergan) played a role in establishing the University of Oslo's cooperation program with Central and Eastern Europe, focusing in particular on the Baltic countries, in 1989–90. From there, he moved to the Council of Europe, which was at the threshold of an expansion unparalleled in any other part of its history. The European Cultural Convention (Council of Europe 1954), which is the legal framework for the Council's program in education and culture, served as the entry point for the many new countries that joined the Council of Europe during the 1990s. Many of these countries were already members of the United Nations, and the countries that became independent in the course of the

[45] *https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/maastricht-treaty/#:~:text=The%20Maastricht%20Treaty%20established%20the,profound%20impact%20on%20European%20integration, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[46] *https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-enlargement_en, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[47] *https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/about-erasmus/history-funding-and-future#:~:text=The%20%E2%80%9CErasmus%E2%80%9D%20programme%20was%20originally,higher%20education%20institutions%20across%20Europe, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[48] *The acronym remains even if the program now encompasses much more than university education.*
[49] *Central European Exchange Program for University Studies, https://www.ceepus.info/, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[50] *https://www.viaa.gov.lv/en/about-nordplus?utm_source=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F, accessed 15 March 2025.*

1990s acceded to UN membership fairly quickly. Although there is no automatic link between UN and UNESCO membership, they became members of UNESCO at equal speed. One of us (Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić) joined UNESCO in 1990, after serving as Secretary-General of the Association of Universities of Yugoslavia. At that time, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) differed from other Central and Eastern European countries.[51] SFRY had a particular status in the broader European cooperation, notably with the European Economic Community (EEC) since it had established formal relations in 1967. Yugoslavia signed several consecutive trade and economic agreements of cooperation with the EEC, the most significant one being in 1980, ratified by all the 12 EEC members in 1983 which included increasing cooperation at ministerial level. Yugoslavia was included in 1990 in the PHARE program, aimed at helping Eastern European countries, but this cooperation ceased in 1991 due to the serious political crisis in the country (European Parliament 1998, Uvalić 2010).[52]

In higher education, the Association of Universities of Yugoslavia was a member of the Standing Conference of Rectors, Presidents and Vice Chancellors of the European Universities (*Conférence permanente des Recteurs, Présidents et Vice-Chanceliers des Universités européennes* – CRE), one of the predecessors of the European University Association (EUA). According to one of the authors (Uvalić-Trumbić 1990), a general trend toward a multi-party democracy and active integration into European processes became dominant in all fields in Yugoslavia, including higher education. Adopting European standards in higher education became one of the priorities in the strategic orientations of higher education.

University autonomy was high on the agenda of leading universities in Yugoslavia. The universities of Beograd, Ljubljana, and Zagreb adopted different documents at institutional level to promote university autonomy. The *Magna Charta Universitatum*[53] was a particular highlight in these trends and gained momentum when the rectors of all 19 Yugoslav universities attended the conference in 1988 in Bologna and signed the document. Yugoslavia's future already seemed unclear[54] at that time, but "the Europe of 1992" seemed a beacon of hope also for the people in this region. Programs such as TEMPUS[55] gave hope for opening up the EEC to Central and Eastern Europe (*ibid.*).

The cooperation between UNESCO and the Council of Europe in developing a joint legal instrument, the first of this kind between these two organizations, was also part of the hope generated by the significance and strength of the European integration process. Despite internal opposition to this cooperation in some parts of UNESCO, but helped by the fact that both intergovernmental organizations were led by European academics,[56] the 1992 initiative moved forward. UNESCO's European Centre for Higher Education (*Centre européen pour l'enseignement supérieur* – CEPES), was put in charge of these activities with one of us (Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić) as the project manager.

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[51] *SFRY was one of the founders of the Non-aligned movement in 1961, and among the founders of the IMF and World Bank. After 1961 it participated in some activities of the OECD and in 1966 became a member of GATT.*

[52] *Originally launched in 1989–90 as the "Poland and Hungary: Aid for Restructuring of the Economies", hence the acronym, the PHARE program became the most important "pre-accession instrument" financed by the EU to support the applicant countries in Central and Eastern Europe to prepare to join the EU. It focused on technical assistance in several policy areas, including education and higher education.*

[53] *See https://www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta-universitatum, accessed 7 December 2024.*

[54] *Deliberations to decide if Yugoslavia had a future as a (con)federation of its constituent states continued.*

[55] *See https://cordis.europa.eu/article/id/31-transeuropean-mobility-for-university-studies-tempus, accessed 15 March 2025.*

[56] *Catherine Lalumière from France as Secretary General of the Council of Europe and Federico Mayor from Spain as Director-General of UNESCO.*

Even if the 1990s were a decade of hope in Europe, there were also clouds on the horizon. In particular, Yugoslavia's efforts to move toward a federation or confederation of more democratic states were shattered with the coming to power of the Milošević regime. The country was torn apart in a series of armed conflicts that did not in all cases lead to democracy, and the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo (Rohan 2018) were especially bloody. In particular, the Milošević regime in Serbia made any meaningful cooperation with the rest of Europe impossible, and the Council of Europe could not have contacts with representatives of the regime. There were, however, contacts with Serbian civil society. In the late 1990s, these were in particular with the Alternative Academic Education Network[57] (Turajlić, Babić, and Milutinović 2001), which originated in the protests by a core of academic staff against the repressive higher education law introduced by the regime in 1997, but there were contacts also before then. The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, of which Serbia was the leading constituent, was therefore not invited to the diplomatic conference adopting the LRC, and Serbia could accede to it only in 2001, when the country had had its own transition and there was hope that democracy would take root.

High politics was present also at the diplomatic conference itself. The country now known as North Macedonia, but which at the time was referred to as "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" in international contexts, was present at the diplomatic conference and signed the convention there. However, it signed separately and with only one of the two sponsoring organizations, since this organization accepted a signature submitted in the name of the Republic of Macedonia, which was the name of the country in its own constitution.

The European Higher Education Area: a new framework for cooperation

In June 1999, the Ministers responsible for higher education in 29 European countries met in Bologna, where they adopted the Bologna Declaration (Bologna Process 1999). The Ministers declared their aim to establish a "European area of higher education" – "in the short term, and in any case within the first decade of the third millennium" (*ibid.*: 3). It was clear that this goal could not be reached merely through Ministerial meetings, even if these were held at two year intervals. Those signatory Ministers who were EU members organized what became the Bologna Process in September 1999,[58] and what became the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) adopted a work program[59] in November 1999.

The mobility of students, graduates, and staff as well as the recognition of qualifications – an important precondition for mobility – were on the agenda of the Bologna Process from the very beginning (Lourtie 2001: i),[60] and the LRC was mentioned explicitly in the predecessor to the Bologna Declaration, the Sorbonne Declaration adopted by the Ministers for Higher Education of France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom in 1998 (Bologna Process 1998: 2).

[57] *See https://www.cep.edu.rs/history, accessed 15 March 2025. See also the Serbian version at https://www.cep.edu.rs/istorijat, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[58] *See https://www.ehea.info/page-ministerial-conference-bologna-1999, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[59] *See https://www.ehea.info/cid100283/work-plan-1999-2001.html, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[60] *Pedro Lourtie, then the Director General for Higher Education in the Portuguese Ministry of Education, was the President of the diplomatic conference that adopted the LRC.*

The Bologna Process, which led to the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)[61] in 2010, provided a framework for higher education that Europe had not previously seen (Bologna Process 2010). The Bologna Process in effect became "the only game in town" for the development of higher education policy, which was agreed at European level and implemented – with varying degrees of commitment and success[62] – within the education systems of its member States. Most European countries expressed a desire to join the Bologna Process, which importantly changed its membership criteria in 2003 from affiliation with specified EU programs to ratification of the European Cultural Convention, combined with a declaration by new member States of "their willingness to pursue and implement the objectives of the Bologna Process in their own systems of higher education" (Bologna Process 2003: 8). In 2001, still under the original membership criteria, the Bologna Process had 33 members,[63] in 2003 it had 40, and in 2005 45, before reaching 49 in 2020.

What was a unique framework for higher education cooperation in Europe gave rise to concern among some of the countries that had ratified or signed the LRC and that were not potential EHEA members, notably Australia, Canada, Israel, New Zealand, and the United States. Both authors have memories of remarks to this effect by representatives of these countries at several meetings of the ENIC Network. Their frustration was real, but it was somewhat mitigated by the fact that Yves Beaudin (Canada) and E. Stephen Hunt (US) were among the most active and influential members of the ENIC network, of which they both served as presidents. Both countries were influential in the LRCC – the US in an observer role – in spite of the fact Canada acceded to the LRC only in 2018, not least thanks to the consistent efforts of Yves Beaudin, and that the US is unlikely to accede to the Convention in the foreseeable future. The LRC does, however, point to the very real challenges of the vast majority of, but not all, States Parties to a convention cooperating closely also within a different framework, in this case the EHEA.

Recognition: From specialist pursuit to the core of higher education policy

The ERASMUS program was not the first organized mobility scheme – the Fulbright Program comes to mind as a contender for that title, while the Europe Community had its scheme for Short Study Visits and Joint Study Programmes as precursor to ERASMUS – but it changed the equation. Not only did it eventually entail a massive increase in the number of mobile students.[64] It was multilateral, so that even if individual students went from their own country to a specific foreign country, the cumulative effect of the program was to stimulate mobility throughout Europe, or at least the parts of Europe included in the EU program. It also aimed at relatively short-term mobility, so that students would go abroad for a period of between three months and a year and then return to their home institutions to complete their degree. This was only possible if their studies at the foreign institutions could be adequately recognized. The same was true for the much smaller-scale programs, such as CEEPUS, EUCOR,[65] and NORDPLUS,[66] that were designed to stimulate mobility within regions of Europe.

[61] *See https://www.ehea.info/index.php, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[62] *For an overview of successive implementation and stocktaking reports, see https://www.ehea.info/page-implementation, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[63] *Those doing the math on the basis of the 29 original members and the 3 countries acceding in 2001 are often confused by the case of Liechtenstein, which was present at the Bologna ministerial meeting but was for some unknown reason not invited to sign the Bologna Declaration; however, it was quietly considered to have acceded before the Praha meeting in 2001.*
[64] *By 2021, more than 13 million students had benefitted from the program https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/about-erasmus/history-funding-and-future, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[65] *https://www.eucor-uni.org/fr/, accessed 15 March 2025.*

This increase in the number of mobile students as well as the emphasis on short-term mobility meant that the recognition of qualifications took on a new political importance. Recognition had of course always been important to the students concerned but now it became an important instrument to achieve the key political goal of increased academic mobility. In its turn, this goal aimed not only at increasing mobility among partners that had traditionally exchanged students but also as a means of developing ties with countries with which academic exchange had been either impossible or very limited for political reasons. Mobility became an important part of European cooperation, in the true sense of the term. The success of confidence building measures, which was one of the functions of academic mobility, depended in part on fair recognition of the qualifications of those who were academically mobile.

The national information centers on the recognition of qualifications and the networks of these centers became important instruments in furthering fair recognition – even if that term may not have been used much before it was introduced in the LRC. When the two authors participated in their first network meeting together, in spring 1991, there were still three networks in the European region: the NARIC[67] Network of the EU, the NEIC Network[68] of the Council of Europe, and the NIB[69] Network of UNESCO. The justification for having three different networks, besides their roots in different international organizations, was their different membership. The members of the NARIC network represented EU members or countries affiliated with relevant EU programs, those of the NEIC represented parties to the European Cultural Convention, and those of the NIB represented members of the UNESCO Europe Region.[70] There were changes, however, illustrated by the NEIC Network, where the representatives of Norway and Portugal had been used to sitting side by side, but in the 1991 meeting we just referred to, Poland was – by the logic of the alphabet – placed between them. The number of members of the NEIC Network would soon grow as more and more countries ratified the Cultural Convention.[71]

The difference between the NEIC and NIB Networks therefore diminished. After all three networks had held a joint meeting in Lisbon in spring 1992, the Council of Europe and UNESCO started to explore the possibility of merging the NEIC and NIB Networks. This was done in 1994, and the NEIC and NIB gave way to the ENIC Network. It certainly helped that the Council of Europe and UNESCO are both classic intergovernmental organizations, so that the differences in the legal frameworks of the two sponsors was not an insurmountable obstacle. On the other hand, the NARIC Network was maintained as a separate entity, both because the EU has a different legal framework and because of its different membership. Put simplistically, all NARICs are also ENICs, but all ENICs are not NARICs. However, the objectives and the membership of the two networks are sufficiently similar for them to cooperate very closely, including a joint annual Network meeting, joint meetings of the ENIC Bureau and the NARIC Advisory Board, and a joint website.[72]

[66] *https://www.nordplusonline.org/, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[67] *National Academic Recognition Information Centres.*
[68] *Network of European Information Centres.*
[69] *National Information Bureaus.*
[70] *The NIBs also included Australia because it had ratified the 1979 UNESCO Europe Region Convention.*
[71] *The overview of signatures and ratifications also indicates the date of accession for each country: https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=signatures-by-treaty&treatynum=018, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[72] *See https://www.enic-naric.net/, accessed 15 March 2025.*

Thus, at the end of this process, the decreasing distinction between the ENIC and NIB networks led to them being merged into a single network (ENIC), the two remaining networks ENIC and NARIC held joint meetings, and these joint meetings entailed a dynamic that led to the ENIC and NARIC networks largely operating as a single network even if in legal and organizational terms they remained distinct.

Merging the previously separate Council of Europe and UNESCO networks was important in its own right, but this positive experience also spurred work on a joint recognition convention between the two organizations. We were convinced we had a practical framework that could function in such a joint project. This was encouraging because the need for a revised legal basis was also obvious. Counterfactual history is always a perilous exercise, but we are convinced that had the merger of the two networks been unsuccessful, the work that led to the Lisbon Recognition Convention would not have been undertaken. The members of the new ENIC Network were in fact the driving forces at national level for ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and many represented their governments at the first LRCC meeting in 1999 in Vilnius.

In parallel to developing a legal treaty, the participation of many new information centers in a single network provided an opportunity to try to develop a joint culture of recognition but this was also a challenging undertaking. It coincided with important developments in attitudes to recognition in many western European countries. At this point, we recall the shift of perspective from a focus on structures and procedures, in shorthand often described as 'comparing years of study', to a focus on learning outcomes. This was a difficult shift of perspective in all countries, but particularly in countries that had traditionally had a highly formal approach to education and/or a narrow conception of what could be considered higher education. The challenges can be illustrated by the statement by one of the Ministers at the EHEA ministerial conference in Bergen in 2005, when there was discussion of whether short cycle qualifications should be included in the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA. This minister, who shall remain unnamed but who was from an EU member State, maintained categorically that "nothing short of three years can be higher education",[73] without explaining how, at the stroke of three, "nothing" became "something".

The quest to develop a common recognition culture largely concentrated on exploring the difficult but essential concept of 'substantial difference', which was the topic of workshops and discussions at a series of ENIC-NARIC meetings and resulted in a publication (Hunt and Bergan 2009). Substantial differences are described in detail in §2.1 of Chapter 2 Key Concepts in the LRC, but it is worth underlining here that, even if there are differences in the extent to which professional credentials evaluators are willing to shift focus toward learning outcomes, these do not stem from national legislation only but also from different ideas and practices. Even within a country, these may differ. Credentials evaluators from the same country may also have different approaches.

While many of the most active participants in the ENIC Network came from northwestern Europe and North America, others also played important roles. Tibor Gyula Nagy, a Hungarian with a profound knowledge of Russia, was the first President of the ENIC Network, Birutė Mockienė of Lithuania was the first President of the LRCC, and Andrejs Rauhvargers made Rīga something of an unofficial "recognition

[73] *Personal recollection, Sjur Bergan.*

capital" of Europe. Overall, the Baltic contribution was very important, and the first President of the LRCC from a country without a Baltic shoreline was elected only in 2019.

Recognition as part of the structural reforms of higher education

By 2000, the European Region had a new legal framework for the recognition of qualifications, and it also had a network of national information centers to further promote implementation of the legal framework throughout the whole region. Both developments were important but the ultimate goal was and remains that fair recognition, as stipulated in the LRC, become a reality throughout the EHEA and, more broadly, the European Region.

Around this time, two other related policy areas emerged that also took center stage in higher education policy debates, not least within the EHEA: quality assurance and qualifications frameworks.

Quality assurance was of course not an entirely new concept, but the need for it was far from universally accepted. Regional accreditation bodies had been working for a long time in the United States, but elsewhere quality assurance (of which accreditation is a specific form) was much less developed. This was perhaps in part because it was felt unnecessary to quality assure education that was either wholly or largely based on public funding, on the reasoning that public funding would not be provided for less than good higher education. One of the authors (Sjur Bergan) recalls that within the Council of Europe, the first discussion of quality assurance focused on the need to assess the quality of private higher education. It is worth recalling that when the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) was established in 1991, it had only eight members. Today it has some 300 member agencies.[74]

The fact that the development and implementation of quality assurance was in an early phase in the 1990s is the main explanation for the wording of Article VIII of the LRC. Article VIII.1 stipulates that each Party shall provide adequate information to enable others to assess the quality. Article VIII.1 refers to more general information, not specifically to QA information. All countries need to be able to provide information on the institutions and programs they consider part of their education systems. If they cannot provide this information, it is questionable whether they have a functioning education system. However, far from all potential States Parties had a functioning quality assurance system, and some questioned the need for one. Therefore, Article VIII.1 distinguishes between States Parties that have a formal quality assurance system and those that do not:

> Each Party shall provide adequate information on any institution belonging to its higher education system, and on any programme operated by these institutions, with a view to enabling the competent authorities of other Parties to ascertain whether the quality of the qualifications issued by these institutions justifies recognition in the Party in which recognition is sought. Such information shall take the following form:

[74] *https://inqaahe.org/, accessed 15 March 2025.*

a. in the case of Parties having established a system of formal assessment of higher education institutions and programmes: information on the methods and results of this assessment, and of the standards of quality specific to each type of higher education institution granting, and to programmes leading to, higher education qualifications;
b. in the case of Parties which have not established a system of formal assessment of higher education institutions and programmes: information on the recognition of the various qualifications obtained at any higher education institution, or within any higher education programme, belonging to their higher education systems.

Within five years of the adoption of the LRC, the discussion in the European Region was no longer about whether formal quality assurance was needed but about what kind of quality assurance Europe should have. This discussion led to the adoption of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) by the EHEA Ministerial Conference in 2005[75] as well as the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register for higher education (EQAR) in 2008.[76] It would now be very difficult for any State party to the LRC to fulfill their obligations under Article VIII without referring to the outcomes of their quality assurance process, and this is a major reason why the LRC has not been revised – let alone that the review of an existing convention is extremely challenging. The much more recent UNESCO convention for Asia and the Pacific (the Tokyo Convention), which was adopted in 2011, does make specific reference to quality assurance (UNESCO 2011: Article VIII.1), as does the 2019 UNESCO Global Convention (UNESCO 2019a: Articles II.7, III.4, VIII.2, VIII.5).

As described in Chapter 4 New Developments in Recognition, qualifications frameworks were virtually unknown, or at least not part of the policy debate, in the European Region when the LRC was developed and adopted.[77] The pioneers in this area were Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, for quite different reasons. For Australia and New Zealand, the background was the need to provide the many foreign students these two countries hosted with an easily understandable way of describing their qualifications to facilitate recognition when they moved back to their home countries or on to third countries for further study or work. In South Africa, on the other hand, the national qualifications framework was a response to the need to provide recognition for the real qualifications (in the sense of competences achieved) held by many of those who had had limited opportunities to enroll in advanced formal education during the *apartheid* regime and therefore could not document their qualifications.

In Europe, the notion of qualifications frameworks was brought into the EHEA above all by Denmark, Ireland, and the Netherlands, through Bologna conferences organized in 2002 and 2003. As outlined in Chapter 4 New Developments, §4.1 Qualifications Frameworks, the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA (QF-EHEA) was adopted in 2005, and Ministers committed to adopting their own national frameworks compatible with the overarching framework. In 2008, the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) was adopted by the European Union, and the higher education part of the EQF is compatible with the QF-EHEA. Although the EQF was designed to be compatible with the QF-EHEA from the start, we should mention here the work done in the

[75] *The ESG were revised in 2015 (Bologna Process 2015a) and will be revised again by 2026 (Bologna Process 2024b: 3).*
[76] *https://www.eqar.eu/about/close-up/#history, accessed December 5, 2024.*
[77] *In the UNESCO framework, the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), covering the globe, has existed since the 1970s and has been revised several times since then: https://isced.uis.unesco.org/about/, accessed 15 March 2025.*

CALOHEE Project (Measuring and Comparing Achievements of Learning Outcomes in Higher Education in Europe) to clarify how the two can be seen in conjunction (Wagenaar 2024a).

Qualifications frameworks facilitate recognition, and the LRCC adopted a recommendation on their use for recognition purposes (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2013). The blending of recognition, quality assurance, and qualifications frameworks into an overall policy framework places the LRC within a broader framework of structural reforms that has been one of the hallmarks of the EHEA from its very beginning. This convergence was manifested through a single working group on structural reforms in the 2012–15 work period (Bologna Process 2015c)[78] as well as by the fact that the commitments to structural reforms undertaken by EHEA member States are now overseen by a Bologna Implementation Coordination Group, which coordinates peer learning activities on recognition, qualifications frameworks, and quality assurance.[79]

This convergence of different aspects of structural reforms underlines the important role that recognition of qualifications plays in the development of higher education policies that further international mobility and hence better understanding between peoples and cultures.

Political developments over at least the past decade or so have, however, provided a much more challenging environment for higher education within the European Region as well as globally.

The LRC in times of international conflict

From the early to mid-2010s onward, the world has been living through a very different international context than that of the 1990s, when the LRC was developed and adopted. At that time there was a relative absence of tension between the countries of the European region, and academic mobility was an important shared policy goal of most of these countries.

In the 25 years since the LRC entered into force, the situation has changed considerably, and in our view for the worse. In many European countries as well as in the United States, there are now prominent political forces that thrive on xenophobia and that have the reduction or even the abolition of migration of all kinds as one of their primary objectives. Populism, often of the right and sometimes of the left, emphasizes national prerogatives and is skeptical about the role and benefits of academic knowledge and understanding (Müller 2017). What the Council of Europe has come to call “a backlash against democracy” (Council of Europe 2021: 137–8) is detrimental both to higher education and to the notion that international experiences and cooperation are beneficial to individuals and societies. Some governments levy high fees on foreign students and seem to see academic mobility more as an income generator than an important factor in building international understanding. Within the EHEA, this changed climate has resulted in the fundamental values of higher education coming under increasing pressure. The fundamental values can no longer be taken for granted but must be defined, defended, and promoted (Bergan and Matei 2024).

[78] *One of us (Sjur Bergan) co-chaired this group and was the main author of its final report.*
[79] *See https://www.ehea.info/page-Bologna-Implementation-Coordination-Group, accessed 15 March 2025.*

The climate of 2024 is therefore far less propitious than that of 1997 or 1999 to the kind of mobility that makes the fair recognition of foreign qualifications important. This changed international climate is also shown by the fact that armed conflicts between states – including between Parties to the LRC or between a Party to the LRC and other countries and territories – have increased since the Convention was adopted. The LRC was adopted at a time when the countries of former Yugoslavia had gone through a time of war, and the role of Serbia, [80] in particular, led to the country not being invited to the diplomatic conference in Lisbon that adopted the Convention in April 1997. Nevertheless, the political climate in the European region in the late 1990s and early 2000s was largely favorable to international cooperation, and it is worth recalling that the European Union underwent a very significant enlargement from 2004 onward, notwithstanding the later withdrawal of the United Kingdom.

In 2025, Europe is much more torn by conflict. Russia invaded parts of Ukraine in 2014, after having invaded parts of Georgia in 2008. It has occupied and/or installed puppet regimes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia and in the Crimea (Krym), Donetsk and Luhansk, in Ukraine. Less than ten years later, on 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full scale invasion of Ukraine, which met strong resistance from Ukraine and led to significant non-combatant assistance for Ukraine from the European Union, the United States, and several other countries in Europe and beyond. At the time of writing, the war is still ongoing.

While the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been given particular salience in the press, it is important to keep in mind that it is, alas, not the only example of aggression by States Parties to the LRC against other States Parties. We cannot provide a complete overview of such cases, but we also cannot fail to point to some further examples to illustrate the challenges the LRC and its parties face in seeking to further rules-based international cooperation. One is an example of aggression by one State Party against citizens who identify with another State Party, one concerns an armed conflict involving a State Party and other parties, and one concerns an example of armed conflict combined with disputes concerning the declaration of independence by one of the parties to the conflict, which again has consequences for this party's relationship to the LRC.

In fall 2023, Azerbaijan ethnically cleansed Nagorno Karabakh[81] of its Armenian population, expelling some 100 000 inhabitants based on their ethnicity (Freedom House 2024, see also Moreno Ocampo 2023) and hence also deprived this population of its right to education on the territory it considered its home. This ethnic cleansing has been condemned by the European Parliament,[82] as has the unlawful detention and trial by Azerbaijan of Armenian leaders from Nagorno-Karabakh in the wake of the ethnic cleansing.[83]

Some States Parties to the LRC are or have been engaged in armed conflict with states or territories that are not parties to the LRC. The most recent example is that of Israel. While the Hamas attack

[80] *At the time it was still named the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; thereafter it was the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro from 2003 until its dissolution when Montenegro declared its independence in 2006. Serbia was, however, its dominant constituent part.*
[81] *Known as Artsakh to the Armenian population.*
[82] *See https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230929IPR06132/nagorno-karabakh-meps-demand-review-of-eu-relations-with-aerbaijan, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[83] *See https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-10-2025-0182_EN.html, accessed 15 March 2025.*

on Israel on 7 October 2023 was near universally condemned and labeled a terrorist attack, Israel's military retaliation in both Gaza and Lebanon is widely considered disproportionate, at least among most Parties to the LRC, and the International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants for the Prime Minister and the former Minister of Defense of Israel for crimes against humanity and war crimes.[84] In a recent report, Amnesty International (2024) has characterized Israel's actions as genocide against Palestinians, a characterization which Israel strongly contests.[85] The impacts on higher education in neighboring Lebanon (Cochrane 2024a) and Gaza (Naidu 2024) are severe, just as the armed conflict impacts on universities in Israel (Cochrane 2024b).

Recognition may also depend on considerations of the legal status of the territory in which institutions are located or the *de facto* education system to which they belong. Kosovo's independence from Serbia,[86] following a bloody war, has been recognized by close to 100 countries[87] but is challenged by Serbia and several other countries, some of which are concerned about similar movements in regions of their own countries. Kosovo has therefore thus far not become a member of the Council of Europe or UNESCO. Kosovo is further considered a "potential candidate for EU accession".[88] It is not a party to the European Cultural Convention or the LRC, even if Kosovo is a member of several international institutions. These include the International Monetary Fund[89] and the World Bank[90] as well as two entities under the Council of Europe: the Venice Commission[91] and the Council of Europe Development Bank.[92] There is a recognition center in Kosovo,[93] but it is not a member of the ENIC Network.[94] In the case of Kosovo, the impetus for independence – and hence a change of borders – came from within the territory in view of the crimes committed by the Milošević regime[95] rather than from aggression by an outside party.

| Concluding remarks

It may be argued that during the long period of conflict between the East and the West generally referred to as the Cold War, during which cooperation between the two blocs was severely limited, the recognition of qualifications was an area in which there was in fact a measure of cooperation, which intensified toward the end of the 1980s. While the regimes of the Warsaw Pact to varying extents oppressed their own citizens and even intervened against other members of the pact in an attempt to change the regime and prevent political liberalization on at least two occasions,[96] there were no attempts at changing international borders. Today, at least democratic countries are less prone to

[84] *https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-state-palestine-icc-pre-trial-chamber-i-rejects-state-israels-challenges, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[85] *https://www.jewishnews.co.uk/israel-rejects-deplorable-amnesty-gaza-genocide-report/, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[86] *For an overview, see Rohan (2018).*
[87] *https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-that-recognize-kosovo, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[88] *See https://www.eeas.europa.eu/kosovo/eu-and-kosovo_en?s=321, accessed 8 December 2024.*
[89] *See https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/KOS, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[90] *See https://www.worldbank.org/en/about/leadership/members, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[91] *See https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/pages/?p=01_presentation#:~:text=The%20Commission%20has%2061%20member,%2C%20Tunisia%20and%20the%20USA), accessed 15 March 2025.*
[92] *See https://coebank.org/en/about/member-countries/, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[93] *See https://naric.rks-gov.net/?lang=en, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[94] *See https://www.enic-naric.net/page-countries-of-the-networks, accessed 29 November 2024.*
[95] *See https://www.icty.org/en/content/slobodan-milo%C5%A1evi%C4%87-trial-prosecutions-case, accessed 29 November 2024.*
[96] *Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.*

accept "bloc thinking" or to consider severe violations of human rights as the internal affairs of a regime or group of regimes than they were several decades ago.

The developments described above – (a) the backlash against democracy, particularly characteristic of, but not limited to, right-wing populism, and (b) armed aggression by (and in some cases between) EHEA member countries and/or States Parties to the LRC – have serious consequences. Within the EHEA, the fundamental values of higher education can no longer be taken for granted. The 2018 Bologna Implementation Report (EACEA, Eurydice 2018: 41–42) identified issues in Hungary, Russia, and Turkey but there are also concerns about the situation in other EHEA members, and the Bologna Follow Up Group has overseen the development of statements outlining a common understanding of the fundamental values of higher education and a system for monitoring the implementation of these (Bergan and Matei 2024).

While this is not the place to explore the different conflicts further, as noted above they are conflicts either between countries that are all Parties to the LRC or in which one State Party to the LRC is involved,[97] whereas the LRC aims, through the fair recognition of qualifications, to promote international cooperation and exchange. The obvious contradiction between the purposes of the LRC and the behavior of some of its Parties raises serious questions. In particular, the unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine led to strong reactions within the structures of higher education cooperation. Many European countries suspended all academic and most other cooperation with Russia, and in April 2022 the Bologna Follow Up Group decided to suspend both Russia and Belarus, which supports and contributes to the war on Ukraine, from the EHEA work program and governing bodies (Bologna Process 2022: 6–7). This suspension was maintained by EHEA Ministers meeting in Tirana in May 2024 (Bologna Process 2024a: 2).

At the ordinary meeting of the LRCC held at Council of Europe headquarters in Strasbourg in November 2022, several Parties asked that the participation of Russia and Belarus in the LRCC be put on the agenda. The LRCC President, in accordance with Rule 3.4 of the Rules of Procedure, decided to call an extraordinary session of the Committee. This extraordinary meeting, on 28 February 2023, adopted a decision by which the LRCC:

- condemned the Russian Federation's unprovoked and unjustified aggression against Ukraine and the involvement of Belarus in this war, which grossly violates international law and the UN Charter;
- expressed its deepest concern about the flagrant jeopardizing of the right to education by the aggression of the Russian Federation;
- confirmed its full support to Ukraine and expressed its solidarity with the Ukrainian people, higher education institutions, scholars, researchers, students and holders of Ukrainian degrees;

[97] *Currently, the fact that Kosovo is not a Party to the LRC has mostly to do with continuing discussions around its status and recognition, but the roots are to be found in the armed conflict in 1999.*

- decided that no candidates from the Russian Federation or Belarus would be elected as a Bureau member, Chair or Vice-Chair, or a chair of any group of experts or working group, and that no representative of the Russian Federation or Belarus would be entrusted with any task of rapporteur or coordinator, or tasked with representing the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee in any circumstances;

- advised the Council of Europe and UNESCO secretariats of the restriction of the participation of Russian Federation and Belarus representatives in Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee meetings;

- invited all the Parties to give further consideration to the steps that the Committee could take to restrict the participation of the Russian Federation and Belarus and representatives in the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee meetings and in any activities and structures related to the Lisbon Recognition Convention.[98]

These measures are directed against the participation of Russia and Belarus in the governance of the Convention. At no point was there discussion of suspending or excluding the two countries from the LRCC. On the one hand, this would have been challenging in legal terms, as the LRC has no exclusion clause. On the other hand, the measures were directed against the public authorities of Russia and Belarus and not against the holders of qualifications from these two countries.

While the decision by the LRCC makes it clear that representatives of Russia and Belarus will hold no office or functions within the LRCC, it does not suspend their participation in the Convention Committee. In this sense, the LRCC decision is less far reaching than that of the Bologna Follow Up Group, and the authors find it difficult to explain this difference. There were, of course, different opinions among the States Parties on the appropriate reaction, but these countries are largely the same as those represented in the BFUG. UNESCO, as a global organization, is reluctant to take measures against individual Member States.
UNESCO's main mission is to "contribute to peace and security by promoting international cooperation in education, sciences, culture, communication and information",[99] whereas the Council of Europe is dedicated to furthering democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Nevertheless, solid majorities in the UN General Assembly had condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Council of Europe[100] had been among the leaders in developing and obtaining a majority for the BFUG decision and had taken swift action by excluding Russia from the organization in March 2022, less than a month after the launch of the invasion.[101] The Council of Europe has, however, been more ambivalent with regard to Russia's status as a partner to Council of Europe conventions, even if Russia and Belarus, which are both parties to the European Cultural Convention, are no longer invited to participate in the meetings of its Education Committee and other education activities.

[98] *For the full text of the decision, see https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/declaration-adopted-by-the-lisbon-recognition-convention-committee-on-the-participation-of-the-russian-federation-and-belarus, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[99] *See https://www.unesco.org/en/brief, accessed 15 March 2025.*
[100] *At the time represented by one of the authors, Sjur Bergan.*
[101] *See https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/the-russian-federation-is-excluded-from-the-council-of-europe, accessed 15 March 2025.*

It is worth recalling that the LRC is intended to help individual holders of qualifications and states unequivocally that these have a right to fair recognition (Bergan 2024b). As Article II stipulates, recognition cannot be made conditional on the applicant's political or other opinions.

Article III.1.2 reads:

> No discrimination shall be made in this respect on any ground such as the applicant's gender, race, colour, disability, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status, or on the grounds of any other circumstance not related to the merits of the qualification for which recognition is sought. In order to assure this right, each Party undertakes to make appropriate arrangements for the assessment of an application for recognition of qualifications solely on the basis of the knowledge and skills achieved.

At the same time, the LRC is a treaty between States, and as such it is affected by broader international developments.

The international climate of the first half of the 2020s is different from that of the 1990s. One of the challenges facing the LRCC, as well as the Council of Europe and UNESCO as the organizations providing its Secretariat, will be to ensure the right to recognition of individuals while taking necessary measures against States Parties that dramatically violate democracy, human rights, and the rule of law and that attack the territorial integrity of other entities. Individuals who have earned their qualifications in the aggressor states have a clear right to have these recognized. It is, in the view of the authors of this chapter, far less obvious that the aggressor states have a rightful place in the bodies governing the LRC.

UNIVERSITAS QUADERNI

N. 01
September 2025

CHAPTER 4

New Developments in Recognition

Kees Kouwenaar

04

Introduction

As explained in 'A word from the editors', part of the effort to examine the past in order to assess the present and future focuses on new challenges and developments, most of which were not on the agenda when the LRC was developed. These include:

1. qualifications frameworks as a tool for recognition,
2. automatic recognition,
3. micro-credentials,
4. digital technologies,
5. learning outcomes.

The selection of these five topics was based on a series of discussions in the wider group of experts with whom the initiative for this publication was discussed. Each of these topics seemed to qualify as 'new' in terms of having seen significant development after the adoption of the LRC in 1997, having significant impact on higher education and international mobility of students and graduates, and having real or potential impact on the legal of conceptual framework of recognition and/or recognition practice.

Some of the sections below lead to conclusions or recommendations which it seemed relevant to include in the Word from the Editors.

4.1. Qualifications Frameworks as a Tool for Recognition

Sjur Bergan and Erwin Malfroy

Background and development

Qualifications frameworks were first developed in South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand in the 1990s, and for quite different reasons. In South Africa, they were primarily seen as an instrument to help non-White South Africans get recognition for qualifications earned outside the formal education system during the apartheid period. In Australia and New Zealand, qualifications frameworks were seen mainly as an instrument helping foreign students at universities in these two countries to have their qualifications recognized more easily when they returned home or moved on to third countries. In other words, qualifications frameworks were intended to help make higher education in Australia and New Zealand more attractive to foreigners, whose tuition fees constituted – and still constitute – a significant source of revenue for the higher education sector of these two countries.

At the time the Lisbon Recognition Convention was developed, the concept of qualifications frameworks was not widely known in Europe, and the Convention therefore contains no reference to them. It was not until the early 2000s that the development of qualifications frameworks became a "Bologna issue" through two well-attended thematic conferences (Bergan 2003, 2005), an extensive report (Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation 2005), and the adoption of the overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) by Ministers in 2005 (Bologna Process 2005a, b). The QF-EHEA had been preceded and influenced by the development of the Dublin Descriptors.[102] Ministers originally committed to developing national qualifications frameworks compatible with the QF-EHEA

[102] *https://beleidswiki.fhict.nl/doku.php?id=en:beleid:dublin_descriptoren, accessed 19 February 2025.*

by 2010 (Bologna Process 2007: para 2.8); this was later revised to 2012 (Bologna Process 2009: para. 12). The development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks is one of the areas covered by the implementation reports issued prior to every Ministerial conference of the EHEA.[103] The QF-EHEA originally consisted of qualifications at three levels,[104] with "intermediate" qualifications included – as a possibility rather than an obligation – "within national contexts" (Bologna Process 2005a: 2). The reason for this intricate formulation was that the position of short cycle qualifications was controversial, and it was generally considered as a qualification within the first cycle. As more countries developed such qualifications, the short cycle increasingly came to be considered as a qualification in its own right. In 2018, the EHEA Ministers decided to make it "a stand-alone qualification within the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA" (Bologna Process 2018: 2).

Around the time the QF-EHEA was adopted, the European Commission started developing the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF or EQF-LLL).[105] The EQF was adopted in 2008, and, as its name indicates, it covers all parts of the education system, whereas the QF-EHEA covers higher education only. It may be worth noting that the EQF was adopted as a "translation tool" and not rooted in a European Directive, as the Commission has limited competence in education matters, which fall under the authority of its Member States. This implies that the QF-EHEA overlaps with the highest levels of the EQF,[106] and for some time there was concern that the EQF would be developed in a different direction than the QF-EHEA. However, this was avoided, and the two overarching frameworks in Europe are compatible even if they are not identical.

By way of example, the European Council Recommendation on automatic mutual recognition refers to both of the European-level overarching qualifications frameworks:

a) national qualifications frameworks or systems are referenced to the European Qualifications Framework, with the referencing reviewed and updated when relevant, and self-certified to the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area;

b) higher education systems are organised in line with Bologna Process structures and principles, comprising a three-cycle framework and, where applicable to the Member State, a short cycle as defined in the qualification framework of the European Higher Education Area (Council of the European Union 2018: 3).

While not a qualifications framework in the proper sense of the term, it could be mentioned that UNESCO's ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) was introduced in 1970 with the aim of increasing the international comparability of education. It is presented as "a comprehensive framework for organising education programmes and qualification by applying uniform and

[103] *For an overview of implementation reports since 2005, see https://www.ehea.info/page-implementation, accessed 19 February 2025.*
[104] *Commonly but not officially referred to as bachelor's, master's and doctoral level; the official terminology, to avoid terms linked to specific national frameworks, is first, second, and third degrees.*
[105] *https://europa.eu/europass/en/europass-digital-tools/european-qualifications-framework#:~:text=The%20EU%20developed%20the%20European,to%20understand%20and%20more%20comparable, accessed 19 February 2025.*
[106] *Levels 6 (first degrees), 7 (second degrees), and 8 (third degrees); EQF level 5 corresponds to short cycle qualifications in the QF-EHEA but includes qualifications at the same level from non-higher education sectors.*

internationally agreed definitions to facilitate comparisons of education systems across countries".[107] ISCED was updated in 2011, and in the current classification a Short Cycle degree = level 5, bachelor = 6, master = 7 and doctor = 8.

At national level, it may be of interest to point to the experience of Belgium. In 1988–89, Belgium became a federal state and the three communities (Flemish, French, and German speaking) became entirely autonomous regarding education, with the exception of the mandatory compulsory education period and the minimum conditions for awarding a qualification. Hence, primary education is 6 years in all three communities, secondary education is 6 years, and (at that time) university education was at least 4 years. It was also stipulated that (for instance) for medicine, the study program should be of 7 years' duration (that law has changed, and it is now 6 years). The goal was indeed that these qualifications should be recognized automatically in Belgium. Because of the implementation of the three-tier-structure in the higher education systems in the communities, the federal laws had to be adapted: a (first cycle/bachelor) degree could now be awarded after three years of university education and not only after 4 years. Later it was changed again for the introduction of the Associate degrees (EQF level 5) as far as these belong to higher education.

Role in recognition

The overarching qualifications frameworks (QF-EHEA and EQF) represent the parameters within which national qualifications frameworks are developed and to which they are linked. There is room for variation between national frameworks, but there are also limits to this variation. Countries are in theory free to develop national frameworks in which, for example, a single higher education qualification would require eight years of study, but such a framework would be incompatible with either of the overarching frameworks and would do students and holders of qualifications no service, for many reasons.

Countries are, however, in charge of and responsible for their own qualifications frameworks. This also means that they need to convince foreign partners that their national qualifications framework is compatible with the QF-EHEA and the EQF. This is done through what is known as 'self-certification' against the former and as 'referencing' against the latter. The criteria for both are similar but not identical. Both processes give rise to a report,[108] which is the most important document in making the case for the compatibility of a given national framework against the overarching frameworks. The credibility of these reports is strengthened by the fact that at least two foreign experts are always included in the group that develops the report.

The national qualifications frameworks and the self-certification/referencing of those against the overarching frameworks are important to recognition because they provide ready answers to several of the questions that credentials evaluators will ask when faced with a foreign qualification (Bergan 2007). The qualifications frameworks will show at what level a given qualification is located, what the

[107] *https://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/international-standard-classification-education-isced, accessed 19 February 2025.*
[108] *The best overview of referencing reports is found at https://europa.eu/europass/en/eqf-referencing-reports, accessed 19 February 2025.*

workload normally required to obtain the qualification is (in Europe commonly expressed in terms of ECTS credits[109]), and that it has been issued by an institution that has been quality assured according to accepted standards. In Europe, this would be the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, commonly referred to as the ESG (Bologna Process 2015a). National qualifications frameworks are therefore also essential to automatic recognition (see below).

National qualifications frameworks include all (or at least most) qualifications in an education system[110] and are based on generic or transversal learning outcomes. They will therefore not provide easy answers to questions about the profile of a qualification or subject-specific learning outcomes.[111] National qualifications frameworks therefore facilitate what we may call "system level recognition" – often (over) simplified to "a bachelor's is a bachelor's". They may also facilitate, but are not by themselves sufficient for, recognition for a specific purpose, such as access to a study program or a specific job.

Their importance is underlined by the fact that the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee has adopted a recommendation on the use of qualifications frameworks in recognition (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2013). The Recommendation underlines "the use of qualifications frameworks as important information and transparency tools in the recognition of higher education qualifications and qualifications giving access to higher education" (para. II.1) as well as their role in facilitating the recognition of prior learning (para. II.2). It underlines that "qualifications frameworks should be used to make it easier for competent recognition authorities to assess foreign qualifications" (para. III.2) and outlines a set of principles that should ensure "the effective use of qualifications frameworks in recognition practice" and relate these to the level, learning outcomes, quality, and workload of a qualification (para III.4).

In sum, then, national qualifications frameworks, especially when they are referenced against the overarching European frameworks, greatly facilitate, but are no substitute for, recognition. Therefore, they are also important instruments in furthering the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and it is not a coincidence that the book marking the 15th anniversary of the LRC includes a chapter on qualifications frameworks as a recognition tool (Bergan 2014).

[109] *Developed by the European Commission as the European Credit Transfer System, it is now the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. See: https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system#:~:text=The%20European%20Credit%20Transfer%20and%20Accumulation%20System%20(ECTS)%20is%20a,and%20study%20periods%20abroad%20recognised, accessed 19 February 2025.*

[110] *Some national frameworks do not include highly specialized qualifications almost uniquely focused on a segment of the national labor market with little scope for international mobility.*

[111] *The distinction between generic and subject-specific learning outcomes was the focus of the TUNING project (González and Wagenaar 2003, 2005). Generic learning outcomes are those that any higher education graduate at a given level (e.g. first degree) can be expected to have achieved, e.g. analytical ability or presentation skills. Subject-specific competences relate to a specific discipline or area of study, e.g. chemistry or history.*

4.2. Automatic recognition

Chiara Finocchietti and Luca Lantero

| Background and context

What is automatic recognition? Why does this concept find a place in a book on the history of an international convention that does not even encompass this term as such? This subchapter tries to answer these questions, analysing the theory and practice of this concept and its link with the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

| From equivalence to "fair recognition"

The process of defining and drafting the LRC was the result of preparatory work and discussions among experts and policy makers in the 1990s. One of the milestones in building the vision underlying the LRC was in October 1994, when the Council of Europe organised a conference in Malta focusing on the project to draw up a new joint convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications in Europe. One of the aims was to replace the earlier conventions which had become obsolete on account of developments in higher education in Europe and the new challenges linked to academic recognition. The conference concluded by recommending three key priorities:

1. recognition of qualifications should be perceived as a cultural right;
2. the need to seek procedures to overcome recognition obstacles linked to diversity and diversification of higher education systems in Europe, while fully preserving the richness of this diversity and not abolishing or denying it;
3. improve the systems for collecting and disseminating information on higher education systems and recognition practices in order to achieve fair and accessible recognition (Kaufmann 1996).

One of the recommendations was also to shift the focus to the qualification itself, to look at the assessment of the "final product" rather than emphasize a quantitative approach.[112]

The Malta conference asked which kind of recognition was the goal of a new convention. The options were two. One was 'absolute and automatic recognition', which completely removes all obstacles for mobile students, graduates and professionals. The other was 'fair and accessible recognition', which lowers existing obstacles to an acceptable and affordable level, while respecting existing differences between qualifications and their roots in the various countries of Europe (Kouwenaar 1996). The choice of the second hypothesis as preferable was advocated on the basis of six questions which dwelt on the limitations in quality assurance of education, the difficulty of establishing European standards with regard to recognition processes and the need to take into account the national differences by considering them as positive factors rather than limitations (*ibid.*: 15).

The proceedings of the Malta conference show the role of ENIC centres[113] in discussing which model of recognition should be preferred, and how this term is linked to the discussion and development of key concepts and principles of the LRC. Furthermore, the term "automatic" was perceived as too restrictive considering the variety of systems, qualifications, and features of each education system. Opting for an absolutely automatic recognition meant at that time conducting a huge effort to reduce all the obstacles reflecting the differences of systems, with the risk of disregarding the diversity of academic cultures considered an essential part of education in the European region. Choosing the concept of fair recognition and finding tools to develop it, was perceived instead as the way to balance the richness of the cultural and educational diversity in Europe with awareness of and respect for each system. Automatic recognition, as a perspective to be considered, lay in the foundation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and was part of the discussion on recognition already in 1994. In the following years automatic recognition came back into the discussion on recognition, in a context in which possible frictions with the diversity of systems were less or no longer perceived in that way. How that evolution was possible, and what were the tools and regulatory frameworks that supported this change or, better, which led to this change, form our next topic.

The Bologna Process

On 18 September 1988, on the occasion of the 900th anniversary of the University of Bologna, 388 rectors and heads of European universities signed the Magna Charta Universitatum, that "contains principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy as a guideline for good governance and self-understanding of European universities in the future".[114] In the Magna Charta Universitatum, the signatory universities agreed to encourage, as in the earliest years of their history, "mobility among teachers and students; furthermore, they consider a general policy of equivalent status, titles,

[112] *This perspective was matured in the recognition context. It contributed in some part to the cultural reflection and vision of the Bologna Process that began a few years later, with the idea of student-centred learning and of shifting the focus onto knowledge and skills acquired rather than on hours of teaching or contents as such.*
[113] *In the same year, the NEIC – the National Education Information Centers network of the Council of Europe – and the NIB – the National Information Bodies on recognition and mobility network of UNESCO – were merged in a single network called European Network of Information Centres, or ENIC; see Chapter 5.1 Governance.*
[114] *At https://www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta-universitatum, accessed 3 March 2025.*

examinations (without prejudice to national diplomas) and award of scholarships essential to the fulfilment of their mission in the conditions prevailing today" (Magna Charta Observatory 1988: 2).

In 1998 in Paris, the Ministers in charge of higher education of four countries – France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom – signed the Sorbonne Declaration (Bologna Process 1998) as a "Joint declaration on harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system". One of the central axes the document revolves around is the relationship between the idea of a comparable qualifications framework and its relevance for recognition and mobility:

> An open European area for higher learning carries a wealth of positive perspectives, of course respecting our diversities, but requires on the other hand continuous efforts to remove barriers and to develop a framework for teaching and learning, which would enhance mobility and an ever closer cooperation. The international recognition and attractive potential of our systems are directly related to their external and internal readabilities. A system in which two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate, should be recognised for international comparison and equivalence, seems to emerge (*ibid.*: 1)

The document, after outlining the common framework, described some steps already taken in this direction, and touched upon the role of the "The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region", the "Lisbon Recognition Convention", signed in 1997 in the Portuguese capital:

> A convention, recognising higher education qualifications in the academic field within Europe, was agreed on last year in Lisbon. The convention set a number of basic requirements and acknowledged that individual countries could engage in an even more constructive scheme. Standing by these conclusions, one can build on them and go further. (*ibid.*: 2)

In 1999 the Ministers in charge of higher education of 29 countries signed the Bologna Declaration. The overall goal of the Bologna Declaration, building on the principles laid down in the Magna Charta and in the Sorbonne Declaration, is set at the very beginning of the text:

> A Europe of Knowledge is now widely recognised as an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth and as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competences to face the challenges of the new millennium, together with an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space. The importance of education and educational co-operation in the development and strengthening of stable, peaceful and democratic societies is universally acknowledged as paramount, the more so in view of the situation in South East Europe. (Bologna Process 1999: 1)

The objectives, set as a way to serve and support this vision, were the basis of reforms in many countries that changed or referenced their qualifications to the three-cycle system of the Bologna Process[115] and of a progressive harmonisation of the higher education system.

[115] *First, two cycles in the Bologna Declaration, and later, the addition of the third cycle (doctorate) with the Bergen Communiqué in 2005 (Bologna Process 2005).*

The Bologna Declaration sets as the first objectives the "adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement" and the "adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate. Access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years. The degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification. The second cycle should lead to the master and/or doctorate degree as in many European countries" (*ibid*.: 3). Together with these, the declaration sets four more objectives, including the establishment of a system of credits – the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) – as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility; promotion of mobility for students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff; promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance, with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies; and promotion of the necessary European dimension in higher education.

In the following years, the term 'automatic recognition' is not present in any of the Ministerial Communiqués until 2012, when it is referred to for the first time in the Bucharest Communiqué. After more than 10 years of the Bologna Process and two years after the establishment of the EHEA, the Bucharest Communiqué makes clear the commitment to the long-term goal of automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees:

> We are determined to remove outstanding obstacles hindering effective and proper recognition and are willing to work together towards the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees, building on the tools of the Bologna framework, as a long-term goal of the EHEA. (Bologna Process 2012a: 4)

The Communiqué also recommends Ministers to "support the work of a pathfinder group of countries exploring ways to achieve the automatic academic recognition of comparable degrees" (*ibid*.: 5).

Looking to the document prepared for the Bucharest Ministerial Conference, and in particular to the document produced by the working group on recognition, there is mention of the concept of automatic recognition only in the context of the role of qualification frameworks. The working group on recognition says that "Qualification frameworks are transparency tools that will contribute to fair recognition but not imply automatic recognition" (Bologna Process 2012b: 27).

Also, the concept of automatic recognition is never referred to in the minutes of the joint ENIC-NARIC meetings in the same time frame, from 1999 to 2012. The first time it appears is in the minutes of the 2012 Meeting held in Toledo less than two months after the Ministerial Conference (Council of Europe, European Commission and UNESCO 2012). In the Toledo ENIC-NARIC Joint Meeting there was an update on challenges and perspectives of the latest developments within the Bologna Process, where the networks took note of the commitments on automatic recognition in the Bucharest Communiqué and asked to be involved in any subsequent follow-up actions on this topic. After the 2012 ENIC-NARIC meeting, automatic recognition became a recurrent topic, being addressed in almost all the following ENIC-NARIC joint meetings.

One of the very few explicit reference to automatic recognition in the run-up to the 2012 Ministerial conference is in the minutes of the extraordinary XXXI BFUG meeting in 2012, organised back-to-back

with the Ministerial Conference, where the European Commission asked for the insertion of a sentence on automatic recognition:

> The European Commission argued that the Bucharest Communiqué should be bolder in underlining the need to make progress on recognition and that the EU Commissioner would like to propose an amendment in which the ministers would commit to working together towards automatic recognition of academic qualifications as a long-term goal of the EHEA, while supporting a pathfinder group of countries which could explore how this could be achieved. A concrete amendment was submitted in writing to this effect. (Bologna Process 2012c: 1)

The Pathfinder Group, established at the end of 2012, facilitated by the European Commission, presented its final report in January 2015 in the context of the Yerevan Ministerial Conference. It defines the concept of automatic recognition: "Automatic recognition of a degree leads to the automatic right of an applicant holding a qualification of a certain level to be considered for entry to a programme of further study in the next level in any other EHEA-country (access)" (Bologna Process 2015d: 5). The group also recommends a number of smaller steps as a starting point to promote automatic recognition, among them proper implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (including respecting the time limit for assessment of qualifications), endorsement and use of the EAR manual, use of modern technologies, making use of the expertise within the ENIC-NARIC networks, supporting the quality assurance of recognition processes and relying on the results of quality assurance in line with the ESG.

From the Bucharest Communiqué (2012) onwards, automatic recognition is referred to in every Ministerial Communiqué, starting with the Yerevan Communiqué (2015), which takes note of the report of the Pathfinder Group and sets automatic recognition as a priority and a commitment of the EHEA to support mobility of individuals. In the Yerevan Communiqué, Ministers in charge of higher education commit "to ensure that qualifications from other EHEA countries are automatically recognized at the same level as relevant domestic qualifications" (Bologna Process 2015b: 5). The Paris Communiqué (2018) refers to automatic recognition "for the purpose of accessing further studies and the labour market" (Bologna Process 2018: 2). The Rome Communiqué (2020) addresses automatic recognition, referring to the establishment of quality assurance in line with the ESGs and of a fully operational qualifications framework, and in addition refers to digital developments: "We also encourage the application of agreed and secure systems of digital certification and communication such as blockchain, as well as the further development of the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) to facilitate automatic recognition" (Bologna Process 2020: 7). In the Tirana Communiqué (2024), Ministers commit to continuing to strive for automatic recognition and also welcome the reviewed version of the EAR Manual, and other tools developed by the ENIC-NARIC networks, and the use of quality assurance and transparency tools such as DEQAR (Bologna Process 2024a).

Following its inclusion in the Bucharest Communiqué, automatic recognition has been addressed since 2015 in the Bologna Implementation Report: the document that tracks the implementation of the key Bologna commitments and principles in the EHEA countries. According to the 2024 edition (EACEA Eurydice 2024), 19 countries practise automatic recognition for all EHEA countries, a slight increase compared with the 2020 edition (EACEA, Eurydice 2020). A further 16 systems[116] report that automatic

[116] *Some participating countries have more than one education system, typically countries with a federal or decentralised system such as Belgium and the United Kingdom. Where appropriate, 'systems' is therefore used instead of 'countries'.*

recognition applies to some EHEA countries (usually based on regional, bilateral or multilateral agreements on the mutual automatic recognition of qualifications). In 13 systems, there is no system-level automatic recognition because additional recognition procedures apply for recognition of higher education qualifications issued in all other EHEA countries.

The European Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad

Three and a half years after the Yerevan Ministerial Conference, in November 2018, the European Union adopted the "Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad" (EU 2018, hereinafter the "Council Recommendation").

The Council Recommendation, starting from the principle that "learning mobility fosters knowledge, skills, competences and experiences, including personal and social competences and cultural awareness, that are crucial for active participation in society and the labour market, as well as for promoting a European identity" (*ibid*.: 1), adds a few elements to the concept and practices to implement automatic recognition. It widens the scope of automatic recognition to upper secondary school qualifications and to outcomes of learning periods. The definition of "Automatic mutual recognition of a qualification" is

> the right for holders of a qualification of a certain level that has been issued by one Member State to be considered for entry to a higher education programme in the next level in any other Member State, without having to go through any separate recognition procedure. This shall not prejudice the right of a higher education institution or the competent authorities to set specific evaluation and admission criteria for a specific programme. It does not prejudice the right to check, if the qualification is authentic and, in case of an upper secondary education and training qualification, if it really gives access to higher education in the Member State of issuance or, in duly justified cases, if the granted qualification meets the requirements for accessing a specific higher education programme in the receiving Member State. (*ibid*.: Glossary)

This understanding clearly stipulates a difference between access and admission in the context of access to further learning. Automatic recognition is seen as the right of the holder of a qualification to be considered for entry to a higher education programme in the next level in another country without a separate recognition procedure, while higher education institutions are autonomous in setting and checking requirements for admission to a specific programme. In other words, the recommendation divides the concept of access, where the workload, the quality and the level of a qualification are automatically recognised at system/national level, from the concept of admission, i.e. the assessment of the profile and the learning outcomes of the specific qualification to determine whether the qualification fulfils the specific requirements and criteria for admission to a particular study programme.

Furthermore, the definition recalls the importance of checking the authenticity of qualifications (see Chapter 2 Key Concepts) for a further treatment of authenticity issues. The Recommendation also details the conditions that should exist for mutual automatic recognition: national qualifications frameworks referenced to the European Qualifications Framework, and self-certified against the EHEA

Qualifications Framework;[117] higher education systems organised in line with EHEA structures and principles, comprising a three-cycle framework; external quality assurance carried out by independent quality assurance agencies registered, or moving towards being registered, with the European Quality Assurance Register and which thus operate in line with both the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (Bologna Process 2015a) and the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (Bologna Process 2015e).

In other terms, the conditions for automatic recognition are that the value of qualifications should be described and 'certified' at national and international level through the qualifications framework as an instrument of transparency; that the higher education system is compatible with the systems of the other Member States of the EHEA; and that the quality of qualifications is reliable and trustworthy. The recommendation suggests that a step-by-step approach should be adopted, based on tools already existing in the higher education sector, while a complementary approach to Member States' initiatives is welcomed, for instance through regional agreements.

> Technology could be of help to systematise information and standardise other content where feasible. Digital access to information can reduce the duration of the evaluation. Moreover, blockchain technology ensures that data can be stored once and for all and can be easily and instantaneously shared with multiple parties. Technology can support the automation of verification procedures allowing further time saving and simplification. See also below in this chapter.

Another relevant element in the recommendation is the role played by National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARICs). The NARICs are seen as key actors in the implementation of automatic recognition, supporting higher education institutions by developing national guidelines for adopting and implementing transparency tools and providing expert support and training, as well as online tools to improve the efficiency, transparency, and consistency of recognition processes. The recommendation also encourages exploration of "the potential of new technologies, such as blockchain technology, to facilitate automatic mutual recognition" (EU 2018: 5). The use of technology is introduced to support and facilitate automatic mutual recognition.

After the Council recommendation, the commitment was taken forward in later communiqués, and the Rome Communiqué (Bologna Process 2020) also has clear reference to the use of technology like blockchain and of digital tools such as DEQAR.[118] Other relevant policy documents of the European Commission make reference to automatic recognition, such as the Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021–30), where automatic recognition is seen as key to making lifelong learning and mobility a reality for all (EU 2021).

[117] *The EQF uses the term "referencing", while the QF-EHEA uses "self-certification".*
[118] *Database of External Quality Assurance Results, run by EQAR. See https://www.eqar.eu/qa-results/search/, accessed 3 March 2025.*

In 2023, five years after the Council recommendation, the European Commission published a monitoring report on its implementation, taking stock of progress made but also of the challenges still ahead. The report documents developments that are relevant for qualifications, both in higher education and in upper secondary education, and describes elements to build an enabling ecosystem for recognition. Among these elements there is reference to the EQF, the enhanced role of NARIC centres, and the European digital tools for recognition, such as Europass, DEQAR and European Digital Credentials for Learning.[119] The report also provides some input for further effort in implementing automatic recognition: continued developing of trust among national education systems, including through the creation of a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System; development of tools for automatic recognition, such as provision of information on recognition via online platforms; and support of implementation by building capacity in Member States (European Commission 2023). Trust and transparency are two of the keywords of the "Council conclusions on further steps to make automatic mutual recognition in education and training a reality", which summarise the key points of consensus around automatic recognition, and invite the member states to take a number of actions, such as taking full advantage of Bologna and EU tools (such as ETCS, Diploma Supplement, ESG, DEQAR, Q-Entry database) and reinforcing the role of NARICs (EU 2023).

The work of the ENIC-NARIC centres

The ENIC-NARIC centres have in recent years played a central role in promoting, facilitating, explaining and providing training on automatic recognition. Among many activities and products, there are the tables of comparison between qualifications in the EHEA, that serve as practical tools to support automatic recognition. Two noteworthy examples are the EHEA qualifications table,[120] which covers all the EHEA countries and includes also EQF level 5/EHEA short cycle qualifications; and the Adriatic and Mediterranean table, which provides comparison information on 'Bologna' and 'pre-Bologna' qualifications[121] and was developed within the framework of two projects supporting informal networks aimed at fostering automatic recognition, namely Automatic Recognition in the Adriatic Recognition Network (AdReN) and Automatic Recognition in the Mediterranean Recognition Network (MAReN).

Another field of activities is knowledge sharing and training. As an example, the MAReN project developed a micro-credential course on automatic recognition for staff of higher education institutions, while many projects, such as ARAQUA, I-AR and SeARcH ENGINE,[122] provided public seminars on automatic recognition for credential evaluators and staff dealing with recognition in higher education institutions. ENIC-NARICs that offer training to national higher education institutions often include automatic recognition among the training topics. In the Italian case, a micro-credential course for credential evaluators has been offered since 2020 to Italian higher education institutions, including automatic recognition in each edition of the course.

ENIC-NARIC centres have also made available a number of publications to explain and highlight the building blocks of automatic recognition, its definition and the different models, such as *Automatic Recognition in Practice: Examples and tools from the project partner countries* (CIMEA 2022), *The*

[119] *https://europass.europa.eu/en/europass-digital-tools/european-digital-credentials-learning, accessed 3 March 2025.*
[120] *https://www.nuffic.nl/sites/default/files/2023-08/ehea-qualifications-table.pdf, accessed 19 February 2025.*
[121] *https://automaticrecognitionnetworks.info/table-of-comparison/, accessed 19 February 2025.*
[122] *https://msmt.gov.cz/areas-of-work/tertiary-education/project-search-engine-strengthening-educational-and?lang=2, accessed 19 February 2025.*

Triangle of Automatic Recognition (NUFFIC 2020b), and *Road to Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Access Qualifications* (Academic Information Centre (Latvia) 2024), to mention just a few.[123] In 2023, the second edition of the European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual contained a separate chapter on automatic recognition (EAR Project Consortium 2023), whereas the first edition (2012) contained no mention of automatic recognition. The ENIC-NARIC publications on automatic recognition have also codified the four main models for automatic recognition implementation (see NUFFIC 2018).

The model of bi-/multilateral agreements predates the Bucharest Communiqué, with some countries, especially neighbouring ones, taking the initiative to have a formal agreement to automatically recognize each other's qualifications. One example is the agreement between Italy and Austria, which dates back to the period immediately after the Second World War (see Lantero and Finocchietti 2023). One example of legal multilateral treaties is the Benelux-Baltic Agreement, which entered into force in 2024.[124] Other examples are the regional intergovernmental agreements on automatic recognition, such as "The Reykjavik Declaration", revised in 2022.[125]

The unilateral lists model applies where one country decides on the qualifications and countries qualifying for automatic recognition within its domain. Portugal is one example of this approach, with the decree law 341/2007 on automatic recognition of bachelor, master and doctoral degrees.[126]

The model of non-legal arrangements shows 'soft' agreements between countries on mutual recognition of qualifications. One example covers the Nordic and Baltic countries, which have developed an admission manual for their qualifications with the purpose of creating a transparency and recognition tool for admissions officers in their region;[127] another example covers countries in the Mediterranean and Adriatic region, in the framework of MAReN and AdReN newtorks. In both regions there is a table of comparisons between their qualifications.[128]

In the fourth model of *de facto* automatic recognition, some countries, regardless of whether formal agreements exist, already automatically accept bachelor and master qualifications from quality-assured comparable degrees in other EHEA countries.

Another publication which explores automatic recognition from the perspective of higher education institutions is *Automatic Recognition in Practice* (CIMEA 2022, cited above).

[123] *As well as the texts named in this paragraph, a bibliography of texts developed by ENIC-NARIC centres would include "Recommendations on automatic recognition of HE access qualifications in the ARAQUA countries" (2024): https://aic.lv/content/files/ARAQUA_recommendations_2024.pdf; "A short path to automatic recognition – 4 models" (NUFFIC 2018); and "Achieving a common understanding of automatic recognition in the EHEA" (2020): www.nuffic.nl/sites/default/files/2021-12/Outcome%20report%20I_Comply%20PLA%202%20Kyiv%20FIN.pdf, all accessed 19 February 2025.*

[124] *https://benelux.int/files/1015/7374/7872/Declaration_signed_with_names__list_of_signatories.pdf, accessed 3 March 2025.*

[125] *www.norden.org/en/declaration/nordic-declaration-recognition-qualifications-concerning-higher-education-reykjavik, accessed 3 March 2025.*

[126] *https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/341-2007-641418, accessed 16 May 2025.*

[127] *https://norric.org/nordbalt/, accessed 3 March 2025.*

[128] *https://automaticrecognitionnetworks.info/compare/page-compare-nqf, accessed 3 March 2025.*

A significant part of ENIC-NARIC activities is related to databases: a consortium of ENIC-NARIC centres developed the Q-ENTRY database[129] on higher education entry qualifications, containing information on 116 final school-leaving qualifications giving access to higher education in 57 education systems.

Another support to automatic recognition is represented by the databases providing information on comparability of international qualifications with domestic ones, developed by a number of ENIC-NARIC centres, including NARIC Ireland Foreign Qualifications;[130] ARDI for Italy;[131] System Kwalifikator for Poland;[132] Qualifications Assessment Tool, for Sweden,[133] just to quote a few examples. Today automatic recognition is one of the key topics, with a specific webpage on the ENIC-NARIC website.[134]

| Automatic recognition and implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (2022)

As described above, automatic recognition was already being discussed during the drafting process of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and even before. For the timeframe 2020–22, the Bureau of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee (LRCC) decided to include automatic recognition as one of the topics in the mapping exercise that was conducted for the monitoring report on the implementation of the LRC, following the first monitoring report of 2016, in which automatic recognition was not included.

The chapter in the 2022 LRC implementation report dedicated to automatic recognition states that, while not mentioned in the LRC,

> A[utomatic] R[ecognition] adds to the concepts of fair recognition and the core principle of recognising foreign degrees unless substantial differences can be shown by the competent authority. Ideologically, it is related to the concept of acceptance of qualifications and reflects a further step away from earlier principles of nostrification and equivalence within recognition. (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2022: 37)

In total 53 replies were received, with 20 respondents stating that automatic recognition had been implemented by the competent recognition authority. The modalities of implementation vary from legal and non-legal bilateral and multilateral agreements, to *de facto* automatic recognition, national legislative acts/regulations, a legally binding unilateral list of degrees and/or a unilateral national document. In addition 12 respondents stated that automatic recognition had been implemented nationally, and 7 countries reported that automatic recognition had been implemented both nationally and by the relevant competent authority. Finally, 11 countries had not yet implemented any measures of automatic recognition.

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[129] *https://www.q-entry.eu/, accessed 3 March 2025.*
[130] *https://qsearch.qqi.ie/WebPart/Search?searchtype=recognitions, accessed 19 February 2025.*
[131] *https://ardi.cimea.it/en, accessed 19 February 2025.*
[132] *https://nawa.gov.pl/en/recognition/system-kwalifikator; accessed 19 February 2025.*
[133] *https://www.uhr.se/en/start/recognition-of-foreign-qualifications/qualifications-assessment-tool/, accessed 19 February 2025.*
[134] *https://www.enic-naric.net/page-automatic-recognition, accessed 19 February 2025. The webpage also contains information on different national approaches, such as automatic recognition nationally and unilaterally binding, e.g. Portugal, which issued a decree-law based on the decisions of its Commission for the recognition of foreign degrees and diplomas.*

While there is no data available from previous LRC monitoring as a basis for comparison, the 2022 Report uses the Bologna Implementation Reports as a reference, and concludes that "in recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of countries which have implemented AR [automatic recognition] measures" (*ibid*.: 40). The Monitoring Report also provides a set of recommendations: the first one says that "full and fair implementation of all the LRC principles is the fundamental basis for any automatic recognition procedure, therefore it is recommended that a new subsidiary text of the LRC on automatic recognition should be drafted" (*ibid*.: 41). The other recommendations invite countries that have already implemented automatic recognition to expand the scope to more EHEA member countries and States Parties to the LRC, of course inviting the countries that have not implemented it yet to take action in this regard, to make publicly available agreements on automatic recognition, to ensure implementation of automatic recognition at national level so that all higher education institutions are covered, and to provide clear and transparent information on the definition of automatic recognition. Emphasis is given to the role played by ENIC centres, which should disseminate clear and transparent information on the definition of automatic recognition. This relates especially to the fact that automatic recognition gives the right to apply for further studies ('access') and not the right to be admitted to a specific course, since decisions on admissions are related to the autonomy of the higher education institutions. The Council of Europe is currently doing substantial work to advance in this context with the establishment of an ad hoc working group on the development of a new legal instrument on automatic recognition. This work is ongoing at the time of writing (March 2025).

By way of conclusion

To summarise, what is the value of automatic recognition for citizens, or more specifically, for qualification holders? Automatic recognition, as described in the previous paragraph, is seen as system-level recognition for access to further studies. This does not imply automatic admission, which is decided by higher education institutions in their academic autonomy. In this way institutions can choose the candidates who have the more appropriate learning outcomes to succeed in the study programme of interest. The main benefit concerns the clarity and transparency of the value of a qualification, and more certainty and safeguards to ensure that this value is automatically 'accepted' also in other countries. Automatic recognition is also seen as a way to diminish or avoid undue bureaucratic procedures. While automatic recognition is framed in the context of academic recognition (though it does not guarantee access to regulated professions), it can of course have benefits also for the understanding of the value of a qualification more generally, e.g. for the labour market.

This is the case also for the LRC itself, which, while being targeted at academic recognition, defined recognition as "A formal acknowledgement by a competent authority of the value of a foreign educational qualification with a view to access to educational and/or employment activities" (Article I). In this sense, academic recognition could support a culture of recognition at large, supporting better understanding and acceptance of the value of qualifications also for employability and the labour market.

Having analysed the evolution of the concept of automatic recognition, the current practices and models, and the state of play regarding its implementation, it is possible to identify two sets of final considerations.

The first set of considerations revolves around what can be defined as 'necessary conditions' for implementation of automatic recognition. These conditions are the results of a common effort by European countries to build transparency among higher education systems and make structural reforms to build a 'Europe of knowledge', as defined in the Bologna Declaration (Bologna Process 1999), and which already have their roots in fundamental principles for Europe that were described first in 1988 in the Magna Charta Universitatum (Magna Charta Observatory 1988), signed by 388 heads of universities in Bologna eleven years before the Bologna Declaration was adopted.

Looking at the analysis of the policy documents in this chapter, it is possible to outline a few conditions for automatic recognition on which there seems to be converging consensus: the first is that the value of qualifications of an education system must be clearly analysed through a transparent process, defined according to internationally agreed standards, and publicly accessible. The methodology through which this is made visible is the existence of a qualifications framework in line with the three cycles of the Bologna Process, referenced to EQF and self-referenced to the EHEA qualifications framework.

The second condition is that Bologna tools and instruments need to be fully applied, ranging from ECTS and Diploma Supplement to the three-cycle degree structure (including also the short cycle according to the Paris Communiqué in 2018). All these tools are mechanisms for transparency and for supporting understanding of the value of qualifications and their correspondence with others, both at national and international level.

The third condition is related to the quality of educational institutions and qualifications, making their value reliable and trustworthy. In this sense they should be quality assured in line with the main reference in the EHEA which is the ESG, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (Bologna Process 2015a).

The fourth condition is that the Lisbon Recognition Convention is ratified[135] and implemented. Implementation of the principles of the LRC, alongside the existence of national information centres in line with its provision, has proved to be an essential condition to support transparency, information provision, knowledge sharing and common understanding about qualifications and their value, and about the rights of individuals with regard to recognition of qualifications.

While not being a condition *per se*, there are a number of transversal aspects that can support automatic recognition and that are quoted in different policy documents, such as digital tools and digitalisation of credentials to support information provision and verification of authenticity.

The second set of considerations refers to elements of continuity and discontinuity in the concept of automatic recognition according to the principles of the LRC.

The first element that can be seen in a logic of continuity is the concept of recognition as a right of the individual. The LRC says that "holders of qualifications issued in one of the Parties shall have adequate access, upon request to the appropriate body, to an assessment of these qualifications" (Art. III.1). In

[135] *This condition is fulfilled by all current EHEA members but it should apply also to any future members.*

Article VI Recognition of higher education qualifications, the Convention says that "each Party shall recognise the higher education qualifications conferred in another Party, unless a substantial difference can be shown between the qualification for which recognition is sought and the corresponding qualification in the Party in which recognition is sought" (Art. VI.1). In Article VI.2, the Convention further says that among the consequences of recognition there is "access to further higher education studies, including relevant examinations, and/or to preparations for the doctorate, on the same conditions as those applicable to holders of qualifications of the Party in which recognition is sought".

The definition of access in the LRC is the following: "The right of qualified candidates to apply and to be considered for admission to higher education" (Art. I). In other terms, the LRC states the concept of recognising foreign qualifications as having the same value as the domestic one for the purpose of accessing further studies unless a substantial difference can be shown. While the context in which the LRC was written more than 25 years ago was very different from today, it lays the foundations for recognising similar value, at least in terms of accessing further studies, in comparable qualifications. Automatic recognition is defined again in terms of a right, as also in the EU Council Recommendation referred to above: automatic recognition is a "right for holders of a qualification of a certain level that has been issued by one Member State to be considered for entry to a higher education programme in the next level in any other Member State, without having to go through any separate recognition procedure" (EU 2018: Glossary). This common element of recognition seen as a right of the person (and one part of the broader right to education) demonstrates an element of continuity with the LRC.

Another element of continuity is the importance of information provision and transparency, as key aspects of both fair and automatic recognition.

In 1994, as recalled at the beginning of this chapter, automatic recognition was seen as too restrictive and undermining the cultural diversity and the richness of different higher education systems. After 25 years, the Bologna Process, with its work in building bridges and facilitating mutual recognition between national higher education systems and qualifications, has changed the scene and provided further ground to make comparison of qualifications more 'automatic'. If this can be clearcut at national level, it can of course be more challenging at institutional level, where the concept of access and admission may be less clearly divided in the daily practice of assessing a qualification, where not only the level, the quality and workload are to be accepted, but also the profile and the learning outcomes (and the verification of authenticity) are part of the assessment process. The point of not having a separate recognition procedure is of course an element of discontinuity with the LRC.

Finally, another element of continuity is the overall objective of recognition of qualifications, yesterday as today. In the preamble of the LRC, with its clear-cut vision, there is reference to the right to education as a human right, and to the fact that higher education should play a vital role in promoting peace, mutual understanding and tolerance, and in creating mutual familiarity among peoples and nations. Furthermore, there is reference to the extraordinary cultural richness of Europe, and to the mobility of students as a way to access and fully benefit from this rich asset of diversity. In this sense the recognition of studies and qualifications is an important measure to support mobility, and fair recognition is seen as a responsibility of society and a key element of the right to education. In the preamble of the 2018 EU Council Recommendation, learning mobility is seen as way to foster skills that are crucial for active

participation in society and the labour market, as well as for promoting a European identity, and automatic recognition is a way to support learning mobility.

Looking at the past, in 1946 Karl Gruber and Alcide De Gasperi defined an agreement, within the Paris Treaty of Peace in 1946,[136] in which Austria and Italy vouched to find an agreement for the mutual recognition of the validity of certain degrees and university diplomas. This commitment was further solidified in the Cultural Agreement between the two countries adopted in 1952, in which both agree to reciprocally recognise academic qualifications and titles. This mechanism was in the line of 'programme' full automatic recognition, and in this sense is of course very different from the concept and practice of automatic recognition today (that is at system level, and not referring to a single programme). But this vision for 'automatic recognition', which was at that time a safeguard to protect minorities and an important element of peace and dialogue between two countries after the Second World War, is today mostly linked to mobility and to the establishment of a Europe of knowledge as an essential building block for European citizenship.

[136] *See https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2007/11/14/74a26b48-396d-449b-8aea-5e081f2833e1/publishable_en.pdf, accessed 3 March 2025.*

4.3. Micro-Credentials

Chiara Finocchietti, Kateryna Suprun, Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, Robert Wagenaar and Yurii Zuban[137]

Introduction

The increasing attention given to micro-credentials and their greater use as parts of both formal education and informal learning are two of the reasons for this separate subchapter. Although it can be argued that micro-credentials are closely related to other issues in this chapter (e.g. qualifications frameworks, learning outcomes, digital technologies), some of which are addressed by subsidiary texts of the LRC (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2013), the editorial team of this volume felt that micro-credentials needed to be explored separately.

After an overview of the European and international policy framework (authored by Chiara Finocchietti), the main section of the subchapter consists of two parts, introduced by Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić as coordinating author. The first part, authored by Robert Wagenaar, presents the concept of micro-credentials and examines its consequences for recognition. It reviews the international literature on micro-credentials, highlights major European approaches to the concept and offers the Tuning CALOHEE Qualifications Reference Framework[138] as the most forward looking one.

The second part, the case study on Ukraine, authored by Kateryna Suprun and Yurii Zuban, presents the uses and benefits of introducing micro-credentials, as forms of recognised non formal learning, in ensuring the continuity of education in cases of armed conflict, such as the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

[137] *The authors of the case study on Ukraine are grateful to Sergiy Artemenko (World Bank 'Ukraine Improving Higher Education for Results Project') for providing the survey data in support of this research.*
[138] *https://www.calohee.eu/tuning-initiative/, accessed 19 February 2025.*

The article concludes that micro-credentials should be recognised as equal to formal qualifications, provided that they meet the same transparency standards.

The European and international policy framework

Lifelong learning has been a recurrent topic in European policy documents in the past two decades. It is referred to in all the ten communiqués adopted by the Ministers in charge of higher education in the European Higher Education Area, including the 1999 Bologna Declaration and the 1998 Sorbonne Declaration (Bologna Process 1998, 1999). In the two latest communiqués, micro-credentials are identified as a way to support lifelong learning and to enable learners to develop or update their cultural, professional, and transversal skills and competences at various stages in their lives (Bologna Process 2020, 2024a).

In the European Union context, in the period 2019–24 micro-credentials are referred to in a significant number of policy documents regarding skills, education and digitalisation. The concept of micro-credentials is not new in itself. The idea of short learning provisions – aimed at promoting upskilling and reskilling, to support lifelong learning and employability – has been present in many countries of the European Higher Education Area for a number of years (Cîrlan and Loukkola 2020; Lantero *et al*. 2021).

To fulfil the mission that European public policy makers assign to micro-credentials, governments see the need for a common framework and understanding of micro-credentials (Bologna Process 2020; Brown *et al*. 2021; OECD 2021; Varadarajan *et al*. 2023). In the European context a significant push in this direction has come since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Micro-credentials have been seen as instruments to support upskilling and reskilling to help both the recovery from the pandemic and the green and digital transition, and also to bring people back to work, support the creation of new jobs and address specific skills gaps (European Commission 2020; Brown *et al*. 2021; Council of the European Union 2022b). For these reasons, in the period 2020–22 a number of policy initiatives were taken. These included establishing a micro-credentials higher education consultation group in the European Union context, which outlined the foundations of a European approach to micro-credentials, and provided background for the European Council Recommendation on micro-credentials and employability, and the Erasmus+ MICROBOL project, which defined a consensus on a common framework for micro-credentials in the EHEA (European Commission 2020; MICROBOL 2022).

The policy conversation on micro-credentials is not limited to the European context, with many countries and regions taking the initiative to support definitions and frameworks for micro-credentials. UNESCO too has worked to define micro-credentials and their role in education (UNESCO 2022a; Martin and van der Hijden 2023). The lifelong learning approach, aimed at serving the diverse education needs of youth and adults, is one of the six major challenges that need to be overcome in reinventing higher education (UNESCO 2022b). Short courses and micro-credentials are seen as a vital way to tackle the educational needs of adults at different stages of their personal and professional lives. Flexible learning pathways, recognition, mobility, and internationalisation are among the nine ways to navigate towards 2030 (UNESCO 2022b).

Introduction to the concept of micro-credentials

Lately, short standalone re- and upskilling courses, called 'micro-credentials', have obtained momentum. Is this a new development or old wine in new bottles? Both seem to be true. Although short training courses have existed for a very long time, the concept of lifelong learning, which has been discussed at both international and national levels since at least the start of the millennium, has resulted in a fundamental change of context in what higher education entails. Both the UN Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 4 Education, and the revolutionary developments and effects of information technology impact on what it means to be knowledgeable, skilled and, as a result, competent to operate successfully in society at large and over time. In effect, globalisation and chip technology have completely changed the way in which we deal with information, in particular due to the introduction of the smart phone, but also with learning. It has allowed for the introduction of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and initiated and accelerated 'micro-credentials'.

Until now, higher education has been perceived mainly as a process of coherent learning resulting in the award of macro-credentials. While 'macro-credentials' require several years of learning normally leading to a degree, diploma, certificate and/or licence, a micro-credential certifies a short-term higher education learning experience. Micro-credentials can have many target groups, ranging from regular students (e.g. electives) to short courses intended for lifelong learners/working professionals to update, broaden and/or deepen knowledge, skills and experience. They contribute to a fifty-year higher education curriculum, from 18 years of age to retirement or even beyond. Societal developments force us to rethink what higher education means. It does not finish with graduation but is expected in the future to be supplemented by 'maintenance'. That is keeping building a portfolio of higher education in the combination of one or more degrees supplemented by certified building blocks of learning over time.

In terms of context, we have to take into account that in the past decades, higher education has gradually moved from offering mainly fixed programmes towards more (individualised) flexible learning pathways, based on a major–minor–elective structure and/or windows for particular activities such as a work placement. During the same period, it has been highlighted that there is or might be a skills gap between what is learned in a formal context and the defined – changing – needs of employers. Studies show that there is a gradual shift from the importance of being 'knowledgeable' to being 'skilled'(OECD 2023). Of course, these two are intertwined in practice.

What makes micro-credentials a new development is that the corporate world is now accepting non-degree certificates for high-paying and top-level positions. However, US research (Council of Graduate Schools 2023) also shows these are not replacing degrees, at least not for the moment. MOOCs and micro-credentials seem to be completed mostly by people 30–44 years old who are well educated and employed. In other words, this type of credential is used and accepted in particular for career advancement, but is also related to workforce specialisation and the need of new skills (Burke 2019).[139] Therefore, it is in the interest of employers that micro-credentials meet transparent level indicators and are quality controlled.

[139] *See also the blog on Suitable: "What are micro-credentials and why are so many universities talking about them?" https://www.suitable.co/knowledge-center/blog/what-are-micro-credentials, accessed 20 February 2025.*

What distinguishes micro-credentials from traditional re- and upskilling courses – which are often informal – is that they have to meet a set of fixed criteria, which makes them formal learning. This has implications for recognition procedures according to the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC). An ENIC-NARIC policy paper, entitled *The Rise and Recognition of Micro-Credentials. Stacking modules and the future of the qualification* (NUFFIC 2022), makes a clear distinction between micro-credentials integrated in the Bologna Process and micro-credentials offered by non-formal providers. While for the first category the LRC applies, according to the authors, for the second category Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) practices are required.

In terms of quality assurance, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) has defined a substantial set of recommendations – based on the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) – for internal and external QA, which should be applied to micro-credentials (Greere 2023). This implies a comparable set of indicators for macro-credentials and micro-credentials. Already in the 1990s, during the development of the European Credit Transfer System (from 2004 the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System), it was stipulated that recognition did not imply a 'cafeteria model' in terms of recognition, because a degree programme is based on learning progression lines and the total is more than its individual components.

Micro-credentials have not changed that philosophy for degree programmes, but at the same time they have an undeniable value in themselves. Therefore, we distinguish two models: (1) short teaching and learning trajectories outside existing degree programmes, and (2) course units which are part of a degree programme or offered as electives or minors. Micro-credentials have three key features: (i) further development of subject-specific and/or generic competences expressed in well-articulated and measurable learning outcomes; (ii) workload duration, and (iii) assessment mode and assessment authority. These are all key to recognition.

Micro-credentials are offered by public, non-profit and for-profit entities and not only have a 'supply side' (VET/higher education institutions), but also a 'demand side' (the potential lifelong learner/employer). The identified need for the educational offer is therefore a shared responsibility of the user and the provider.

In recent years the topic of micro-credentials has been given serious attention, which has resulted in a lot of initiatives of (inter)national organisations, such as the EU, UNESCO and OECD, as well as quality assurance organisations and higher education institutions. Most of these initiatives focus on the educational concept, not so much on format, criteria, and features. As a result, there is far less clarity about the 'reliability of information' to define micro-credentials, that is the level, scope, and type of learning, although attention has been given to those aspects in the paper, *Characteristics Statement: Micro-credentials*, published in May 2022 (Quality Assurance Agency UK 2022). To a lesser extent, this has been addressed in a policy paper prepared by the Thematic Peer Groups of the Bologna Follow-Up Group, responsible for developing the European Higher Education Area, which covers a broad spectrum of items related to micro-credentials including quality assurance, the role of qualifications frameworks, workload, recognition and portability (Bologna Process 2024d; CIMEA 2024).

A publication which offers a robust framework for implementation is *Micro-Credentials in Higher Education*, prepared in the context of the academics-driven ERASMUS+ project "Measuring and

comparing achievements of learning outcomes in higher education in Europe of the International Tuning Academy" (Wagenaar 2024b). All these papers identify and describe crucial elements to allow for recognition of achieved learning. This raises the questions of whether recognition of micro-credentials in a national and/or international context is essentially different from the recognition of study periods; and whether recognition of periods/outcomes of lifelong learning in terms of micro-credentials is a specific contribution to the toolkit for recognition.

Definition of the micro-credential

To respond to these questions and related ones, it is highly relevant to make clear what a micro-credential actually involves. A wide range of definitions of micro-credentials as well as insights into the concept have been published and circulated. Highly relevant is the work undertaken by the EU, OECD, and UNESCO and the two Erasmus+ projects co-financed by the European Commission, called MICROBOL[140] and the European MOOC Consortium (EMC 2019).[141]

The European Commission established a higher education consultation group which published its final report in December 2020, entitled: *A European Approach to Micro-Credentials. Output of the Micro-credentials higher education consultation group: final report* (European Commission 2020). It resulted in a European Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability (Council of the European Union 2022b). It suggests a list of measures to be taken by EU Member States to implement the development of a micro-credential ecosystem.

The most comprehensive definition available of a micro-credential, and what it entails, is the one provided by the Tuning-CALOHEE projects, because it is generated on the basis of many of the definitions published previously, none of which is fully satisfactory, each one lacking some crucial elements.

> A micro-credential is a unit of learning, based on the principles of learner-centred and active learning, expressed in learner outcomes granted by a certified provider and owned by the learner. The learning outcomes are well articulated and offer a precise description of subject specific and generic competences (knowledge, skills and/or autonomy and responsibility) and discriminate between lower and higher levels of learning. They allow for measured learning against transparent and clearly defined criteria. The learning responds to identified societal, personal, cultural and/or labour market needs.
>
> The unit can be standalone, or combined with other micro-credentials into a larger unit, and/or be part of a qualification. In the European Education Area (EEA), a micro-credential has a volume of 3 to 10 ECTS credits, reflecting an estimated workload of 75 to 300 hours of structured and independent learning. Internationally agreed principles concerning quality assurance apply, which in the EHEA are the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) taking into account the appropriate qualifications reference frameworks. The learning achieved is certified in a printed certificate and/or digital badge, respecting formal legal criteria. (Wagenaar 2024b: 7)

[140] *https://microbol.microcredentials.eu/, accessed 19 February 2025.*
[141] *https://emc.eadtu.eu/, accessed 19 February 2025.*

This definition reflects the key instruments of the Bologna Process, which have global significance, that is: the ECTS Users' Guide 2015 (European Commission 2015), European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) 2015 (Bologna Process 2015a), the European and National Qualifications Frameworks (Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation 2005) and the Lisbon Recognition Convention (Council of Europe and UNESCO 1997a). The members of the EHEA agreed at the Tirana Bologna Ministerial Conference in May 2024 to update both the ECTS Users' Guide and the ESG (Bologna Process 2024a). It is expected that the updated documents will give more attention to micro-credentials.

Accepting this definition has consequences in terms of transparency, quality assurance and recognition. It implies that comparable rules apply for micro-credentials and for degrees, that as a result there is no substantial difference between them in credit mobility and recognition. It also means that micro-credentials meet the requirements for recognition in both national and international settings. This can be underpinned by the fact that the alliances created in response to the European University Initiative of the EU have been urged to develop and implement micro-credentials to offer a (further) boost to internationalisation and the development of international competences. As the definition indicates, the micro-credential can be standalone but at the same time should be stackable; that is, it should be able to form an integral part of a degree programme. The programme learning outcomes are the basis for recognition and full integration in the curriculum.

Implementation of the concept

As outlined in the introduction and definition, to make micro-credentials fit for purpose there needs to be transparency in learning outcomes, volume of learning and level of achievement, to allow for fair and possibly automatic recognition of the learning achieved by society in general and by higher education institutions in particular. The distinction is made for reasons of clarity and transparency, although one can make the argument that well-articulated learning outcome statements express level explicitly and workload implicitly. However, practice shows otherwise. Qualifications reference frameworks, both general and subject-specific ones, are of crucial importance to the expression of level. The suggestion here is to apply the ones published recently by the Tuning-CALOHEE projects.[142] These have been prepared by international groups of disciplinary experts and integrate the two European general qualifications frameworks while offering more detail and reflecting most recent societal developments. In other words, they are forward looking (see Wagenaar 2024a).

They make it possible not only to offer international standards for full degree programmes, but also to position micro-credentials effectively in the EHEA cycle system/EQF levels 5 to 8. This offers a response to the suggestion that micro-credentials be linked to cycles/ESG levels only. Due to the length of the cycles/ESG levels in learning time, this results in rather general and therefore weak indicators in terms of the level and mastery of learning. To illustrate this point for a regular bachelor programme of 180–240 ECTS credits, the learning of the first set of credits (or first academic year) is quite different from the last set of credits making up a degree (final year of a degree programme). Tuning-CALOHEE offers a useful addition to these formal level indicators by introducing the notion of 'direction of learning'. The 'direction level of mastery' is based on the EQF indicators and relates to the type of activities involved in the micro-credential: making the learner more knowledgeable, skilled and/or acting with authority,

[142] *https://www.calohee.eu/tuning-initiative/, accessed 19 February 2025.*

with the result representing levels of progression of learning. Although actual learning integrates these three elements, in practice the balance differs substantially.

In the Tuning-CALOHEE General Qualifications Reference Frameworks (GQRF) each of these components has its own verb: 'Demonstrate' (more knowledgeable), 'Evidence' (more skilled) and 'Manifest' (with authority) (Tuning-CALOHEE 2024). The components require their own (aligned) teaching, learning and assessment strategies. Educational experts have claimed that a micro-credential might cover all three elements of the 'direction' level. Given the limited size of a micro-credential this argument cannot be substantiated and does not do justice to the variety of aims and related learning outcomes of a micro-credential (Wagenaar 2024b).

This brings us to the volume of learning of a micro-credential, which is included in the definition. So far, there is no international agreement on a minimum or maximum volume. However, the logic of the role of a micro-credential offers clear indicators. The range of 3 to 10 ECTS-credits suggested, reflecting 75 to 300 working hours for structured and independent learning, is applied here to do justice to the term 'micro-credential'. The volume should be realistic – based on a robust calculation – and should allow for both acquisition of new knowledge and for deep learning, reflecting the learner-centred approach and active learning. Active learning requires time for self-studying to become knowledgeable and/or skilled and/or to act with authority in a particular topic. Units of 1 or 2 ECTS credits or less should be named nano-credentials and focus in practice on knowledge transfer and acquisition.

Recognition of micro-credentials

To allow for fair recognition according to the Lisbon Recognition Convention and to do justice to the definition, the information materials about micro-credentials should offer details of: (1) the aim(s) of the course unit; (2) the contents of the course unit; (3) the entrance level conditions, preferably expressed as learning 'incomes'; (4) the level of the course unit, expressed in terms of EQF level and 'direction' level; (5) transparent and measurable learning outcomes; (6) the volume of learning in terms of ECTS credits, and therefore the hours it is expected that a typical or average learner will invest; (7) the teaching and learning strategy and method(s) applied, as well as the assignment(s) involved and the informative or summative assessment model applied; (8) the status of the credentials rewarded.

To ensure full (automatic) recognition, the learning incomes (item 3) and learning outcomes (item 5) of the micro-credential according to the LRC should be aligned with the level statements or indicators of the appropriate qualifications reference frameworks, preferably the Tuning-CALOHEE ones because those are meant to update and detail the two European qualifications frameworks without challenging them.[143] Thus, alignment with the Tuning-CALOHEE frameworks automatically entails referencing against both QF-EHEA and EQF.

It is also advised – for reasons of clarity and transparency – to apply the UNESCO ISCED Fields of Education and Training 2013 (ISCED-F) in identifying academic fields and related micro-credentials (UNESCO 2013a). The European Commission has developed a model for documenting the information related to a micro-credential in the publication *A European Approach to Micro-credentials* (European Commission 2021a,b).

[143] *Tuning-CALOHEE Website https://www.calohee.eu/, accessed 17 May 2025.*

| Deployment of micro-credentials in emergency: case study on Ukraine

Micro-credentials are a widely discussed topic, mainly from the perspective of quality assurance and recognition as described above, but another aspect worthy of attention relates to their potential to ensure education continuity, particularly in cases where the latter comes under risk. This was the case following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As reported by the Ministry of Education of Science of Ukraine (MoES) during the emergency meeting of the MoES Sectoral Working Group 'Education and Science' on 15 March 2022,[144] half of all national higher education institutions resumed online learning and teaching, after a two-week standby period, as recommended by the MoES. The remaining universities either could not restart their operations, due to the Russian occupation or siege of the cities in which they are located, or decided to extend the standby period until further notice. By mid-April 2022, only a few higher education institutions from two regions remained in a forced pause, while the rest were providing services online or in blended mode.[145] The offline presence of higher education institutions started increasing again from the beginning of May 2022, when institutions in 12 regions started providing hybrid learning and teaching. In addition to the security situation, the fluctuations of which have obviously shaped the choice of education provision to date, teaching has also been severely impacted by energy challenges during winter.

All these factors have pushed Ukrainian higher education to give priority to digital transition and transformation, in the core functions of teaching, learning, and research and also in operations management. This was similar to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the ability of teachers, researchers and administrators to work has been decimated by the concern about their own safety, on a scale incomparable with the COVID-19 experience. This is why the MoES decided to look for alternative ways to keep the education process running.

Coincidentally, already some months prior to the full-scale Russian invasion, the MoES was working on a nationwide procedure to recognise the non-formal and informal education learning outcomes for the purposes of formal education. A by-law[146] was approved in early February 2022, grounded in good practices of the Erasmus+ QuaRSU project [147] on recognition of qualifications, and setting the legal framework for what would require regulation within just a few weeks. The by-law established the minimum requirements for the institutional recognition procedure for non-formal learning outcomes, for the application of a qualifications holder, and for the decision-making process within the higher education institution. While many Ukrainian universities were already familiar with the practice of recognition of non-formal learning prior to the approval of this regulation, the by-law steered the way towards recognition of non-formal learning outcomes by a wider range of higher education institutions, as it provided a standard procedure to follow. Another, even more significant impact of the by-law

[144] *https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cmo_M0MPzlou0GVQKNzdYZY_2I4kAhKK/view, accessed 19 February 2025.*
[145] *This claim is grounded in the national MoES official information note dated 16 April 2022, at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zMRhcZ36rkJTn16T51VQn8npLAxAKa1d/view?usp=sharing, accessed 19 February 2025. The two regions with halted education activities constituted part of the 24 regions of Ukraine and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, as recognised by international law. Prior to the Russian full-scale invasion to Ukraine on 24 February 2024, certain parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions were still controlled by the Government of Ukraine. The list of territories previously temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation in those regions can be found in the 2019 Decree of the President of Ukraine 'On the borders and list of districts, cities, towns and villages, parts of their territories temporarily occupied in Donetsk and Luhansk regions'. See https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/32/2019#top, accessed 19 February 2025.*
[146] *https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/z0328-22#Text, accessed 19 February 2025.*
[147] *https://erasmusplus.org.ua/en/projects/qualifications-recognition-support-for-ukrainian-universities/, accessed 16 May 2025.*

was that it allowed stackability[148] of non-formal learning outcomes up to 25 per cent of the total study programme pursued by a higher education student – thus providing the legal possibility to fulfil higher education study requirements through the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

As the ability of formal higher education providers to provide teaching in times of war was challenged and varied considerably, the MoES decided to extend its resource mobilisation strategy to a range of massive open online courses (MOOCs) – mainly Coursera, Udemy and edX – requesting and obtaining free-of-charge access to their micro-credentials for Ukrainian students and academic staff. In total, higher education institutions in Ukraine were granted access to about 16 000 micro-credentials.

Various metrics indicate that close to 400 higher education institutions and 60 000 students have since then benefitted from the provision free of charge of the micro-credential MOOCs as of June 2024, making the case for investigating the results of the recognition by-law implementation. From January to March 2024, the MoES carried out a survey[149] on the effectiveness of using MOOCs in the study process after February 2022 and the recognition of non-formal learning outcomes obtained through MOOCs integration to study programmes. The survey was completed by administrators and academic staff of 113 tertiary education institutions (c. 14% response rate) and 2 289 students (c. 5% response rate), representing 293 tertiary education institutions. To allow for a full analysis, the results were corroborated to account for tertiary education institutions which had the perspectives of all three surveyed stakeholder groups recorded – students, teachers and administrators – resulting in a sample of 19 tertiary education institutions.

The students reported that their institutions recognised a variety of micro-credentials offered by global (Coursera, edX, Udemy) and national (Prometheus) MOOC providers. As reported by the students, 83% of their completed online micro-credentials were recognised by their home institutions. This recognition trend differs substantially from the perspective of the academic staff who argued that, on average, 34% of the obtained micro-credentials were successfully recognised by their universities – which is still twice as high as the administrators' perception of 12% recognised micro-credentials. One plausible explanation for this variation lies in the sample bias, since those students who had had their learning outcomes recognised may have been more likely to respond to the survey than those whose application for recognition was refused. The discrepancy in awareness of recognition practices between academic and administrative staff can likely be attributed to the fact that in 60% of the cases recognition was reportedly undertaken directly by academic faculty, thus limiting involvement of administrators.

Another notable variable in recognition of non-formal practices is the unit of recognition. As reported by academic staff, the learning outcomes obtained through micro-credentials have been most often recognised at the level of individual course modules (60%). Only 7% of teaching respondents claimed to have recognised the MOOC learning outcomes equivalent to whole study courses, and 33% of them mentioned the practice of recognition on both the module and the course level. These trends correspond well to the students' experiences, as 56% of students reported recognition of individual course modules. This is followed by recognition of both study courses and modules (33%), once again leaving recognition of

[148] *As defined in Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022, stackability refers to "the possibility, where relevant, to combine different micro-credentials and build logically upon each other" (Council of the European Union 2022).*
[149] *The survey was sent out to higher education institutions and professional pre-higher education institutions, as the recognition by-law under discussion applies to both education levels.*

full-scale study courses to be a rare case found, with just 10%. While more conclusive evidence is required to validate these initial findings, they might well indicate the commitment to keep academic staff actively contributing to teaching also in those study courses that rely on MOOC-driven micro-credentials.

On average, all 19 tertiary education institutions started with recognition of non-formal learning outcomes in 2019, which may explain the high recognition rates as reported by students. The adoption of the by-law in 2022 has nevertheless impacted most sampled universities, as 16 institutions have had their regulations amended or updated in the months following.

The survey has provided some initial insights into implementation of the by-law on recognition of non-formal learning outcomes enabled through MOOC micro-credentials in times of crisis. Albeit hardly generalisable, the reported findings demonstrate that those higher education institutions that have been working with non-formal qualifications for many years have instituted good recognition practices. More comprehensive and qualitative inquiries are required to identify barriers to recognition of micro-credentials in Ukraine and solutions to overcome them. Further research avenues could include comparative analysis across countries, given the presence of similar cases of recognition of MOOCs as credit-bearing parts of degree programmes by higher education institutions in New Zealand (Parsons *et al*. 2023), the UK, Italy and the USA (Farrow *et al*. 2021).

In conclusion

This contribution is intended to offer insights into the learning concept of micro-credentials and its consequences for the procedures and tools developed for recognition of learning. These consequences seem to be rather limited for the time being. However, the documentation available shows there is a need to make them an integrated part of recognition, because micro-credentials can serve as a part of or an alternative to formal qualifications.

The use of micro-credentials reflects the notion that the perception of what higher education represents is gradually changing. As outlined, the higher education experience might not end with graduation but requires a continuous process in which the awarding of a qualification is only a first step in creating and enhancing a portfolio consisting of formal degrees and micro-credentials and possibly also informal and non-formal learning.

This contribution also includes a case study on Ukraine about the use of micro-credentials in situations of emergency. This study is an example of ensuring the continuity of education, in this instance in the context of Russian military aggression against Ukraine, when normal conditions of study were interrupted and non-formal learning, including recognition of micro-credentials, was the most plausible way to provide for higher education, comparable to the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This contribution suggests that in the context of the European Higher Education Area as well as the European Education Area and that of the LRC, micro-credentials should be handled by stakeholders in terms of recognition of qualifications and credit mobility equal to formal qualifications, regardless of the provider being a public, non-profit or for-profit entity. As a result they meet the same transparency standards, which implies that the existing toolbox for recognition is sufficient and only requires to be extended to explicitly include micro-credentials.

4.4. Digital Technologies in the Context of Recognition

Chiara Finocchietti and Serena Spitalierìi

| Introduction

This subchapter analyses the relationship between the recognition of qualifications and the deployment of the latest digital technologies, focusing on the key question of whether, and to what extent, digitalisation can support the fair recognition of qualifications in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. This question is examined by reviewing the key reference documents for the LRC, but also looking at implementation, with activities and projects carried out by the ENIC and NARIC networks. The remit is also broadened to include the European Higher Education Area, one of the main pillars of which is furthering recognition through implementation of the LRC. While keeping the focus on the European perspective, a helicopter view of dialogue at interregional and global level on the topic is also sketched. Finally, the chapter broadens to include perspectives on risks and opportunities of the use of Artificial Intelligence in the recognition of qualifications.

| Digitalisation: a recognition perspective

The term digitalisation is commonly defined as "the process of converting something to digital form".[150] Other dictionaries add what is meant by 'digital form' to the definition of digitalisation: "to change something such as a document to a digital form (= a form that can be stored and read by computers)".[151] From a recognition perspective, this definition applied in practice means digitalisation: (1) of the object of recognition, i.e. qualifications and credentials, with the data they contain; (2) of the recognition process itself.

[150] *https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/digitalization, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[151] *https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/digitalize, accessed 28 February 2025.*

Stated in a more technical way, digitalisation applies both to data that should be processed – qualifications, credentials – and to the student data needed for recognition. These can be in different forms of digital data maturity, ranging from the lowest level, such as a pdf, to the highest level of data that are structured according to an interoperable standard and that can be comparable (Nordic Council of Ministers 2020; NUFFIC 2020a). The recognition process can be disaggregated into the three main steps of: input (digital student data to be received for assessment), throughput (the process of managing and assessing data), and output (the statements following the recognition decision) (NUFFIC 2020a).

The Lisbon Recognition Convention reference documents

In the 1997 text of the LRC there is no reference to digitalisation as such, which was at the time not well developed, but there is strong emphasis on the need to have relevant, accurate and up-to-date information on qualifications, education systems, and recognition procedures.

According to the 2004 Joint ENIC-NARIC Charter of Activities and Services, ENIC-NARICs have among their tasks to improve the range of information tools for the national centres by development of suitable databases and information materials. Computer literacy and skills in using ICT are listed among the basic requirements for ENIC-NARIC staff. The section on the technical equipment that a centre is expected to have is all about digital tools: maintaining its e-mail connection, having access to the Internet, working with interactive databases, having access to publishing on the web, maintaining a database of previous evaluations carried out by the ENIC-NARIC centre (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2004b).

In the same year, the ENIC and NARIC networks adopted the “Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Information on Recognition”. Entirely dedicated to the role of individual ENICs, NARICs, and other networks providing information on higher education systems and qualifications, and on the recognition of foreign qualifications, the Code emphasizes that information should be provided by all appropriate means, including information technologies, in accordance with internationally accepted standards (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2004a).

The need for transparency, coherence and reliability of procedures and criteria for the assessment of foreign qualifications is reaffirmed in the Revised Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications in 2010. Without referring to digital solutions as such, the recommendation indicates that recognition authorities should publish standardised information on the procedures and criteria for the assessment of foreign qualifications concerning higher education, and this information should automatically be given to all applicants. Another indication for recognition authorities is “to draw up an inventory of typical recognition cases and/or a comparative overview of other education systems or qualifications in relation to that of their own country as an aid in making recognition decisions consistent” (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2010: IV.18) and consider making them available to applicants. Furthermore, there is reference to the need to use modern communication technologies to simplify and modernise the verification of authenticity of documents.

The role of digitalisation in supporting information provision is present in the first report on the “Monitoring the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention”, where part of the monitoring

exercise is devoted to understanding to what extent information on education systems, institutions and recognition procedures are available online. At that time, five countries that were part of the LRC were still lacking a national information centre website (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2016a). The importance of having information available online is also part of the 2019 report on the "Monitoring of the implementation of Article VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention" (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2019a).

Among the documents adopted by the ENIC-NARIC networks there is the "The ENIC-NARIC Networks' Quality Assurance System. Self-evaluation & peer review protocol" (ENIC and NARIC Networks 2024), which dates back to 2012 and was adopted in 2019. In this document digital tools are mentioned only once, with the same approach to digitalisation, seeing it mainly as a way to provide information to applicants (the question in the document asks if the centre has an online database for applicants).

The 2019 Guidelines

While the review of the above-mentioned documents gives the impression of an evolution in the approach to digitalisation for recognition (for instance with the reference to digital skills for ENIC-NARIC staff, or the potential of technologies to verify authenticity of qualifications), the overall focus remains very much on information provision. It is in 2019 with the "Guidelines for National Online Information Systems" (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2019b) that such an evolution in the approach encompasses the entire recognition process and workflow. The Guidelines, which also provide a historical overview of the work carried out in the field by the LRCC Bureau and the ENIC and NARIC networks, encourage the creation or improvement of information systems (such as websites) targeted at graduates and students with foreign qualifications, higher education institutions, employers, national recognition authorities, professional organisations, and other stakeholders .

The Guidelines provide "a set of common standards and principles by offering guidance for the type of information that should be included in national information systems to facilitate exchange of information and advice among countries, thus improving the quality of information". The idea of having common standards and principles in the sector is seen as a way to improve the quality of information. Secondly, the information should be accessible not only in terms of content, language and style, but also in terms of the technological platform. In section 4 of the document there is, for the first time ever in an LRC reference document, an indication that new technological solutions enhance the quality and efficiency of services of ENICs and NARICs.
There is mention of good practices such as having an online electronic application system to request an assessment; an electronic payment system for services (if fees are charged); and the possibility of obtaining information on qualifications previously assessed and placed within their education system. Furthermore, there is reference to the advance of information technologies as an enabler of innovative approaches for ENICs and NARICs in the dissemination of information, data collection, processing, and storage.

Digitalisation is seen as a way to support efficiency of the recognition process, through:

- internal systems to digitalise, store, process and archive applicants' documents in line with national legislation;

- internal databases to compile and provide the ability to search the list of qualification recognition decisions previously processed by the national centre, which can support decision consistency for newly submitted applications;

- internal customer relationship management (CRM) systems to track and respond to enquiries from applicants, stakeholders and the general public (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2019b).

The second monitoring report (2020)

This evolution in approach accelerated in the following years, probably due to the outbreak of COVID-19, which constituted a push factor towards more digitalised processes. This change is partly captured by the second monitoring report of the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2022). In this report, for the first time there is a section dedicated to digital tools, following the decision of the LRCC Bureau to include this as one of two topics that are not directly addressed in the LRC 1997 text but that are highlighted repeatedly in recommendations, declarations, protocols, models of good practice and other instruments adopted by the LRCC (the second 'new' topic is automatic recognition). The survey was sent out to respondents in 2019, so the decision to include a section on digital solutions fully captures the evolution of the approach to digitalisation for recognition before the influence of the COVID emergency. On the other hand, responses to the survey were collected by the end of 2020, so the results could already record some changes caused and/or accelerated by the health emergency.

The survey had two main questions on digital solutions: whether the national information centre had online electronic systems/solutions, with a focus on 'external' and 'internal' types of solutions, and whether national legislation allows for submission of digital documents for recognition procedures. Of the 53 respondents to the questionnaire (coming from 52 Parties to the LRC[152]), 42 had online electronic system(s) or solutions, and 10 indicated that such services are not available.

Looking at the typology of external services provided, the majority of centres have means for online submission of documents, open online databases and resources of information for the assessment of foreign qualifications. Fewer centres had electronic payment systems for services if fees were charged (21), online security features to issue documents and statements (19), and verification of authenticity of domestic (16) and foreign (13) qualifications.

Looking at types of internal service(s)/solution(s) provided electronically, the results show that the majority of centres had the possibility of working remotely with organisation of internal meetings and access to records and archives, had systems to store and digitalise applicants' documents, or to track and respond to enquiries from applicants, had internal online databases and resources of information, and had internal systems to process applicants' documents and to make use of digital signatures. Few centres had systems for checking the identity of the applicant (14) or automatic solutions to identify genuine or fraudulent qualifications (4).

[152] *The Flemish Community of Belgium (BE-FL) and the French Community of Belgium (BE-FR) provided separate responses to the questionnaire.*

For the majority of respondents, legislation allowed for the presentation of virtual digital documentation during the recognition procedures (32) and, if this was not provided for, recognition authorities could accept it at their discretion (7). In five countries legislation did not allow submission of digital documents, and four countries indicated 'other' without additional information. In 79% of cases, countries stated that they had implemented different types of online electronic systems (quite different among them) and, in line with the official role of the national information centres, 83% of the respondents had online open databases/resources of information.

The monitoring report provides a set of recommendations, ranging from the need to draft a new subsidiary text of the LRC on digital solutions (taking into account the existing 2019 "Guidelines for national online information systems") to the need to implement digital solutions in view of the rise in mobility and trends in digitalisation, encouragement of application of agreed and secure systems of digital certification and communication, such as blockchain, and the establishment of archives to store applicants' documents for comparison purposes and as a means of preventing recognition of fraudulent documents. Furthermore, the recommendation refers to key principles for digital solutions agreed at international level, such as interoperability, openness, accessibility, privacy and data protection, user-centricity, use of technologies that support verifications of authenticity, and of course the need for systems that are fully compliant with LRC principles (e.g. encompassing instruments for the right to appeal) (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2016a: 48–49).

Looking at the approach and results of the second monitoring report, it is clear that the focus has moved from digitalisation for information provision only to a path leading to digitalised processes and instruments for recognition.

The experience of the ENIC and NARIC networks

While in the official documents there are relatively few references, at least until 2019, to digitalisation as outlined in the overview above, in the work of the networks this aspect is quite prevalent, in most cases focusing on information provision and exchange. Looking at the minutes of joint ENIC-NARIC meetings since the first in 1994, there are references to databases, online tools and a 'computerized programme for the evaluation of foreign academic credentials and degrees' (Council of Europe, European Commission and UNESCO 1994), use of a mailing list for internal communication in the network (at that time managed by UNESCO-CEPES and named CEPES L Electronic Forum) and the role of websites.

In 2000, in the joint ENIC-NARIC meeting in Brussels, the activities report of the working party on electronic communication and information (ELCORE) was presented. The group, following a suggestion by the Canadian ENIC, was working on setting up and maintaining a website of information about the ENIC and NARIC networks and the different education systems, as well as recognition issues more generally. All centres that did not have a website were invited to establish one within a year (CIMEA 2000; Council of Europe, European Commission and UNESCO 2000). At the 2001 ENIC-NARIC meeting in Rīga, the ELCORE working party reported progress on the creation of the ENIC-NARIC website.[153] The

[153] *www.enic-naric.net, accessed 25 March 2025.*

website would act as a gateway to the original sources of information, which should be provided on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity (in other words, it was – and still is – the responsibility of each centre to make sure that the links on the website are kept up to date and complete). A detailed action plan at that time was presented to the European Commission for support (Council of Europe, European Commission and UNESCO 2001). The website was officially launched in December 2001, developed by the Canadian, Lithuanian and Norwegian ENICs, with financial support from the European Commission and the Council of Europe, and the ELCORE group presented these developments during the Malta ENIC-NARIC meeting in 2002. There was mention also of the UNESCO-CEPES database on transnational education (Council of Europe, European Commission and UNESCO 2002). In the same meeting, there was an update on the website and on the work of the ELCORE group, and it was expressly agreed to have a Working Group on Information Strategies in the Field of Recognition (Council of Europe, European Commission and UNESCO 2003).

The 2004 meeting focused on information strategies for the ENIC and NARIC networks, with a presentation of the work of the ENIC-NARIC Working Party on Developing Information Strategies (ENWIS). This included: the text of the Code of Good Practice in the provision of information on recognition (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2004b), adopted in the same meeting; a list of frequently asked questions; and examples of fact sheets for information centres. There was also the report of the ELCORE group, with discussion of plans for development of the site, the management of internal information and the use of different listservs (Council of Europe, European Commission and UNESCO 2004). From 1 June 2007 the ENIC-NARIC website was hosted by UNESCO-CEPES until 2009, when UNESCO decided to close the Centre[154] In the same 2007 meeting there was also a presentation on the use of electronic resources for evaluation by the Swedish centre, and the presentation of the UNESCO portal Recognized Higher Education Institutions (Council of Europe, European Commission and UNESCO 2007).

In line with technological evolution, the discussion thereafter moved from information provision only to a major focus on digital tools for training (online courses, platforms), communication on social networks, development of application tools for ENIC-NARICs, recognition of online learning (MOOCs, badges, micro-credentials), the possibility of awarding online recognition statements and decisions, supporting verification of authenticity, countering education fraud, public access to database of statements online, support for automatic recognition, the use and exchange of digital student data, digitalisation of information management systems and recognition workflows.

In other words, between 1994 and 2024 the discourse on digitalisation in the ENIC and NARIC networks evolved from the concept of support for transparent and accessible information provision to the concept of 'digital transformation' (UNESCO 2024a), as a process involving all aspects of the work on recognition in a holistic perspective.

[154] *CEPES was officially closed in December 2011, although most of its activities were discontinued in 2009.*

ENIC-NARIC tools and projects

The tools and projects developed by the ENIC-NARICs mirror the evolution of the discourse around digitalisation in the networks. In recent activities, for instance, there are many examples of databases with publicly accessible statements of comparability (NARIC Ireland Foreign Qualifications,[155] ARDI by the Italian ENIC-NARIC,[156] NAWA Kwalifikator by the Polish ENIC-NARIC,[157] Qualifications Assessment Tool by the Swedish ENIC-NARIC[158]), databases of access qualifications to higher education (Q-ENTRY developed by the Italian ENIC-NARIC[159]), databases with country profiles of higher education systems (including country briefings on 15 countries developed in the framework of the Refugees and Recognition,[160] React, [161] and ARENA[162] projects led by the Norwegian ENIC-NARIC, and the 14 country profiles developed in the RecoAsia[163], RecoNow[164], Meric-NET[165] and RecoLatin projects[166]), databases supporting automatic recognition and comparing qualifications (Automatic Recognition in the Adriatic Recognition Network, AdReN,[167] Automatic Recognition in the Mediterranean Recognition Network, MAReN,[168] and tables of comparisons among qualifications in the EHEA[169]).

Other projects have focused on building platforms for training, like the STREAM and AR-Net (Automatic Recognition in the Networks) projects, which developed an online training platform for admissions officers in higher education institutions in the EHEA,[170] or the Maren platform, in which a micro-credential on automatic recognition was offered to higher education institutions and partner ENIC-NARIC staff.[171] The role of digital tools has been explored with a view to countering document fraud and activities of diploma mills, e.g. in the FRAUDOC project,[172] with the *Guide on Diploma Mills and other Dubious Institutions* (CIMEA 2018a).

While the role of digital tools has been a transversal topic in many projects and activities, two projects focused on the role of digitalisation to fully support the work of recognition in line with the LRC principles: the Digi-Rec project, which produced "Digital Student Data & Recognition. A White Paper for the ENIC-NARIC Networks" (NUFFIC 2020a), and the Digi-Net project, which resulted in "Digitalisation of credential evaluation workflows. Practical guidelines for the ENIC-NARIC Networks" (NUFFIC 2023). Over the past decade, a number of centres have fully digitalised their internal workflows and now have digital information management systems.

[155] *https://qsearch.qqi.ie/webpart/search?searchtype=recognitions, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[156] *https://ardi.cimea.it/en, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[157] *https://kwalifikator.nawa.gov.pl/, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[158] *https://www.uhr.se/en/start/recognition-of-foreign-qualifications/qualifications-assessment-tool/, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[159] *https://www.q-entry.eu/, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[160] *https://www.nokut.no/en/about-nokut/international-cooperation/erasmus-projects/refugees-and-recognition/, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[161] *https://www.nokut.no/en/about-nokut/international-cooperation/erasmus-projects/react--refugees-and-recognition/, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[162] *https://www.nokut.no/en/about-nokut/international-cooperation/erasmus-projects/arena/, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[163] *https://www.recoasia.eu/, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[164] *http://www.reconow.eu/en/index.aspx, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[165] *http://www.meric-net.eu/en/index.aspx, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[166] *https://www.recolatin.eu/, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[167] *https://automaticrecognitionnetworks.info/table-of-comparison/, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[168] *https://automaticrecognitionnetworks.info/table-of-comparison/, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[169] *https://www.nuffic.nl/sites/default/files/2023-08/ehea-qualifications-table.pdf, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[170] *https://www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/recognition-projects/ar-net-concluded, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[171] *https://recotraining.eu/courses/learnpress-101/, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[172] *https://www.cimea.it/EN/pagina-fraudoc, accessed 28 February 2025.*

The European Higher Education Area: Digitalisation for a Student-Centred Approach

Enlarging the view to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), through a review of the ministerial communiqués,[173] in the first 15 years there was emphasis on data and transparency of information, while digitalisation and technological development were referred to only twice as a challenge/opportunity: "European higher education also faces the major challenge and the ensuing opportunities of globalisation and accelerated technological developments with new providers, new learners and new types of learning" (Bologna Process 2009: 1) and "rapid development of knowledge and technology, which impacts on societies and economies, plays an increasingly important role in the transformation of higher education and research" (Bologna Process 2015b).

It is in the Yerevan Communiqué that there is explicit reference to the potential benefits of digital technologies for learning and teaching (Bologna Process 2015b). The first explicit reference to recognition is in the Paris Communiqué, where Ministers urge the adoption of transparent procedures for the recognition of qualifications, prior learning and study periods, supported by interoperable digital solutions (Bologna Process 2018: 1). In this communiqué, Ministers also welcome the digitalisation of the Diploma Supplement, and they "commit to support higher education institutions to pursue further student data exchange in a secure, machine-readable and interoperable format, in line with data protection legislation (*ibid*.: 2). In the Paris Communiqué for the first time there is a paragraph on digitalisation as such, underlying its transformative potential for societies at large and for higher education, and an indication of how to create conditions for the best exploitation of such potential (*ibid*.: 3).

Digitalisation is also an important part of the Rome Communiqué, written during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the first mention of Artificial Intelligence. The Rome event was, incidentally, the first Ministerial meeting held fully in a virtual setting due to the health emergency. There is reference to the role of digital solutions as a way to facilitate secure, efficient, and transparent exchange of student and institutional data[174] (Bologna Process 2020: 6) and encouragement to apply agreed and secure systems of digital certification and communication such as blockchain, as well as further development of the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) to facilitate automatic recognition (*ibid*.: 7).

In the Tirana Communiqué the risks of digitalisation are mentioned, with reference to the phenomena of diploma and accreditation mills, fraudulent qualifications and academic cheating services (Bologna Process, 2024: 4; 8). The communiqué contains extensive reference to the impact of AI on societies and on higher education, to its opportunities, risks, and challenges, with particular emphasis on ethical considerations related to its development and deployment. The Communiqué explicitly refers to the principles that should be driving the use of AI in higher education, and Ministers ask the BFUG to consider in its work the wider and longer-term impact of the digital transition on higher education in the EHEA, including AI, and in particular with regard to the key commitments and the use of Bologna Process tools (Bologna Process 2024: 5, 8).[175]

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[173] *An overview of the communiqués will be found at https://ehea.info/page-ministerial-declarations-and-communiques, accessed 28 February 2025.*

[174] *"Joint digital approaches to enhance recognition, quality assurance and mobility are needed. We ask the BFUG to map existing and find new solutions to enhance the interoperability of digital systems and the exchange of student and institutional data in full respect of privacy and security, taking into account the experiences of the European Student Card Initiative and other initiatives".*

[175] *The stable release of ChatGPT happened in August 2022, making AI become a topic in public debate.*

Also looking at the EHEA framework through the lens of communiqués, it emerges that digitalisation has explicitly become a prominent part of the conversation in the past decade. It is seen quite extensively, from its use in teaching and learning, to student and institutional digital data, to its role in transparency and security in exchange of data and as a means to support international mobility, but also for its risks related for instance to education fraud. In the latest communiqué AI is extensively referred to, in the light detailed above. More generally in the EHEA there has been an evolution from digitalisation to 'digital transformation' (UNESCO 2024a).

The Global Landscape: Global and regional conventions on recognition

Looking at the 'sibling conventions' of the LRC, meaning the second generation of regional UNESCO conventions, digitalisation underlies almost all of them. In the UNESCO Regional Convention for African States, the preamble refers to the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to improve teaching and learning through Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Cross-Border Education (CBE), and the use of Open Educational Resources (OERs) (UNESCO 2014: 2). The Convention for the Arab States has the same approach, referring in the preamble to the role of modern information technologies in education, and also to the need for national bodies in charge of recognition to have advanced technological aids (UNESCO 2022c: Art. VI.2a).

There is a similar approach in the Convention for Latin America and the Caribbean, where awareness of the role of the digital sphere is again in the preamble, which refers to the impact of information and communication technologies on educational models, knowledge transfer and learning methods, thus enabling innovation, as well as expanding access to quality higher education (UNESCO 2019c: 3).

For the Asia-Pacific Convention, the 'oldest' second generation convention after the LRC, while there is no reference to digitalisation as such, the changing landscape in higher education, including information and communication technology, is one of the rationales for drafting the convention itself, as written in the introduction in the Explanatory Remarks (UNESCO 2011).

In the text of the Global Convention, adopted in 2019, there are two explicit references to the role of technologies: one is the commitment "to eradicate all forms of fraudulent practices regarding higher education qualifications by encouraging the use of contemporary technologies and networking activities among States Parties" (UNESCO 2019a: Art. III.8), and the second is the encouragement to state parties to use technologies to ensure easy access to information (*ibid.*: Art. VIII.4)

From the overview provided so far, the vision that seems to emerge is that digitalisation has been a transversal dimension supporting recognition for a long time, but only in the past decade has it taken its place in the conversation around higher education and recognition as a topic in itself. This may be due to a number of factors, probably including the 'forced' acceleration in the use of digitalisation due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and developments linked to the dissemination of AI tools (for example the 'massive' use of conversational agents) following the stable release of ChatGPT in August 2022. This evolution is related also to the awareness that digitalisation is not a goal *per se*, but – from the recognition perspective – a way to support fair recognition of qualifications in line with the LRC

principles. The evolution from the use of digital tools to support transparency and consistency of information to the digitalisation of student data and processes, and now the shift to the concept of digital transformation, has mirrored the evolution from what has been defined as the passage from "online" to "onlife" (Floridi 2015).

AI and recognition of qualifications: risk or opportunity?

The international framework

We face a widespread debate on the possible uses of AI, and also its potential risks and opportunities in the recognition of qualifications. Once again, confronted by these technological developments, the core question is whether and to what extent the use of AI could support faster and fairer recognition in line with the LRC.

Looking at the frameworks that constitute the reference for the LRC and the work of ENIC-NARIC networks, we see that in the EHEA context the Tirana Communiqué (Bologna Process 2024a) already gives some indication of the potential impact and use of AI in higher education. The two co-secretariats of the LRC, the Council of Europe and UNESCO, also set an overall framework for the use of AI. The human rights approach underpins the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law, adopted in May 2024 (Council of Europe 2024), and the focus on education is the object of a Council of Europe publication on *Artificial Intelligence: A critical view through the lens of human rights, democracy and the rule of law*. According to this text, some scientific publications are exploring AI support for administrative and institutional services, and some higher education institutions (mainly in the USA) already use AI-supported software for enhancing admission processes (Holmes *et al*. 2022). On a global scale, UNESCO devotes a specific focus to Artificial Intelligence in education.[176] In 2019, the Beijing Consensus on Artificial Intelligence and Education recalled the use of data and AI in transforming evidence-based policy planning processes, and the role of AI in enabling flexible learning pathways and the accumulation, recognition, certification and transfer of individual learning outcomes (UNESCO 2019b).

The year 2024 also marked the approval by the Council of the European Union[177] of a regulation aiming to harmonise rules on artificial intelligence in the European Union, the so-called AI Act. Supporting the objective of promoting the European human-centric approach to AI, the regulatory framework follows a 'risk-based' approach (the higher the risk, the stricter the rules), classifying the risk associated with the use of AI into four categories: minimal or absent, limited, high, or unacceptable level of risk. AI systems classified with unacceptable risk will be banned in the EU, while high-risk AI systems will be subject to a set of requirements and obligations for gaining access to the EU market.

Annex III defines the high-risk AI systems, containing a section 'education and vocational training' that lists, among others, the AI systems intended to be used "to determine access or admission or to assign natural persons to educational and vocational training institutions at all levels", "to evaluate learning

[176] *https://www.unesco.org/en/digital-education/artificial-intelligence, accessed 28 February 2025.*
[177] *https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/05/21/artificial-intelligence-ai-act-council-gives-final-green-light-to-the-first-worldwide-rules-on-ai/, accessed 28 February 2025.*

outcomes, including when those outcomes are used to steer the learning process of natural persons in educational and vocational training institutions at all levels", and "for the purpose of assessing the appropriate level of education that an individual will receive or will be able to access, in the context of or within educational and vocational training institutions at all levels" (Council of the European Union and the European Parliament 2024).

The Recognition Process: a Few Questions for Discussion

A number of questions arise from the possible use of AI in the recognition of qualifications at large. One set of questions refers to the broader topic of the learning outcomes that qualifications should certify, in relation to the aspects of teaching and learning, and to academic integrity. Is AI a tool to support the quality of learning in a context of transparency and integrity? To what extent could it be used to cheat and obtain a qualification that is not backed up by authentic learning? Can we trust learning outcomes in the era of AI (Bergan 2023; CIMEA 2023a)?

Another question is whether, and to what extent, can AI systems support international academic mobility, for instance with tools supporting teaching or assisting in mitigating some of the obstacles and barriers to mobility, such as language issues (CIMEA 2023a)?

In the recognition perspective, from a methodological point of view it is possible to identify three steps of the process: (i) identification of the elements of the qualification; (ii) checking for substantial differences; and (iii) establishing comparability with the corresponding qualification (CIMEA 2023a; NUFFIC 2020b, EAR Project Consortium 2023). For each of these three steps it is possible to 'deconstruct' the process and see where AI, or digital tools more in general, can support and automate the process (CIMEA 2023a).

There are two aspects in which AI could play a particular role: the automation of routine work, and the detection of document fraud. With regard to the recognition process and workflow, the questions that must be asked include the following: to what extent can AI automate the evaluation of a qualification, assessing it automatically through a comparison with other similar qualifications received from the same country/institutions, and automatically provide a recognition result and a comparison report (according to previous outcomes of assessment)?. To what extent is the result trustworthy and without bias or discrimination? To what extent can AI generate a decision independently, or rather provide the data and a draft analysis for a human evaluator to decide upon? To do this assessment AI needs a huge amount of data, and the continued validity of these data should be ensured, maintained, and organised to allow their consistent use. But what happens if a centre or a higher education institution does not have an equally massive archive of such data (qualifications, results of assessment already carried out)?

Considering the geographical distribution of resources feeding AI, the digital divide, the differences in quantity and quality of digital data on the higher education system of a certain country, can we expect an increase in inequality among different regions in the world in the assessment and the quality of recognition procedures? How can we ensure equity? Can higher education institutions and/or ENIC-NARIC centres collect and organise data on their own or can we expect the creation of recognition hubs? If this is the case, how do we ensure that such hubs are cooperative and not competitive? What will the costs associated with the development of AI and of such big databases be?

AI could also be an interesting tool to support translation from different languages. What will be the role of AI in simplifying access to educational documents in their original language? Can AI help overcome translation obstacles in consulting educational documents in the original language even if the credential evaluator does not have any competence in the language of the document? How can the quality of automatic translations be ensured?

The second aspect concerns the verification of the authenticity of qualifications. This can be done through a variety of means, depending also on the maturity of digital data, and on digital methods of verification available (CIMEA 2018b; Johansson and Finocchietti 2023; EAR Project Consortium 2023). One way is to fill in an online verification database, with the data recorded in the qualifications. Another way is to compare and check relevant features of the documents to be analysed against an already available database, to spot inconsistencies and mistakes that can constitute a sign of fraud (CIMEA 2023a). Here again, the question of whether AI takes a decision or supports a human decision is relevant.

Looking at this aspect, is it possible to use AI to detect anomalies and signs of possible fraud in the qualifications, comparing them against other similar qualifications received, with technology such as, for instance, natural language processing to analyse the correctness of qualifications, machine learning for fraud identification, and computer vision to facilitate anomaly spotting? In other words, can AI contribute to detecting document fraud? And if from a certain country there is usually a higher number of fraudulent qualifications, will the system be more inclined to indicate fraud even if it is not the case? And vice versa, if from other countries the level of fraudulent qualifications is usually very low, would the system be likely to spot fraudulent qualifications? And can the final decision, both on the assessment and on the authenticity, be taken by AI? Or should a human intelligence still have the final say?

From the opposite perspective, can AI be a powerful tool in the hands of dubious providers and fraudsters? Can AI replicate a qualification completely identical to the original? Can we trust qualifications in the era of AI?

Conclusions

After reviewing the long journey into digitalisation in the recognition of qualifications, and in the light of the open questions raised by development in the use of AI, there are a few considerations to be made, revolving around the three key words: people, data, processes.

The first consideration relates to the importance and role of data, and of recognition workflow management. Lack of fully digitalised workflows in the recognition process within institutions and organisations, fragmented collection of data due to the use of different software and applications during the lifecycle of students and of qualifications (e.g. one software app used for admission, one for students' academic career management, one for awarding qualifications), and lack of awareness about the importance of data-driven decisions could hinder the efficiency and effectiveness of the process itself, and exploration of the potential use of AI.

In this sense the 'human oversight' in the recognition process and its digitalised workflow is very important, from the very first design stage to its assessment and periodic update and reviewing. The digital process should be 'human by design', with credential evaluators and recognition experts contributing to its conceptual design and deployment. Furthermore, this development should be guided by the principles accepted in the international higher education community, such as data ethics, privacy and security, cooperation and interoperability, respect for human rights, transparency, and fairness, just to mention a few. Cybersecurity and data protection measures are necessary requirements to effectively mitigate the risks to the fundamental rights of students and applicants more generally.

Secondly, digitalisation and artificial intelligence require a consistent skills foundation for credential evaluators, admission officers and of staff performing recognition processes. Digital skills, and more recently AI literacy, knowledge of key regulatory frameworks at national and international level and of ethical implications of the use of AI in recognition, access and admission, and (at least) basic data analysis and data interpretation capabilities seem to emerge as a relevant part of the set of knowledge, skills and competences for credential evaluators. In this sense, capacity building, training, exchange of practices and peer support can play a role in supporting an application of digital tools and AI that is ethically consistent, human-centred, and that can support the quality of the recognition process (Finocchietti and Spitalieri 2024).

To conclude, we can see the role of digitalisation and AI in recognition and more generally in higher education as the relationship between two classical divinities, Proteus and Minerva. Proteus was a sea god, who was able to predict the future, but was unwilling to do so (Giannelli 1935). For this reason, when people were trying to capture him to get him to foretell the future, he was able to change his shape continually to escape. Minerva was the famous goddess of knowledge, wisdom and (divine) intelligence.[178] For his characteristics, Proteus can be seen as the god of digital transformation, a continuous process, and people need to capture him, with human skills and knowledge, to 'see what is the future', but always serving quality education by looking at Minerva, the goddess of real knowledge and wisdom.

[178] *https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/minerva/, accessed 28 February 2025.*

4.5. Learning outcomes

Kees Kouwenaar

Introduction

Learning outcomes have become an important concept in higher education, and in education in general, though the concept has most systematically been formalised in higher education, notably through the Bologna Process. There are several definitions of learning outcomes (Adam 2006, Kennedy *et al*. 2007), most of which are fairly similar to the following:

> What a student knows, understands, and/or is able to do at the end of a learning process.

It may be argued, as in the Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe 2018a,b,c), that the classical definition of learning outcomes is insufficient and that it needs to comprise a fourth element: what one is willing to do and, by definition, willing to abstain from doing even if one is able to do it. This is relevant to the ethical dimension of (higher) education. If and how this ethical dimension can or should also play a role in the decision whether an applicant can or cannot be admitted, to further studies or work, is a complicated but relevant question. For the purpose of transnational recognition of higher education qualifications, this writer leaves the ethical dimension of learning outcomes in parenthesis – while fully acknowledging the importance of this ethical dimension of higher education.

The TUNING project (González and Wagenaar 2005) emphasised the difference between generic (or transversal) and subject-specific learning outcomes. Generic learning outcomes are those that any higher education graduate at a certain level (e.g. first degree/EQF level 6) should possess, whereas

subject-specific learning outcomes are, as the name implies, specific to each academic discipline or field of study and they designate, for example (and overly simplified) what the holder of a second degree in chemistry should know, understand and be able to do in chemistry. The distinction between generic and subject-specific learning outcomes is important to recognition, and the relative balance between the two will vary with the context and purposes of recognition. If the issue is whether a given qualification is a first degree, generic learning outcomes will be given considerable weight. If the issue is whether an applicant is qualified to exercise a regulated profession, subject-specific learning outcomes are likely to be assigned decisive weight. The distinction between generic and subject-specific learning outcomes is discussed in further detail below.

Although speculative, it may be interesting to wonder why the concept of learning outcomes has grown in prominence since the last decades of the 20th century (see also Zhang and Peterbauer 2020). The immediate gains of clearly articulated learning outcomes for the quality of learning seem obvious – but why then? And not before? Or later?

It is useful to clarify here how – in the context of this section of this chapter – we see the connection between competence and learning outcome. Both concepts identify what a person knows, understands and/or is able to do. The distinction is that a learning outcome describes this (this competence) as the result of a learning process. So, the logical connection is as follows: a competence is what a person knows, understands and/or is able to do. A learning outcome is the competence that a student has developed at the end of (and through) a learning process.

In this subchapter, we use the terms 'competence' and 'learning outcome' in this sense of learning outcomes being a specific case of competence: competence gained at the end of a learning process.
The reader is invited to note that there is no friction between 'competence' and 'knowledge'. Competence encompasses knowledge as well as the other components. Criticism of 'competence-based learning' often stems from the lack of attention that is paid – in reality or perception – to the knowledge component of 'competence-based education'.

Is there a correlation between the growing importance of learning outcomes and important developments that impacted higher education across the globe, such as the growth of mass higher education, the giant leap in (digital) technological development and globalisation of production, commerce, travel, and transport?

Massification changed higher education significantly (Tight 2019). It is no longer – as it was for ages – an activity in society impacting only a small fraction of the population, preparing them to take leading roles in society and in a relatively small number of well-defined activities: in 'the professions' (medicine, law, teaching) and in the reproduction and regeneration of the higher education and research system itself. Students who did not choose one of 'the professions' were bound – and expected – to end up in the well-defined profession of academia: to become a scholar like the professors who taught them. Even today, one finds academics who are inclined to consider only the student who makes it to the ranks of their peers as a real success.

Besides massification of higher education, changes in society also contributed to diversification

of higher education (see e.g. Carayannis and Morawska-Jancelewicz 2022). Globalisation as well as technical and digital developments changed society tremendously. There was a huge increase in what is called the 'knowledge economy' in the demand for highly educated people in a whole range of professional activities for which there was no tailormade higher education preparation – jobs for which a whole range of higher education degrees would each qualify equally well. Jobs for life have become the exception rather than the rule; a significant number of readers of this text will do work for which their chosen programme studies were not the unique and required preparation. The generic learning outcomes have grown in importance as the lasting human capital that is gained through higher education.

In summary: the profile of higher education programmes and graduates has become much more diverse than before, and the labour market has become much more diverse and volatile than before. What has this to do with the rise to prominence of learning outcomes?

Well, one may argue that in the past,

- with a limited number of higher education programmes,
- leading to a limited number of higher education qualifications,
- giving admission to a limited number of professional activities,
- for a limited proportion of the population,

there was less of a need to examine more closely what knowledge, skills and understanding actually lay beneath the formal qualification.

But with a vast variation in higher education programmes – in focus, in target groups, in quality (of entrance, process and outcome) – this becomes more complex. It is even more complex in international terms, since the cross-border migrant with a higher education qualification has changed from a rare exception to an everyday reality (Van Mol, Cleven, and Mulvey 2024). Measures to enhance transparency and comparability at system level, such as qualification frameworks and other elements of the Bologna Process, are necessary but may be not sufficient to fully resolve this complexity.

The meaning of a higher education qualification as a unique entry ticket (one that is both necessary and sufficient in a one-on-one relation between a specific programme of studies and a specific job) has been and still is changing. It is changing because of the vast variation in job profiles and job requirements – often without higher education programmes specifically designed for them. And because of the highly accelerated pace in which jobs change or simply vanish to be replaced by entirely new ones. A general level of competence has become much more important for many jobs than a subject-specific qualification. This raises the question to what extent a "Bologna cycle" degree (bachelor's – master's – PhD) does represent a clear and well-understood set of such generic competences in terms of what people know, understand or are able to do better than at the next lower level and not as well as at the next higher level of competence.

The USA, with its absence of a formal regulatory framework (except for professions with professional accreditation) leading to a highly diverse pattern of higher education institutions and programmes, has seen such different meanings of the formal qualification *per se* much earlier. For any bachelor's degree from an accredited higher education institution, everybody in the US will acknowledge that it is a bachelor's degree. But what the degree holder can actually do with it will vary so much, according to the combination of courses and the kind of institution, that the bachelor's diploma itself is much less relevant than the transcript of records that shows what courses with what result have been taken towards the degree.

Thus, as higher education qualifications *per se* (i.e. without enough information on what they entail) become less meaningful within national educational and labour market settings, another question gains importance: "What have you learned?" In other words: "What do you know, and how can you use your knowledge and understanding to do what?"

The Bologna Process has created a simple and unified degree structure across Europe, which is a good thing in itself. But one may ask whether – by itself – it constitutes an adequate response to this diversification – to mass higher education and to complex globalised and digitalised societies.

In summary, changes in society may require a reassessment of the value of university degrees and diplomas (i.e. the pieces of paper) as compared to their embodied value of clearly articulated learning outcomes of higher education trajectories. This may require a rebalancing between (a) degrees and diplomas and (b) learning outcomes as the core element of recognition and admission of holders of foreign credentials. If one overlooks the reality that similarly named degrees may represent vastly different competences, the result may be confusion and frustration. Indeed, learning outcomes have gained in prominence in recognition practice. But arguably, current tools to express – and compare – learning outcomes still leave much to be desired.

It makes sense to explore how learning outcomes also have had their impact – and may have further impact in future – on the practice of and the philosophy behind the admission of holders of foreign qualifications to academic or economic activities on the basis of what they have learned before crossing the border. One must acknowledge that having to look in detail into the achieved learning outcomes sets entirely new challenges of manageability.

NB The paragraphs above discuss the value of higher education qualifications in terms of the admission they provide to specific follow-up activities in work or further studies. In the section on automatic recognition, and elsewhere in this publication, the distinction between 'recognition' and 'admission to activities' will return. Recognition that does not provide the desired admission to activities may seem sufficient to meet legal obligations, but may still fall significantly short of citizens' expectations.

| Transversal and subject-specific learning outcomes

When looking at learning outcomes in the context of recognition of foreign credentials, we need to distinguish between subject-specific and transversal or generic learning outcomes. Scholarly literature does not provide an unambiguous or unanimous distinction between the two concepts. Below, the author's view of a workable distinction is articulated.

Subject-specific learning outcomes articulate what a person knows, understands and is able to do in a specific field of expertise or academic discipline. Being able to write and deliver a lecture on the medieval kings of France is a subject-specific competence. So is being able to build a test setup with Erlenmeyer flasks in which laws of chemistry are applied or tested. Often, subject-specific learning outcomes from higher education show a combination of subject-specific knowledge and a subject-specific ability to apply this knowledge in a context, using the approaches and methods of that field. Subject-specific knowledge of academic disciplines may overlap – and so do the approaches and methods.

Transversal competences and learning outcomes (sometimes also called 'generic' or 'horizontal') are different from subject-specific ones. Transversal competences – like 'critical thinking', 'teamwork', 'intercultural competence' – are applicable across a wide field of professional and social contexts.

The particular form that a competence like 'critical thinking' assumes may differ, for example between quantitative domains and in positive science conditions from qualitative domains in social science. But 'critical thinking' does have common key characteristics across disciplines even though application of these characteristics may take different shapes according to domain conventions.

The distinction between subject-specific competences and transversal or generic ones is not always a sharp one. In many cases, subject-specific competences require and assume adequate proficiency in generic competences like critical thinking, or 'inquiry and analysis'. Conversely, transversal competences need a subject area to be applied to, in order to be meaningful. Still, the distinction is useful. It helps to articulate more clearly what specific characteristics a generic competence like critical thinking requires in physics as distinct from in philosophy. It also helps us to understand that the underlying competence of critical thinking that is developed in the study of physics or philosophy is indeed also valuable outside that specific domain. And most importantly, it helps to bring these transversal competences out of the realm of the implicit and tacit parts of higher education and to give teachers better language to explain to their students what growth in these transversal competences is expected or demanded of them.

What is the relevance of this distinction for the cross-border recognition of educational qualifications? Well, the changing role of a university degree and the weakened link between a higher education programme and ensuing activities (in economic, civic and other senses) over one's lifespan also entail that the more generic competences acquired through higher education are (often implicitly but increasingly also explicitly) seen as an important aspect of the higher education qualification. This effect is further strengthened by the fast rate at which the knowledge acquired in university is surpassed by newer research findings and becomes obsolete. Assessment of the generic competences of the foreign applicant thus becomes a more important part of the question of whether the applicant's qualification can be recognised and can lead to admission to activities.

If a Dutch company says "We want applicants to have a research university master's degree in any of the social sciences or humanities", it will most probably have the Dutch system of research universities and universities of applied science in mind and will know little about higher education systems elsewhere. When foreign degree holders apply for the job, their degrees will be assessed for their comparability in terms of "level and quality" with the more familiar Dutch degrees. "Level and quality" are in fact broader terms for what in essence is an expectation of specific generic competences.

So, a more precise articulation of the relevant transversal competences and competence levels can make "level and quality" more tangible in the assessment of foreign credentials. It will help if the applicant's qualifications are weighed against a more precisely articulated set of competences that are required – or expected – by the authority in the host country that decides on admission to the activities. It will help if specialised recognition agencies know what (generic and specific) competences are required for the various activities in their country – and have the skill to analyse foreign credentials for such competences.

| Quality of institutions or programmes and learning outcomes

Above, we touched on some challenges with the concepts of 'level' and 'quality', concepts which nonetheless play an important role in the practice of cross-border assessment of qualifications. These concepts pose a challenge because they lack specificity: what is exactly meant by 'level' or 'quality'? What are adequate measures of 'level' and 'quality' in both senses of the word 'measure'?

- What are good, broadly accepted and commonly understood descriptors for 'very low'– 'low'– 'average'– 'high'– 'very high' level or quality? and
- What are good and broadly accepted methods to actually measure them?

They pose challenges because they lack a distinction between the higher education institution on the one hand and higher education programmes offered at the institution on the other. Highly prestigious institutions may also offer much weaker programmes – especially when they are multi-campus institutions serving a variety of target groups. Institutions – and programmes – may have different purposes, turning a comparison into one between apples and oranges.

They pose challenges because they lack a distinction between the quality (assumed or real) of the graduates and the added value of the educational programme. Highly prestigious programmes at top institutions will yield high-quality graduates regardless of the quality of the education programmes – simply because of their intake. Much lower-ranked institutions may be actually doing a much better job in helping students to create a large distance between their competences at the start and at the end of their education programme.

Last but not least, the concepts of 'level' and 'quality' pose challenges if higher education institutions remain weak in articulating what their students actually know, understand and can do at the end of the learning process.

Rankings of higher education institutions are highly problematic for many reasons:

- *Rankings often reflect more the impact of skilful marketing on reputation and objective quality;*
- *Ranking using research data is used to assess teaching quality;*
- *In research, ranking often uses data on statistical outliers like Nobel prize winners to inform on overall and average quality.*
- *Many focus on volume rather than quality of research.*
- *Many focus more on academic than societal impact.*
- *Rankings are often skewed to specific sectors (science, health and economics), misrepresenting humanities and most social science).*

In summary: the perceived quality and level of institutions and programmes are still much more prevalent in recognition practice than the weak quality and measurability of these indicators should allow.

Quite another problem is the fact that individual graduates of education programmes may – and indeed do – vary in their achieved learning outcomes. This disparity between 'what the documents prove' and 'what competences the individual actually possesses' is treated elsewhere in this publication.

Well and poorly articulated learning outcomes

Critical analysis of existing frameworks of competence and existing examples of articulated learning outcomes can help us to determine what properties are required for a framework of competences and learning outcomes to serve the purpose of enhancing the quality of higher education – and improving cross-border recognition of higher education qualifications in the process.

The focus is here on frameworks for generic competences. This is not because these are more important than subject-specific competences but because, in practice, there is more consensus about what (for example) bachelor's graduates in mathematics or nursing should know, understand or be able to do in their discipline than about what generic competences they should acquire.

Whether we look at the UNESCO SDG competences (UNESCO 2017a) or the European EntreComp framework[179] or the Council of Europe Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe 2018a,b,c), we see that most frameworks do deconstruct broad competences into more specific sub-competences, but do not articulate distinct levels of performance – from poor through sufficient to excellent.

Table 1.2.11. Learning objectives for SDG 11 "Sustainable Cities and Communities"

Cognitive learning objectives	1. The learner understands basic physical, social and psychological human needs and is able to identify how these needs are currently addressed in their own physical urban, peri-urban and rural settlements.

From UNESCO 2017a (Graphic elaborated)

[179] *https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC101581, accessed 20 February 2025.*

For instance, the SDG competence framework for each SDG distinguishes between cognitive, socio-emotional and behaviour learning outcomes and identifies up to five sub-competences in each. As an example, one cognitive sub-competence for SDG 11 is copied here.

But the description is binary in the sense that it describes a learner who commands the competence, as if there could be only two steady states: one of total command of the sub-competence, and one of total lack of command.

AREA

IDEAS & OPPORTUNITIES

COMPETENCE

SPOTTING OPPORTUNITIES

HINT AND DESCRIPTOR

Use your imagination and abilities to identify opportunities for creating value.

Identify and seize opportunities to create value by exploring the social, cultural and economic landscape. Identify needs and challenges that need to be met. Establish new connections and bring together scattered elements of the landscape to create opportunities to create value.

THREAD	FOUNDATION		INTERMEDIATE		ADVANCED		EXPERT	
IDENTIFY, CREATE AND SEIZE OPPORTUNITIES	I can find opportunities to help others.	I can recognise opportunities to create value in my community and surroundings.	I can explain what makes an opportunity to create value.	I can proactively look for opportunities to create value, including out of necessity.	I can describe different analytical approaches to identify entrepreneurial opportunities.	I can use my knowledge and understanding of the context to make opportunities to create value.	I can judge opportunities for creating value and decide whether to follow these up at different levels of the system I am working in (for example, micro, meso or macro).	I can spot and quickly take advantage of an opportunity.

From UNESCO 2017a (Graphic elaborated)

The EntreComp framework and the Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture do identify progress to higher levels of competence, but in terms of additional knowledge, skills or understanding. The competence descriptors at foundation, intermediate, advanced and expert level are still binary in nature.

Compare that binary approach to this example from the Galileo network based at the University of Calgary (Canada).[180]

[180] *https://www.galileo.org/tips/rubrics/ct_rubric.pdf, accessed 16 May 2025.*

Guide To Assessing Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it. Critical thinking is self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored and self-corrective thinking. It requires rigourous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use. It entails effective communication and problem solving abilities and a commitment to overcome our native egocentrism and sociocentrism. (Paul and Elder, 2006)

Assess the work using each of the five criteria below:

Formulates or reformulates a vital problem, question or issue.	Fails to identify or summarize the problem, question or issue.	Summarizes the problem, question or issue though some aspects are confused or incorrect and nuances and key details are missing or superficial and/or context is overlooked.	Clearly and precisely formulates or reformulates the vital aspects of the problem, question or issue as it relates to the context.	Vital aspects of the problem, question or issues are clearly and precisely formulated or reformulated identifying integral relationships essential to analyzing the problem, question or issue as it relates to the context.

From Galileo.org (Graphic elaborated)

For one aspect of critical thinking – the ability to formulate a problem – the rubric identifies progressive performance descriptors from performance that is clearly very weak, to somewhat stronger and strong performance.

This is similar to the design of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages of the Council of Europe (2001, 2020). There, descriptors reflect the levels A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2 for the different aspects of language proficiency, specified as understanding (listening, reading), speaking (spoken interaction, spoken production), and writing. It may be noted that the CEFR was developed primarily for self-assessment and was not intended for use as a hard pass–fail decision or (for instance) for use by immigration authorities to determine whether immigrants satisfy language requirements for residence or citizenship. The point to be made here is that the CEFR – by articulating these levels of decreasing weakness and increasing proficiency in specific sub-competences – has created a common language to enhance intersubjective agreement on levels of language competence. Similarly, the descriptors in the Galileo example on critical thinking create a common language to talk about how good students should be and are in that aspect of the competence.

From these examples, we can deduce which characteristics a competence framework should have if it is to be a useful tool both for educational practice and for the assessment of learning outcomes in a cross-border setting:

1. The competences need to be articulated not just at the level of a broad competence like critical thinking or teamwork but need to be broken down into sub-competences that better reflect real-life behaviour.

2. For each of these sub-competences, there need to be not one but several descriptors of the level of competence to be demonstrated, with decreasing signs of weak or failing performance and increasing signs of adequate or excellent performance under increasing complex and difficult circumstances. Good descriptors have action verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs that give information on *what the learner can do how well in what circumstances.*

3. These descriptors need to be intuitively understandable by the main actors in the educational setting: the teachers and the students.

After an exploration of the fundamentally subjective nature of generic competences, one competence framework used by one of the European University Alliances will be examined in some detail, as it meets the requirements outlined above.

| Intermission: the subjective nature of key outcomes of higher education

There is broad consensus that the lasting human capacity gained through higher education is not only in subject-specific expertise, but also in more generic competences like critical and creative thinking, analytic, investigative and problem-solving skills, and communicative and cooperative skills, as well as intercultural and ethical dispositions (see e.g. Belchior-Rocha *et al*. 2022). It follows that these transversal elements should – and implicitly do – play an important role in the assessment of foreign educational qualifications for the purpose of admission to specific (academic or professional) activities. Reaching broad common understanding on key transversal competences, levels of performance in such competences and their reliable assessment seems key to a solid assessment of holders of foreign qualifications. This is the core reason for including this section on learning outcomes in this publication.

However, there is a fundamental challenge to reaching such a common understanding, a common language, a common framework, a common tool for transversal competences. Scholarly work on transversal competences belongs to the domain of the social sciences, in which definitions of concepts are problematic because they are subjective, not only in the choice of words to define the elements that are necessary and sufficient to distinguish the defined concept from 'the outside world' but also in the interpretation of these words by different users in different contexts. Experts who develop a language and tool for transversal competences, academic teachers who apply it in their teaching, the students who develop their competences, and cross-border evaluators of qualifications may all have a slightly different understanding of a concept – even if they accept the use of the same words to describe it. This applies to the level of the broadly described competence, to the more specific level of sub-competence and to the level of performance.

So how do we tackle this challenge of subjectivity-by-definition?

Not by ignoring it. The best way forward would seem to be to create a broad foundation on intersubjective agreement, a shared understanding: if many teachers and educationalists believe that they mean the same thing when talking about (a) what important transversal competences are, (b) how they can be described, (c) how they can be deconstructed into realistic sub-competences, and (d) how progressive performance levels can be identified from clearly insufficient to excellent, then … there is still no guarantee that they will indeed have the same constructs in mind. But chances are that these will differ less than if they did not have this shared language.

In summary: for the assessment of transversal learning outcomes in foreign educational qualifications, we need a common language describing these transversal learning outcomes on as broad a basis of intersubjective agreement as possible.

VALUE – LOUIS as an example of a tool for learning outcomes

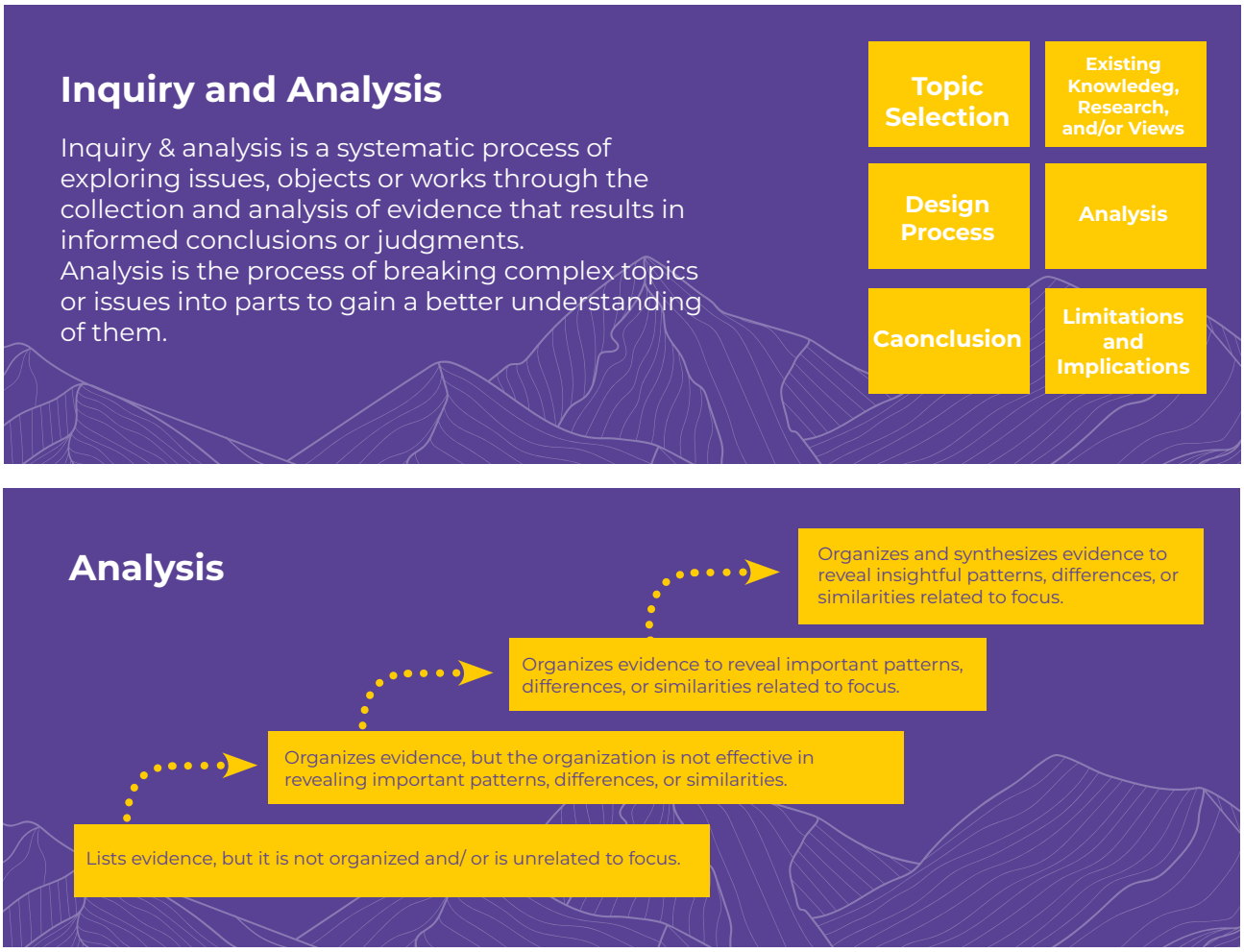
As a starting point for such broad intersubjective agreement, we can look at Learning Outcomes in University for Impact on Society (LOUIS),[181] developed in the Aurora network. Aurora,[182] founded in 2016 as a European network of societally engaged research-universities, is part of the European University Alliances initiative of the European Commission.[183] LOUIS was developed as part of the Aurora Competence Framework and is based on the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE)[184] approach developed by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U).

From www.aacu.org/value/rubrics, Accessed 28 July 2025 American Association of Colleges and Universities (Graphic elaborated)

AAC&U's VALUE approach was developed in 2007–09 by faculty experts from across the USA to identify key transversal competences, to identify fundamental criteria for the related learning outcomes and to articulate performance descriptors demonstrating progressively more sophisticated levels of attainment (Finley 2012, Rhodes and Finley 2013, Carey 2018). The VALUE approach is now used by over 5 600 organisations in the US and 141 other countries. AAC&U continues its work to further improve VALUE (Pike and McConnell 2018).

As the acronym suggests, the VALUE approach was developed to create a better common tool for the assessment of undergraduate learning in transversal competences. The Aurora Universities Network, in the context of its 2020–23 programme in the European Universities Initiative supported under the Erasmus+ programme, adapted VALUE to its own context and created the LOUIS approach. LOUIS fully adopts the 16 VALUE competences with their sub-competences (or dimensions), each with their four progressive performance descriptors. Apart from some minor editorial and visual adaptations, the main distinction is that LOUIS focuses more on articulating the learning outcomes for transversal competences (i.e. what teachers want students to learn), although assessment (i.e. what teachers see that students have learned) is of course also important (Pike and McConnell 2018).

[181] *https://aurora-universities.eu/louis/, accessed 19 February 2025.*
[182] *https://aurora-universities.eu/, accessed 19 February 2025.*
[183] *https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative, accessed 16 May*
[184] *https://www.aacu.org/initiatives-2/value; https://www.aacu.org/, both accessed 19 February 2025.*



From the Aurora LOUIS website https://aurora-universities.eu/louis/, created by Kees Kouwenaar, the author of this section (Graphic elaborated)

Thus the VALUE/LOUIS tool meets the basic requirements for clearly articulated transversal learning outcomes: broadly defined transversal competences (like Analysis and Inquiry) are deconstructed into more intuitively understandable sub-competences like 'topic selection' and 'analysis', and for these tangible sub-competences it gives progressive performance descriptors that show decreasing weaknesses and increasing sophistication in that sub-competence.

LOUIS is being used by a slowly increasing number of teachers in Aurora member universities, using jointly developed training material for teachers as well as a survey to assess students' response. In some of the universities, it is being integrated more systematically in the systems for professional development of academics and in some instances even into the educational regulations of the institution. Overall, students respond favourably to the more tangible articulation of transversal learning outcomes.

However, as argued above in the paragraph on the subjective nature of transversal competences, real impact can only be expected if there is a really broad level of intersubjective agreement in Europe. The VALUE approach, on which LOUIS is based, was created with very broad involvement of academic

teachers and is now in use. Similarly, a broad involvement of large groups of academics from different fields and countries in Europe could help to create a broad consensus on a framework for transversal competences, sub-competences and performance descriptors as a common language for educational achievement. In a way, this would resemble the ECTS system: a common tool that can be used according to local needs.

| Towards a pilot project on learning outcomes for recognition

In this contribution, we have argued that European higher education needs a toolkit and language to become much more specific about the generic competences that are generated through higher education: in terms of learning outcomes that tangibly describe what graduates know, understand and are able to do – and also in terms of "better than at a lower stage and not yet as good as at a higher stage".

We have argued that LOUIS – the Learning Outcomes in University for Impact on Society developed in the Aurora Universities Network as part of its programme in the European Universities Initiative – may well offer a suitable language and toolkit for the European Higher Education Area because it meets the basic requirements:

- It identifies a limited number of broad generic competences which comprehensively cover the area of generic competences acquired through higher education.
- It deconstructs these broad competences into dimensions or sub-competences which are intuitively understandable and applicable in teaching-and-learning environments across subjects and cultures.
- It describes progressive performance levels for these sub-competences, not in terms of additional things that graduates can do (perfectly) and could not do before (at all), but in terms of decreasing weaknesses and increasing complexity and sophistication in how well they do it.

To lay the foundation for a broad awareness and use of this LOUIS approach in the EHEA, it would be necessary to organise a broad calibration and validation process, through which a large number of academics – and possibly labour market experts – from various disciplines and regions examine the LOUIS approach and formulate suggestions to amend or adapt it to make it optimally suitable for the EHEA.

The Aurora LOUIS team is willing and able to develop a project proposal to organise such a broad calibration and validation: at the level of the underlying principles and the 16 broad competences, at the level of the deconstruction into sub-competences and at the level of the progressive performance descriptors. A two-step approach for each level (Competences/Sub-competences/Performance descriptors) seems appropriate, with a focus on the broad collection of a wide variety of comments and suggestions in each first step and a convergence towards an optimally broad consensus on a calibrated LOUIS version in each second step.

The informal team responsible for this publication, on the past, present and future contribution of the Lisbon Recognition Convention to the practice of recognition in Europe and the quality of higher education in Europe, warmly supports the idea for such a calibration and validation project.

Learning outcomes and the LRC

One could look at the connection between learning outcomes and the Lisbon Recognition Convention from two perspectives, looking back and looking forward.

A historical perspective: as the LRC 'opened the door to a less 'legal/administrative' and more 'goal-oriented/educational' outlook on recognition, the further development towards learning outcomes as a cornerstone for recognition seems part of the LRC legacy. The same applies to the distinction between 'recognition' as such and 'admission to activities'.

A forward-looking perspective: the key message of this subchapter is that a focus on learning outcomes helps to bring the ultimate goal of recognition and of the LRC closer to reality. It helps to reduce the waste of human capital/potential through lack of recognition and it helps to avoid forcing individuals to undergo training for things they already know/understand/can do.

Nonetheless, there is also a risk: the risk that a shift to focusing on learning outcomes may open the door to reintroducing some questionable practices from the past, in particular formalistic and bureaucratic approaches to what may constitute a substantial difference.

And there is a risk that the methods and tools needed to use learning outcomes as the basis of recognition will become box-ticking exercises, ignoring the inherently subjective nature of transversal competences and methods to assess them, and turning assessment methods into seemingly objective and therefore no longer realistic procedures.

It seems crucial that assessment of international qualifications – as also within the Learning Outcomes paradigm – remains based on a comparison between:

a) the 'learning incomes' of the activity to which admission is sought: what people (all people, not only holders of foreign qualifications) need to know, understand and be able to do in order to be able to succeed at the activity, and

b) the learning outcomes that the holder of the foreign qualification has.

This comparison must be based on pre-defined requirements for that activity and must meet with standards of fairness and transparency. The concept of substantial difference needs to focus exclusively on substantial difference between the competences (knowledge, skills and understanding – and values if articulated) required of all who engage in the activity and the competences of the applicant.

UNIVERSITAS QUADERNI

N. 01
September 2025

CHAPTER 5

Governance and Implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention

Sjur Bergan

05

Introduction

As we hope this book demonstrates, the development and adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention is an important aspect of higher education policy in the European Region. The fact that the LRC is still the main legal framework for the recognition of qualifications in this region a quarter century after its adoption is due not only to its quality as a legal text but also to the ways in which it is being implemented. A legal text is essential, but the true measure of its success will be whether and to what extent it serves its purposes in practice.

This chapter focuses on several aspects of the implementation of the LRC. The subchapter on its governance describes the ways in which the States Parties, through their appointed representatives, make decisions that help put the LRC into practice and adapt it to the evolving context of higher education, as described elsewhere in this book. The subchapter considers the governing body of the LRC – the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee and its Bureau – as well as other bodies that play an important role in putting the LRC into practice, such as the ENIC Network and various working groups. It also considers how developments in other contexts, such as cooperation between the ENIC and NARIC networks and the European Higher Education Area, help implement the LRC.

While the LRC is an international legal treaty between States, and national public authorities therefore play the most important role in its governance bodies, higher education policy and practices cannot be developed by public authorities alone. The subchapter on stakeholder participation considers how the members of the academic community – and in particular the representatives of higher education staff – as well as external stakeholders contribute to the governance and implementation of the LRC.
At a day-to-day level, credential evaluators play the key role in putting the LRC into practice. Credential evaluators mostly work either in national recognition centers (ENICs/NARICs) or at higher education institutions, and they represent unique professional competence. The subchapter on the development of the recognition profession describes how the recognition of qualifications has been professionalized and how the professional competence of credential evaluators is developed through international as well as national cooperation. The importance of professional development at national level is illustrated by the case of Italy.

Issues of fraud and lack of authenticity in qualifications or higher education institutions are treated elsewhere in this publication (see Chapter 2 New Developments, §2.2 Authenticity).

5.1. Governance of the LRC

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As an international legal treaty developed in the framework of two intergovernmental organizations, the Lisbon Recognition Convention required a set of governance arrangements of its own. Existing arrangements within either the Council of Europe or UNESCO could not be used because they would not take adequate account of the specificities of both sponsoring organizations. In addition, since 1994, both organizations had run and served a joint network of national information centers on recognition and mobility, the ENIC Network,[185] which would also play a role in the implementation of the LRC.

By ratifying the LRC, States undertake a set of obligations outlined in the legal text. There is, however, some room for interpretation, and it was also foreseen from the outset that the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee (LRCC) could adopt subsidiary texts, such as recommendations (Article X.2.5). Unlike the LRC itself, these are not of a binding nature, but they are nevertheless important statements guiding the parties in their implementation of the LRC. Since the LRCC seeks consensus as far as possible, one could perhaps have feared that it would be challenging to develop the interpretation and implementation of the Convention. If so, these fears have not been borne out: the LRCC has adopted recommendations that contribute to quite progressive practice in putting the Convention into operation.

This chapter outlines the governing arrangements for the LRC, assesses to what extent these have contributed to implementation of the Convention, and examines cases in which it has been difficult to come to satisfactory decisions.

[185] *European Network of National Information Centres, which cooperates very closely with the corresponding NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centres) Network of the European Commission. See https://www.enic-naric.net/, accessed 3 February 2025.*

The Governance of the LRC

The LRC is governed by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee (LRCC), made up of representatives of the States Parties to the LRC, currently 57.[186] States that were invited to the Diplomatic Conference, as well as the European Commission and the President of the ENIC Network, may participate in the meetings of the LRC as observers, as may "representatives of governmental and nongovernmental organizations active in the field of recognition in the Region" (Article X.2.2).

The Committee meets "at least every three years". The first meeting of the LRCC was held end-on with the ENIC-NARIC meeting in June 1999. Appropriately, the meeting was held in Vilnius, as it was Lithuania's ratification, as the fifth State Party, that made the LRC come into effect on 1 February 1999. Thus, the Convention Committee held its first meeting as soon as it was practically possible following the entry into force of the LRC, in keeping with the provisions of the Convention, which stipulate that "The Committee shall meet for the first time within a year of the entry into force of this Convention" (Article X.2.9).

Since then, the LRCC has met at regular intervals, as stipulated in the same Article, which says that the LRCC shall meet "in ordinary session at least every three years" (*ibid*.). A three-year meeting cycle now seems to be the rule, but in the early years the Convention Committee met every two years. It is perhaps not surprising that the LRCC needed to meet more frequently in the first years after the Convention entered into force since, among other things, it adopted several recommendations, about which more below.

The LRCC may also hold extraordinary meetings to consider specific urgent issues (Council of Europe and UNESCO n.d.: Rule 3.4). The Convention Committee has used this opportunity twice so far: in November 2017 to adopt the Recommendation on Recognition of Qualifications Held by Refugees, Displaced Persons and Persons in a Refugee-like Situation (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2017) and in February 2023 to consider the relationship of Russia and Belarus to the governance of the LRC in the light of the role of the two countries in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. The extraordinary meeting in 2017 was called at the initiative of the Co-Secretariats in agreement with the LRCC Bureau, whereas the one in 2023 was called by the President of the LRCC.

To organize and oversee its work between sessions of the LRCC, the Committee elects a Bureau composed of four members (Council of Europe and UNESCO n.d.: Rule 5). The Bureau is elected for a period lasting until the following ordinary meeting of the LRCC – so currently for a period of approximately three years – and members are re-eligible once.[187] The Bureau meets as decided by its President and the Co-Secretariats (Council of Europe and UNESCO n.d.: Rule 5.5), now normally two or three times a year. It prepares the meetings of the LRCC and may also initiate work in accordance with the LRCC work plan. For example, the two reports monitoring the implementation of the LRC were developed by the Bureau (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2016a, 2022).

[186] *https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=signatures-by-treaty&treatynum=165, accessed 3 February 2025.*
[187] *"Members of the Bureau shall be eligible to serve for two consecutive terms in the same office" (Council of Europe and UNESCO n.d.: Rule 5.4).*

Both the LRCC and its Bureau function well, and the Bureau, in particular, has taken on a more active role than was originally foreseen. In the original conception,[188] the LRCC was intended mainly as a formal body of the parties making the required decisions on the development and implementation of the Convention, whereas the ENIC Network was intended as the body preparing these decisions. This is reflected in the LRCC Article outlining the function of the Convention Committee:

> The Committee shall promote the application of this Convention and shall oversee its implementation. To this end it may adopt, by a majority of the Parties, recommendations, declarations, protocols and models of good practice to guide the competent authorities of the Parties in their implementation of the Convention and in their consideration of applications for the recognition of higher education qualifications. While they shall not be bound by such texts, the Parties shall use their best endeavours to apply them, to bring the texts to the attention of the competent authorities and to encourage their application. The Committee shall seek the opinion of the ENIC Network before making its decisions. (Council of Europe and UNESCO 1997a: Article X.2.9)

Before we turn to the relationship between the LRCC and the ENIC Network, however, we need to raise one point where practice as it has arisen deviates from the original intentions and this could raise some issues, namely the election of the Bureau and the rotation of its members.

Bureau members are elected to serve for the period between ordinary LRCC meetings – now generally three years – and are, as we have seen, re-eligible once. This provision is inspired by the rules for Council of Europe committees, which also stipulate that a Bureau member having served two full periods may nevertheless be elected Chair (and also Vice Chair) of the pertinent committee. For the UNESCO Global Convention, at least, the requirement that the Bureau be composed of one Chair (elected in a personal capacity) and one Rapporteur (elected in a personal capacity), in addition to one representative (elected as State Party) per each of the six UNESCO electoral groups can be expected to ensure a measure of rotation and representativity. In other words, the general Council of Europe rules for committees foresee that members may progress from being ordinary Bureau members to serving as Chair and/or Vice Chair, but not that they otherwise rotate within the Bureau.

The LRCC has, however, not followed this latter provision, which is also not stipulated in the LRCC rules and regulations. Some members have therefore served in the LRCC Bureau for a substantial period by completing two periods in a given Bureau position, after which they have immediately been elected to another position in the Bureau and served there for two full periods, and so on. This has of course been a decision of the LRCC and the practice is not contrary to at least the letter of the rules, but it has led to the Bureau being composed largely of the same persons for a long time. Therefore, the rotation that was intended to ensure some renewal of the Bureau has largely been inoperative. It calls into question whether, for a Convention that now has 57 Parties, this lack of rotation impacts the chance of many of the Parties to be represented in the LRCC Bureau and whether a greater measure of rotation among States Parties would not have been (and might now be) beneficial.

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[188] *The original conceptions and intentions, as referred to in this article, are based on the recollections of Sjur Bergan and Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, who were, respectively, the Council of Europe and UNESCO officials responsible for the development of the LRC and the establishment of the ENIC Network, and who also served as co-secretaries of the LRCC and the ENIC Network.*

The relationship between the LRCC and the ENIC and NARIC networks

Well before the initiative towards what would become the Lisbon Recognition Convention, there were networks of national centers active in the field of recognition – several of them.[189]

For the Europe Region of UNESCO, the network of National Information Bodies was coordinated by its European Centre for Higher Education (UNESCO/CEPES, from its French name *Centre europeén pour l'enseignement supérieur*). CEPES was located in Bucharest and was seen as one of the relatively few meeting grounds between experts from both sides of the Iron Curtain. Indeed, international recognition of qualifications in higher education was seen as one of the topics on which meaningful conversation could take place across the geopolitical divide.

From 1983, the Council of Europe had a "Network of National Information Centres on Academic Mobility and Equivalence". From the start, it was acknowledged that in some countries information on **mobility** was separated from information on **equivalence**, but in other countries it was in a single organization. So the full name referred to both functions, but in shorthand, MIC/NEIC was used, although the abbreviation NEIC became the prominent one. The decision to establish the NEIC Network was taken by the CC-PU and the CDCC (Council for Cultural Cooperation) in 1980, and the first meeting of the Network was held in Den Haag (The Hague) in 1983 (Deloz 1986: 24–25). This decision followed strong encouragement by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers in 1974 for "the setting up of a competent centre or service in countries where national equivalence information centres or services do not yet exist" in order to "to collect and provide up-to-date and reasonably detailed information on national institutions of upper secondary and higher education; to make the information so collected available to similar information centres in other countries which are signatories of the European Cultural Convention and to the Secretariat of the Council of Europe; [and] to collect and provide at least a minimum of information on foreign education systems, including the objective assessment of foreign qualifications and existing equivalence arrangements, and in particular on those of the signatories of the European Cultural Convention" (Council of Europe 1974).

While the Council of Europe's Division of Higher Education and Research served as the "coordinating body" of the network and ensured cooperation with the European Community (now European Union) and UNESCO, NUFFIC played an important role as a coordinator with the remit to "gather and to disseminate information received from other centres … and to participate in the preparation and to write the minutes of the meetings of the network (*ibid.*: 25). In the first years of the NEIC Network, the Secretariat therefore seems to have been provided by both the Council of Europe and NUFFIC in cooperation. The meeting in The Hague was followed by a second meeting in Rome in 1984 (Hagen 1984) and a third in Bruges in 1985 (Council of Europe and NUFFIC 1985). By the time one of the authors (Sjur Bergan) took up his position with the Council of Europe in February 1991, the NEIC Secretariat was entirely with the Council.

Two aspects of the NEIC Network may be worth noting. Firstly, in keeping with the early conventions of the Council of Europe and the usage at the time, the reference was to "equivalence" rather than

[189] *Appendix 7 provides brief biographical notes on some key actors in recognition.*

"recognition". Secondly, the remit of the network comprised both recognition and academic mobility, and in some countries – like Sweden – the responsibility for these two policy areas was located with different national bodies, so that these countries were represented by both such bodies in the NEIC Network. As the EU strengthened its actions promoting mobility, especially through the ERASMUS program, mobility issues became less relevant to the NEIC Network and subsequently to the ENIC Network.

UNESCO, represented by CEPES, was committed to cooperation on recognition in higher education in Europe through the adoption of its recognition convention for the Europe Region (UNESCO 1979). The first meeting of the national information bodies relevant to this convention was held in 1986, in connection with the third session of the Regional Committee for the UNESCO Europe Region Convention in 1986 (Deloz 1986: 24–25; Kalela 1986: 9). Like the Council of Europe and the European Commission, CEPES/UNESCO sought cooperation between the networks of national centers for recognition from the very beginning. Note that, in the 1980s, UNESCO's Europe Region included but was considerably broader than the States Parties to the Council of Europe's European Cultural Convention.[190] With the exception of the national information centers of a very few Cultural Convention countries that were not members of UNESCO, all NEICs were therefore NIBs, but a good number of NIBs were not NEICs.

For the sake of completeness, it should be recalled that in 1972, ten "socialist countries"– i.e. countries allied with the Soviet Union – had adopted a separate recognition convention, known as the Prague Convention, which came into force in 1975. While most Parties were European some were not, as the Parties were Bulgaria, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Mongolia, Poland, Romania, Vietnam, and the USSR (Nemethy 1990; Sułkowska-Kuszteljak and Rżysci 1986: 35). To our knowledge, the Prague Convention has never been formally abolished but it lost all relevance with the political developments in the late 1980s and early 1990s, that made broad European cooperation possible and without which the LRC would not have come about as a joint Council of Europe/UNESCO convention.

In 1984, the Commission of the European Communities (now the European Commission) started its own network of National Academic Recognition Information Centres. As is clear from the title, the network focused – and still focuses – on academic recognition, i.e. on recognition of higher educational qualifications for academic purposes. The reason for this limitation is the sharp delineation of the topics for which the European Commission does and does not have a mandate.

After 1989, with the diminishing difference in membership between the Council of Europe and UNESCO's Europe Region, the two organizations and the Member states developed a shared vision to merge the two networks into one. This new ENIC network was indeed effected by 1994 – while the conversations on a joint Recognition Convention were already in full swing.

The ENIC network was established as a joint Council of Europe/UNESCO body in 1994 (so three years before the adoption of the LRC), by merger of the NEIC and NIB Networks. The LRCC stipulates that:

[190] *Text and State Parties of the UNESCO 1979 Europe Region Convention: https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-recognition-studies-diplomas-and-degrees-concerning-higher-education-states-belonging, accessed on 3 February 2025.*

> The ENIC Network shall, in its composition restricted to national information centres of the Parties to this Convention, uphold and assist the practical implementation of the Convention by the competent national authorities. The Network shall meet at least once a year in plenary session. It shall elect its President and Bureau in accordance with its terms of reference. (Council of Europe and UNESCO 1997a: Article X.3.2)

The President of the ENIC Network may also participate in the meetings of the LRCC (Article X.2.3); in practice s/he is often a member of his/her national delegation to the LRCC. So far, all LRCC Presidents and Bureau members have had a background in the ENIC Network.

Although the NARIC Network is an EU body and as such has no formal role in relation to the LRCC, the distinction between the ENIC and NARIC networks in relation to the LRC is less clear in practice than it is in theory. The ENIC and NARIC networks hold joint annual meetings, and the ENIC Bureau and the NARIC Advisory Board also meet jointly. In addition, all NARICs are also ENICs, whereas the ENICs of countries not in the EU/EEA or not party to the relevant European Commission programs are not NARICs. Similarly, ENICs of States that have not ratified the LRC (notably the United States and, until its ratification of the LRC in September 2024, Greece) have been involved in practice in discussions and activities related to its implementation.

The recommendations adopted by the LRCC (see below) were all prepared within and approved by the ENIC Network before they were adopted by the LRCC, often after having been considered by the LRCC Bureau. When the recommendations were developed by a working group, this group was appointed by the ENIC Network. The 2017 Recommendation was, however, prepared by the Council of Europe Secretariat and discussed directly within the LRCC Bureau, which indicates the increasingly independent role of this Bureau, as well as the urgency of the matter. This is within the powers granted the LRCC by its Rules of Procedure to "promote the application of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and oversee its implementation (Council of Europe and UNESCO n.d.: Rule 2.1) and also to "initiate the elaboration of such instruments [recommendations and other instruments furthering the implementation of the Convention]" (*ibid.*: Rule 2.2).

In 2023, work on an update of the 2004 Joint ENIC-NARIC Charter of Activities and Services (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2004b) was begun at the initiative of the LRCC Bureau. A working group was established with four members (the ENIC President, one member of the NARIC Advisory Board, the LRCC President and one member of the LRCC Bureau) plus the co-secretariats. The draft text was discussed and consulted with ENIC-NARIC centers at the 2023 ENIC-NARIC meeting in Stockholm through two workshops. The text as amended after the consultation of the networks was submitted to the LRCC Bureau for further consideration.

Another example of cooperation between the LRCC Bureau and the ENIC and NARIC networks is that information on the governance of the LRCC is hosted on a dedicated webpage of the ENIC-NARIC website.[191]

[191] *https://www.enic-naric.net/page-about-governance-LRC, accessed 17 May 2025.*

The LRCC's ability to develop the LRCC and adopt recommendations

The LRCC may adopt "recommendations, declarations, protocols, models of good practice or other instruments to guide the competent authorities of the Parties in the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention" by a simple majority of the Parties (Council of Europe and UNESCO n.d.: Rule 2.2). It may also "adopt amendments to the Lisbon Recognition Convention in accordance with the rules set out for this purpose in the Lisbon Recognition Convention" by a two thirds majority of the Parties (*ibid*.: Rule 2.3), and it "shall decide on any requests of accession made under Article XI.3 of the Lisbon Recognition Convention" (*ibid*.: Rule 2.4) by the same majority of Parties.

The Convention therefore foresees that the LRCC can make decisions by vote. Nevertheless, the LRCC seeks consensus, both generally and in adopting texts developing the LRCC. One could therefore perhaps assume that the recommendations adopted by the LRCC follow the views of the Parties most reluctant to develop new interpretations and practices, and that they represent a kind of lowest common denominator within the LRCC.

This has not been the case, however. Several of the recommendations adopted represent significant advances in recognition practice and, while they do not have the legal force of the LRC itself, they have proven important in developing recognition practice. In particular, the Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2010) develops recognition practice considerably beyond the provisions of the LRCC, and it was originally adopted only four years after the LRCC itself was adopted, two years after it came into force, and then revised nine years later, in 2010. Work on the draft recommendation in fact had started already in 1997, and the group of experts who drafted the LRC further developed their thinking on recognition in the process – beyond what was feasible in the Convention text itself.

Many of these ideas found their way into the recommendation which, as its title indicates, spells out the criteria and procedures for recognition in considerably greater detail than the LRC could possibly stipulate, even if it of course does so in keeping with the text of the Convention. Thus, among other things the Recommendation states that

> [p]rocedures and criteria for the assessment of foreign qualifications should be transparent, coherent and reliable, and they should periodically be reviewed with a view to increasing transparency, taking account of developments in the education field and eliminating requirements leading to undue complications in the procedure. (*ibid*.: para. 6)

It further says that "[i]n the assessment of foreign qualifications concerning higher education, the international and national legal frameworks should be applied in a flexible way with a view to making recognition possible" (*ibid*.: para. 7), and it stipulates that

> Competent recognition authorities should provide advice to individuals enquiring about the possibilities and procedures for submitting formal applications for the recognition or assessment of their foreign qualifications. As appropriate, in the best interests of the individual, advice should also be provided in the course of, as well as after, the formal assessment of the applicants' qualifications, if required. (*ibid*.: para. 17)

This Recommendation also states that "[r]equirements for the translation of documents should be carefully weighed and clearly specified, especially as concerns the need for authorized translations by sworn translators" (*ibid.*: para. 23). It stipulates that "[w]hile the need to establish the authenticity of documents as a part of the assessment procedure is therefore very real, this need should nonetheless be balanced against the burdens placed upon applicants" (*ibid.*: para. 26), and it encourages Parties "to review any national laws requiring overly complicated and costly authentification procedures, such as full legalisation of all documents" (*ibid.*: para. 27). Not least, the Recommendation underlines that

> Qualifications of approximately equal level may show differences in terms of content, profile, workload, quality and learning outcomes. In the assessment of foreign qualifications, these differences should be considered in a flexible way, and only substantial differences in view of the purpose for which recognition is sought (e.g. academic or *de facto* professional recognition) should lead to partial recognition or nonrecognition of the foreign qualifications. (*ibid.*: para. 36).

All these paragraphs underline that the LRC is learner centered – or maybe more appropriately "holder of qualifications centered" – in the sense that it focuses on making the situation easier for applicants even if these provisions may lead to added burdens on the competence recognition authorities. These were not uncontroversial statements at the time, and yet they were adopted by the LRCC.

The Recommendation also encourages the competent recognition authorities to focus on learning outcomes (*ibid.*: para. 40) – which was an advanced statement in 2001, when the Recommendation was adopted – and it stipulates that "[t]he assessment of a foreign qualification should focus on the qualification for which recognition is sought. Previous levels of education should be considered only where these levels have a serious bearing on the outcome of the assessment and should, as far as possible, be limited to qualifications of a level immediately preceding the qualification for which recognition is sought" (*ibid.*: para. 41). This paragraph was a clear response to those countries which in the 1990s, when there was much focus on the length of secondary schooling, maintained that this difference in length in qualifications giving access to higher education could impact on the level and quality of higher education degrees. Also in these cases, the Recommendation takes recognition practice several steps beyond the minimum requirements of the Convention.

The Recommendation on Recognition of Qualifications Held by Refugees, Displaced Persons and Persons in a Refugee-like Situation (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2017), which is dealt with in Chapter 6, also goes relatively far in reinforcing the obligation of States Parties under Article VII. The Recommendation on International Access Qualifications (UNESCO and the Council of Europe 2007) was originally adopted in 1999 as the first subsidiary text under the Convention. It addresses the recognition of qualifications given by non-state actors (at the time, in particular the International Baccalaureate), an issue that several States Party did not wish to include in the LRCC. It stipulates some requirements for providers, including that the "awarding institution should be responsible for the agents it, or its partner institutions, appoint to act on its behalf" (*ibid.*: para. 7) and that these institutions "should be responsible for issuing the qualifications resulting from their transnational study programs" (*ibid.*: para. 8). In other words, if freelance agents operating on behalf of an institution make untrue statements, e.g. exaggerate the quality of the institution and its programs, the institution is ultimately responsible for such false claims even if they are technically not made by the institution itself but by somebody

mandated by it. Likewise, an institution cannot delegate the issuing of its diplomas to any other body. It also makes clear, however, that

> **Qualifications** issued through transnational educational programs, complying with the provisions of the present Code, should be assessed in accordance with the stipulations of the **Council of Europe/ UNESCO Recognition Convention** and its subsidiary texts. (*ibid.*: para. 11, bold type in the original)

This represents a significant obligation on those parties that were reluctant to recognize transnational qualifications.

The Recommendations and other instruments adopted by the LRCC benefited from, and were influenced by, the work done within the ENIC Network to develop recognition practice. In particular, the concept of 'substantial differences' (Hunt and Bergan 2009), which was debated with considerable engagement within the ENIC Network in the late 2000s, became a key concept in the LRCC understanding of recognition.

Among interesting developments in that respect is the UNESCO Global Convention on Recognition, which introduced the definition of substantial differences as "significant differences between the foreign qualification and the qualification of the State Party which would most likely prevent the applicant from succeeding in a desired activity, such as, but not limited to, further study, research activities, or employment opportunities" (UNESCO 2019a: Section 1). Another example is the implementation of Article VII of the LRC regarding recognition of refugees' qualifications also in absence of educational documentation, especially after 2015. While this part is dealt with in depth in Chapter 6, here we simply emphasize that the work of the networks was key to transforming both the principle stated in the Convention, in the 2017 Recommendation on refugees' qualifications adopted by the LRCC (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2017), and other agreed measures into daily practice through detailed and rigorous methodology.

Another dimension, which is perhaps less immediately visible but very relevant in terms of impact, is the work carried out by the ENIC and NARIC networks in applying the LRC principles and supporting a recognition culture in line with this principle at pan-European level. The European Area of Recognition manual, in its first and second editions (EAR Project Consortium 2012, 2023), contributed to transforming the principle into a practice shared and agreed by all the States Parties to the LRC. This is also the role of the training course for credential evaluators, which represents an important opportunity for new staff of ENIC-NARICs to get to know each other and to exchange information about recognition practice, laying the ground for a common vision of recognition principles and practices. ENIC-NARICs also play an important role as 'multipliers' of this culture of recognition at national level with higher education authorities, institutions and staff. They do so through activities like the organization of training, seminars, and institutional support.

Another space for cooperation in this regard is the European Higher Education Area. Since 2018, the EHEA has adopted a peer-support structured approach, based on "solidarity, cooperation and mutual learning", reconfirmed by the Rome and Tirana communiqués (Bologna Process 2020, 2024a). Since 2018, three thematic peer groups have been established focusing on three key commitments crucial to

reinforcing and supporting quality and cooperation inside the EHEA:

- a three-cycle system compatible with the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA and first and second cycle degrees scaled by ECTS;
- compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention; and
- quality assurance in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.[192]

The Thematic Peer Support group on compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention supports full implementation of the LRC through information sharing and exchange of practices, on a scale of topics that ranges from full legal implementation to recognition of alternative pathways to recognition of refugee qualifications.

Even on the basis of this brief overview, we can conclude that the LRCC has demonstrated its ability to further the implementation of the Convention and to develop recognition practice considerably beyond the limits that one could have feared would be imposed by the generally consensus-oriented nature of the LRCC's work and the fact that recognition traditions and culture vary considerably throughout the countries that are Parties to the Convention. In the years soon after the LRCC came into force, the number of Parties was of course lower, and in a formal sense the LRCC could therefore adopt decisions and instruments that would be binding on Parties that ratified the LRCC later. The LRCC was conscious of the need to encourage more countries to ratify the Convention. All members of the ENIC Network were *de facto* if not *de iure* parties to the decisions through the preparatory work in the ENIC Network. These countries were also observers in the LRCC until they became members when they ratified.

| The LRC and challenges of a deteriorating climate for international cooperation

The purpose of the LRC is to make it easier for individual holders of qualifications to get fair recognition of these when they move to another country for work or study. For this to be possible, the international situation more broadly needs to be favorable or at least not outright hostile to such mobility. As discussed at some length in Chapter 3 The LRC in a Broader Context, the international climate was much more favorable to cooperation in the mid-1990s than it is in the mid-2020s. Both the rise of populism – which, among other things, is hostile to migration and in many cases to more extensive international cooperation that populists see as putting restraints on what they refer to as national sovereignty – and the increasing prevalence of armed conflicts that involve at least one State Party to the LRC challenge the basic assumptions on which the LRC is based: that the movement of people is positive and enriching.

Chapter 3 outlines some recent conflicts that challenge European higher education cooperation, and the overview provided in that chapter is not repeated here. However, it is worth underlining that these

[192] *After the 2024 Tirana ministerial conference, the BFUG decided to add a fourth Peer Support Group on the social dimension of higher education. For an overview, see https://ehea.info/page-Bologna-Implementation-Coordination-Group, accessed 6 March 2025.*

conflicts challenge the governance of the LRC in several ways. On the one hand, the LRC's purpose is to facilitate the recognition of qualifications on the basis of those qualifications and, in the words of the LRC without "discrimination … on any ground such as the applicant's gender, race, color, disability, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status, or on the grounds of any other circumstance not related to the merits of the qualification for which recognition is sought" (Article III.1).[193] On the other hand, the LRC is an international treaty between States, and as such, it is not unaffected by the overall climate of international cooperation or lack thereof.

An important challenge is to distinguish between the LRC itself, which provides rights to individual holders of qualifications, which is not being challenged, and the governance of the LRC, in which the participation of States Parties guilty of serious violations of the provisions of the LRC and/or the values basis on which the Convention builds is at the very least not unproblematic. As we saw in Chapter 3, in February 2023 the LRCC adopted a decision that limits but does not suspend the participation of Russia and Belarus in the LRCC because of the role of both countries in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Similar decisions have not been made in reference to other serious international conflicts, including those discussed in Chapter 3.

Resolving the paradox of the LRC's intended purpose of helping individual holders of qualifications to obtain fair recognition of these while at the same time being a treaty between States and therefore affected by broader international developments will be an important challenge in the years to come for both the LRCC and the organizations providing its Secretariat – the Council of Europe and UNESCO.

| Conclusions and ways forward

After 25 years, the LRC is "still going strong", and its governance arrangements have largely demonstrated that they are fit for purpose. In particular, the LRCC has proved itself able and willing to adopt significant recommendations with the potential to improve the implementation of the LRC, even on issues on which States Parties hold divergent views and have developed different practice. The Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications, which was adopted only two years after the Convention came into force, outlined important measures for its implementation. Recommendations on international access qualification and on refugees' qualifications address specific issues that are either not covered explicitly by the Convention or on which the provisions of the LRC are fairly general. The LRCC has also conducted two much needed surveys of the state of implementation of the Convention, the first of which played a part in developing the Recommendation on the recognition of refugees' qualifications as well as the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees. Both are dealt with in Chapter 6. However, as discussed above, it may be argued that the LRCC has been less successful in dealing with the repercussions on its work of conflicts between States Parties.

As we look ahead, it is important to emphasize that the LRC has played and continues to play a key

[193] *The wording is based on the European Convention on Human Rights, which at the time did not include reference to gender identity and sexual orientation.*

role in ensuring the fair recognition of qualifications throughout the European region. Its governance arrangements – with the roles of the Convention Committee and the ENIC Network, as well as the ability and will of both to continue to develop recognition policy through both formal recommendations and the sharing of good practice – play an important role in ensuring the continued relevance of the LRC.

Even if we therefore believe the LRCC governance arrangements are fit for purpose, we believe that some questions are of continued relevance to the work of the LRCC and the ENIC Network:

- What other areas of recognition policy would benefit from specific recommendations adopted by the LRCC?
- Could surveys of the implementation of the Convention be conducted and published somewhat more frequently, for example every four rather than every six years?
- How could the implementation surveys be better followed up by policy development and, if required, work with specific States Parties that have demonstrated serious lack of implementation? The work on refugees' qualifications is a good example of follow-up, but it is an exception.
- Could the implementation surveys be expanded to include new topics related to the Convention, including assessing the impact of the LRC in terms of improved access to applicants' preferred education programs and/or professional activities, less frequent denial of access, and decrease of instances in which holders of qualifications had to undergo education aimed at learning outcomes they already possessed?
- Could the LRCC react against States Parties that fundamentally violate the basic principles and values on which the LRC builds, and if so, how?
- Could a greater rotation in the membership of the LRCC Bureau ensure greater commitment of States Parties to the work of the LRCC and hence to the implementation of the LRC?

5.2. The Role of Stakeholders

Jens Vraa-Jensen

| Introduction

Over several centuries, decisions about the enrolment of students to universities were seen as an important part of university autonomy and thus these decisions were – like most other decisions in universities until after 1968 – taken mainly by professors.

When universities were established as state institutions and thus became part of the public education system, even if this was still in embryonic form, it was very common that regulations and frameworks established limitations on autonomy, but still left most decisions to the individual universities and their collegial decision-making bodies or committees.

It is only within the past five decades or so that national systems or structures in relation to enrolment and recognition have been established in many countries and provided with a set of national rules and regulations which governed the admission procedures and thus also applied to the recognition of foreign credits and degrees.

This "professionalisation" in (national) bodies outside the individual universities does provide improved guarantees of equal treatment of applicants/students with equal merits and credits. And the establishment of a set of European conventions on recognition from 1953 onwards (see Chapter 1 The Road to Lisbon) gave students a much higher certainty that their foreign qualifications would be recognised fairly, and the Lisbon Recognition Convention stipulates that foreign qualifications shall be recognised if no substantial difference can be demonstrated.

Another advantage of a centralised, national system is that it will be able to diminish commodification of universities and higher education. If no central recognition system were in place, it would be far easier for entrepreneurial universities, rogue providers or diploma mills to sell a degree or diploma to hopeful students, who would be left in deep uncertainty as to how and whether the expense was worth the (very high) price they would pay. This risk is of course also reduced by a central and efficient quality assurance system, which is operating under a set of standards and guidelines, which are broadly accepted and implemented. The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (Bologna Process 2015a) have provided the standards for quality assurance in Europe since they were first adopted by EHEA Ministers in 2005 and then revised in 2015.[194]

These steps towards a national system coincided with a greater importance given to higher education, to knowledge production and dissemination to a higher number of students and to a broader part of the public sphere. This, in turn, was part of greater changes in the context of universities shifting from elite to mass institutions. In most countries in Europe, this development accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s.

In parallel, and in many cases as an integral process, there was growing pressure from inside the university sector for enhanced relations with "the outside world" (mainly job creation and innovation in private business), but there was even more pressure from outside forces in both the private and public sectors. Individual universities and the entire university sector were put under pressure nationally and internationally to become more market-oriented and act as private enterprises in a global market in the growing "knowledge economy". This development was part of the development of neo-liberalism as the predominant economic doctrine from the late 1970s/early 1980s (Harvey 2005, Stieglitz 2024) and of New Public Management as its manifestation in the public sector.

Collegial governance models were largely replaced by managerial and hierarchical structures, geared to react quickly to shifting market relations and funding options rather than focusing on different academic needs, including the need for research-based knowledge, holistic education and wisdom. In many countries, the elected leadership of higher education institutions was replaced by leaders hired under a management contract. In some countries, both leadership models co-existed.

The introduction of managerial structures, theories, and practice in university governance meant that market approaches, based on ideas and terms from economic life and theory, became predominant. These new ideas included the involvement of stakeholders as parties in a labour market relation.

Stakeholders (or "consultative members"[195] in the Bologna Process) became a term of growing importance in developing involvement of many different groups which until then had been unknown to the life and function of universities – and became a norm in governmental and intergovernmental committees and structures of relevance to higher education.

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[194] *In the Tirana Communiqué, Ministers "invite the authors of the ESG to propose a revised version by 2026 to the BFUG, to be adopted by us at our 2027 Ministerial conference" (Bologna Process 2024b: 3).*

[195] *There are currently eight consultative members: the European University Association (EUA) and EURASHE representing higher education institutions, ETUCE/Education International representing higher education staff, the European Students' Union (ESU) representing students, BusinessEurope representing employers, ENQA representing quality assurance, and the Council of Europe and UNESCO as international organizations. The European Commission is a member of the EHEA rather than a consultative member.*

| Who are the stakeholders in relation to universities and recognition – interests and *raison-d'être*?

A general definition of stakeholder groups can be found in Wikipedia:

> "groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist", as defined in the first usage of the word in a 1963 internal memorandum at the Stanford Research Institute. The theory was later developed and championed by R. Edward Freeman in the 1980s. Since then it has gained wide acceptance in business practice and in theorizing relating to strategic management, corporate governance, business purpose and corporate social responsibility (CSR).[196]

The concept that universities without stakeholder support would "cease to exist", as the quotation says, must of course be challenged. We are not witnessing a total adoption of the entire economic term and theory in universities and higher education. The only stakeholders who will be able to make the university "cease to exist" are students and academic staff. The fundamental survival of universities or university systems will never be dependent on others – even though universities will be deeply dependent on mainly public funding and regulation if they are part of a national education system. In short, universities cannot exist without students and (academic) staff, but they can survive without the involvement of employers and other organisations, who are external to the university. Students and staff are, in management terms, "need to have", while other stakeholders are "nice to have".

This does not mean that other stakeholders are basically irrelevant to the positive development of universities and higher education systems – which include recognition. Important stakeholders are groups characterised by general recognition of their legitimate rights and interest in higher education and universities, learning outcomes, education quality or qualifications.

Among the external stakeholders, employers' organisations (in both the public and private sector) have a strong and legitimate interest in the quality of studies and the competences of graduates. In all debates about developments in the future labour market, it is important to keep in mind that graduates are employed by the private as well as the public sector. Thus, both private and public employers must be included in debates about employability and the required competences and skills – this is equally important at national and international levels.

Fortunately, many of the generic/academic qualifications are of high importance in any job, while there may in many cases be differences in the subject-specific skills required (see Chapter 4 New Developments). Often it will be important to consider differences of focus and interests between small and large companies. Inputs from all parts of the labour market are of value and will potentially ease the path for graduates from studies to work.

In general, employers will mainly focus on the employability component of the mission of higher education. However, the mission of education, particularly higher education, consists according to the Council of Europe of four equally important elements:

[196] *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stakeholder_(corporate)*, *accessed 3 February 2025.*

- preparation for sustainable employment;
- preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
- personal development;
- the development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base. (Council of Europe 2007, para. 5)

Preparation for employment is a very important purpose of higher education, but the views of stakeholders who are concerned with all four dimensions listed above should be considered even more valuable to the development of higher education and thus to recognition than those who mainly focus on a single dimension.

Quality assurance and accreditation agencies constitute an external stakeholder group presumably with a holistic approach to the mission of and output from higher education. Taking the ESG as an example, there is a clear priority for inclusion of both the holistic/generic dimension like critical thinking and academic theories, together with methods, and the subject-specific skills into assessment of programmes or institutions. The ESG are recognised as the 'Gold Standard' for quality assurance and accreditation across Europe and in many regions outside Europe. Thus, the agencies who operate in accordance with this standard are very relevant in any discussion about development of recognition of studies abroad.

Subject-specific professional organisations at national or international level (like associations of engineers, historians, medical doctors etc.) cannot be considered equally relevant in this discussion, as they are by definition interested mainly in specific subjects and less concerned about quality and learning outcomes in the higher education sector as such.

Students and students' unions are one of the most important groups to universities who take the connection between teaching and research seriously. Universities based on the nexus of teaching and research would of course "cease to exist" if the students disappeared. Students' organisations have a very important and specific role to play in debates about teaching and learning (particularly in discussions of student centred learning versus standardised teaching materials and methods) and freedom to learn, which is an important dimension of academic freedom.

Staff and their trade unions or professional associations are the second group without which institutions would "cease to exist". High quality in teaching and learning is created in the classroom (whether virtual or on campus) in the interaction between highly qualified teachers and engaged students. The quality of teaching and learning is also dependent on the high quality of research, which can support teaching and learning outcomes for the purpose of providing the latest knowledge and wisdom for the graduates, and through them for the labour market. This means that staff and students are two stakeholder groups who are very relevant in any debate on future developments of rules and regulations about recognition and the quality of higher education in general.

University leadership and rectors' conferences are by nature also important to the life and survival of universities. History has over centuries proved that universities can survive without appointed managers and have been able to fulfil their mission based on collegiality and elected academic leadership. This is reflected in the UNESCO recommendation on the status of higher education teaching personnel (UNESCO 1997).

The role of leadership has for reasons mentioned above changed dramatically and has become much more complex over recent decades. There is no doubt that professional administrative support is needed for institutions and their internal life and external position, and it is vital to their survival as universities. One of the most important roles of the leadership and management in relation to their internal life is to provide the best possible circumstances for the teaching, learning and research processes. Equally, it is necessary to defend the basic values of academic freedom and institutional autonomy and protect individual members of staff and students against violation of these values. In connection with recognition, rectors are important as leaders of institutions where quality education is created and thus given the ability to provide irreplaceable inputs to recognition processes and decisions.

Public authorities responsible for the education system (the national owners of higher education systems) have a unique role to play in a dual capacity. They establish and administer the national legal framework around institutions in public education systems (including provision of substantial public funding) at national levels. At the same time, they are national representatives in intergovernmental organisations and contexts (the European Higher Education Area, UNESCO, Council of Europe, EU). In that capacity, they can set up international systems of support and recommendations, while legally binding conventions or other regulations for individual universities are rare, with the Lisbon Recognition Convention as one of the exceptions. Their role in relation to recognition is crucial as they are negotiating and deciding on the international conventions and other aspects of the legal and practical recognition framework, in Europe including the ENIC and NARIC networks. And they are responsible for ratification and implementation at national level. They are in fact the "owners" of the conventions and of their implementation/ratification at national level. As such, they should be taking advice from the other stakeholders and of course from the staff and structures of the intergovernmental institutions themselves.

As international or intergovernmental organisations, UNESCO and the Council of Europe are important as the international overseers of conventions like the LRC and of several recommendations, like the 1997 Recommendation concerning the status of higher education teaching personnel (UNESCO 1997). The EU, and in particular the Commission, is formally restricted by the EU Treaty (EU 2012) from establishing legally binding measures in this area because the treaty defines education as a national responsibility and competence. Nevertheless, the Commission is playing important roles through policy papers and recommendations, membership of the EHEA and establishment of networks among individual universities across the EU countries.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee and the ENIC and NARIC networks are in this case also owners and administrators of the LRC and cannot be categorised as a stakeholder group.

How could recognition benefit from stakeholder involvement?

In the sections above, we have discussed different stakeholders and their main interests within the (higher) education system. We now proceed with suggestions for including stakeholders in the future governance of the LRC and perhaps also of the national centres and their networks (ENIC and NARIC).

The LRC, in Article X, establishes a committee which consists of one representative of each State Party to the convention. Other governmental and non-governmental organisations which are active in the field of recognition may be invited as observers. Thus, there are no permanent stakeholder representatives in the current governance structures, but stakeholders may be invited as observers if a majority in the Committee decide to do so. In practice, the Bureau and the Co-Secretariats make this decision. Similarly, stakeholders may be invited to participate as observers in the annual joint meetings of the ENIC and NARIC networks.

A revision of Section X in the convention will be needed if stakeholder organisations are to be more involved, not only as invitees but in their own capacity and on a permanent basis.

We have highlighted differences between different stakeholder groups, and it would be relevant to mirror those differences in a new structure containing clauses on stakeholder involvement. Such a review would need to specify their status in the governing body and also specify whether different stakeholder groups have different functions and status in this body. The most relevant groups are those who are closest to the daily life of universities and are directly engaged and involved in creating quality education. These are those representing institutions (EUA, IAU and EURASHE), students (ESU) and teachers (EI/ETUCE). As the European Region in the sense of the LRC is not limited to Europe alone, similar organisations from North America should be eligible for participation on the same conditions as European organisations.

Such stakeholder groups could become consultative members/observers of the Committee on a permanent basis and would contribute with knowledge and insights about conditions and circumstances with a perspective from inside the sector. They should also be able to participate in the annual meetings of the networks as well as in seminars and similar activities.

Other stakeholder groups with their different perspectives from outside the institutions could be given the opportunity to participate in the annual meetings of the networks and seminars.

There are of course other ways of improving involvement from the sector stakeholders. The recommendation here is considered as the most productive in relation to the existing activities and governance structures with regard to a wish to inform about the realities in the institutions and the view of external groups like employers.

5.3. Furthering the Professional Development of Credential Evaluators

Letizia Brambilla Pisoni, Chiara Finocchietti, Kees Kouwenaar, and Erwin Malfroy

In addition to the authorities involved in governance and the stakeholders, a third key group for implementation of the LRC consists of the people who assess foreign qualifications and decide (or give authoritative advice) on whether the applicant can be allowed to carry out the desired activities – in further studies or work.

This group consists of two types of professionals: those in higher education institutions and those at a higher level who are concerned with the system of higher education. In the European context, the second group consists mainly of professionals operating under the formal approval of the national educational authorities.

The existence of professionals dedicated to the assessment of foreign qualifications predates the genesis and adoption of the LRC at both institutional and national level, often by a considerable timespan. The German Zentralstelle für ausländische Bildungswesen (Central Office for Foreign Education) dates back to 1905[197] and NUFFIC offered its first advice on a foreign qualification in 1958, some six years after its foundation (Horst: 31).

Also the networks of national centers for assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications predate the LRC, with the birth of the National Information Centres on Academic Recognition (NARIC) in 1984

[197] *The Zentralstelle was established on 1 April 1905: https://www.kmk.org/aktuelles/artikelansicht/zentralstelle-fuer-auslaendisches-bildungswesen-zab-feiert-100geburtstag.html, accessed 19 May 2025.*

and the establishment of the European Network of Information Centres (ENIC) 10 years later (even if the two previous separate networks, NEICs and NIB, under the aegis of the Council of Europe and UNESCO, were already active before the NARIC Network came into being). The first part of this chapter has provided information on the ENIC and NARIC networks.

So although the work on recognition of qualifications has existed in Europe for much longer, for more than 25 years the Lisbon Recognition Convention has served as the legal framework for the principles and practice of recognition in Europe, providing structured configuration to the work of recognition.
Arguably, however, the genesis and adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention created a new landscape and a new paradigm for the professional development of credential evaluators – at institutional and national level.

There have been studies and publications on the concepts, theory and practice of recognition – for an overview, see the ENIC-NARIC website[198] – and many training activities have been developed for professional work in the field at different levels and in different contexts, for ENIC-NARIC staff or higher education institutions, for example. In this publication there is every reason to focus on the professional role of the credential evaluator, both in terms of the evolution of specific professionality and of the definition of core tasks and related skills and knowledge. Since approximately 2015, the need for better support, definition and advocacy for the profession has arisen, as witnessed, for instance, by the establishment of the first Association for International Credential Evaluation Professionals (TAICEP), which held its first general meeting in 2015, and which structures its activity around the four goals of advocacy, knowledge, professional development, and sustainability.[199]

In the first part of this section, we aim to sketch how the recognition profession has developed since – and probably because of – the LRC through three lenses:

1. A lens focused on targeted initiatives to create material with tools, methods and best practices to further recognition in accordance with the LRC;

2. A lens focused on targeted initiatives to transfer knowledge, understanding and skills required for granting fair recognition by offering training by experts to the broader community of practitioners;

3. A lens focused on general activities in the community of recognition practitioners, in which initiatives for improvement and dissemination were rooted and fostered.

In the second part of this section, we present a case study on the professional development of recognition experts and credential evaluators in a national setting: Italy.
Finally, we look at what appear to be the main challenges to keep up and further develop the level of professionalism among those involved in the assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications.

[198] *https://www.enic-naric.net/, accessed 17 May 2025; particularly Recognition tools & projects and Topics*
[199] *https://www.taicep.org/taiceporgwp/about/, accessed 19 May 2025.*

| Experts jointly creating material

Since 1997, an impressive number of working groups has examined a broad variety of issues in the context of the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. These issues include procedures and criteria for the assessment of foreign qualifications, the Diploma Supplement, international diplomas with access qualifications like the international and European baccalaureates, transnational education, refugees with incomplete documentation, substantial differences, joint degrees, the use of qualifications frameworks for recognition, automatic recognition, digitalization, national LRC implementation, ethics, and alternative pathways (e.g. micro-credentials). Many of these groups convened under the umbrella of the EHEA; some had financial support from the European Commission.

Among the materials they created, we may list the following, without claiming to be comprehensive:

- Recommendation on International Access Qualifications (UNESCO and the Council of Europe 1999),
- Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications, 2001, revised 2010 (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2010),
- Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees, 2004, revised 2016 (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2016b),
- Recommendation on the Use of Qualifications Frameworks (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2013),
- Recommendation on Recognition of Qualifications held by Refugees, Displaced Persons and Persons in a Refugee-like Situation (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2017),
- EAR: European Area of Recognition Manual (EAR Project Consortium 2012),
- EAR HEI: European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions (AR-Net Project Consortium 2020).

Many of these topics are treated in substance in other parts of this publication. The reason for mentioning them here is that the working groups developing these documents tended to bring together experts from individual ENICs/NARICs, leading recognition professionals in their own countries. In these groups, experts exchanged information and views from their national contexts and jointly created new expertise and new solutions to specific challenges to the implementation of the LRC.

Through this process, they also grew in strength as a community of experts, dedicated to a constructive approach to solving recognition problems and breaking down barriers still existing among national authorities and higher education institutions.

Initiatives to transfer recognition competence

The ENIC-NARIC experts used their expertise to reach out to recognition professionals at the level of higher education institutions to inform them about the LRC and familiarize them with its key principles, to share information and methods for a fair and equitable treatment of holders of foreign qualifications as intended in the LRC, and to promote further development through the recommendations and manuals referred to above.

The European Association for International Education (EAIE)[200] played an important role in the dissemination of recognition expertise within the new LRC paradigm. Founded well before the LRC (in 1989), the EAIE had a dedicated Admissions & Credential Evaluation (ACE) section from the very start. ACE organized sessions and workshops as part of the annual EAIE conferences, and after 1997 these took the LRC and the ensuing development of expertise as their point of departure. ACE – later transformed into one of EAIE's "expert communities" – has continued to organize workshops and sessions (at the annual conferences and at the EAIE Academy) with a frequency of roughly three per year. Assuming an average attendance of at least 15 participants, we can estimate that more than 1200 participants have benefitted from this channel for dissemination of the LRC approach to recognition.

At the moment, however, the expert community on recognition no longer exists as such and has been turned into the Thematic Committee 'Marketing and Admissions' with a different focus.[201]

A special mention may be made of efforts to transfer competence in recognizing refugees' qualifications. Under the auspices of the Council of Europe, the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR; see Chapter 6 Refugees' Qualifications) has organized competence development specifically geared toward the EQPR. A part of this competence development focuses on recognition methodology, while a part is made up of modules on qualifications from specific areas or countries, such as Afghanistan.[202] Publications on specific recognition issues also play an important role (Ullrich *et al*. 2022).

The *Diploma di Corso di perfezionamento* is a qualification foreseen in Italian legislation since the 1990s in the national qualifications framework, in line with ex Art. 6, *Law 341/1990* e *Art. 1 paragraph 15 of Law 4/1999*. The law foresees that Italian universities can, in accordance with their autonomy and within their budget, organize training and professional courses aimed at participation in public competitions, updating competences and for other relevant purposes.

[200] See https://www.eaie.org/, accessed 20 May 2025.
[201] See https://www.eaie.org/get-involved/volunteer/thematic-committees.html, accessed 20 May 2025.
[202] https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/focus-on-afghanistan-training-offered-for-evaluating-afghan-refugee-credentials, accessed 20 May 2025.

Building a community of practitioners

The creation and strengthening of the community of practitioners can be seen as the third element in professionalization of those involved in the assessment of foreign qualifications for the purpose of admission to specific further activities. With expertise being developed and shared among the leading experts, then disseminated among the wider group of practitioners in a growing spirit of a community dedicated to best practice, a culture conducive to fair recognition was slowly but surely created.

In addition to the regular meetings and informal interaction in the ENIC and NARIC networks and within the EAIE, we should mention the ENIC-NARIC listserv in this context. The listserv was set up as an e-mail channel of exchange within the ENIC and NARIC networks. It is a place where individual credential evaluators can ask for advice from other members of the network on specific issues, such as a qualification from an institution or program with which (s)he is unfamiliar. The responses are also visible to all members of the network, so that the listserv also functions as an informal measure of quality control. Over time, this exchange has also helped to build a sense of community.

Case study: Italy

One step further in enhancing the professional competence of those assessing foreign credentials is to establish what knowledge, skills, understanding, and professional values and attitudes distinguish the accomplished professional, and to train credential evaluators within their respective national contexts.

Italy is one of the countries that have done so on an extensive scale. The Italian ENIC-NARIC has provided various training activities to higher education institutions in the past, including the experience of offering full degrees at master's level on the topic of the internationalisation of higher education in cooperation with Italian higher education institutions (i.e., the two editions of the Interhed Master's[203] in 2010 and 2011), and in 2020 the idea matured of offering the first micro-credentials for credential evaluators in Italy.[204] The idea developed in parallel to the growing interest in and debate at European level on micro-credentials, seen as short learning opportunities targeted at upskilling or reskilling. It also coincided with the outbreak of COVID-19, which strongly impacted higher education while also serving as a stimulus for study and training.

The first micro-credential courses took place online in June–September 2020, with a workload of 12 ECTS credits. They were organized together with an Italian university (Università Europea di Roma) and gathered 40 participants, the maximum number allowed. Participants who successfully completed the course received both the micro-credential certificate awarded in the blockchain *Diplome* ecosystem of CIMEA and an official Italian qualification, the *Diploma di Corso di perfezionamento*. During the course, with the first cohort of students, there was strong support for and discussion of the need to have more clarity and transparency in the role of credential evaluator, to find ways to stay connected and to have a stable network of experts and colleagues for the exchange of information, practices, and experience.

It was in this environment that the idea to create an Italian association of credential evaluators arose,

[203] *https://www.cimea.it/Upload/Documenti/803_brochure_Master_InterHed_2011.pdf, accessed 20 May 2025.*
[204] *https://www.cimea.it/EN/pagina-corso-di-perfezionamento, accessed 20 May 2025.*

to support professionals and enhance the quality of the profession. The need to define and create transparency on who can be members of this association and the opportunity to do so emerged at the same time. For this reason, in October 2020, just after the end of the micro-credential course, work started on defining the tasks of a credential evaluator, the related knowledge and skills, and the level of autonomy. The path to this formalization was the standard one used for non-regulated professions. At the initiative of the Italian ENIC-NARIC, a group of experts was created to define the standards of the profession together with the Italian standards body UNI,[205] a private, nonprofit association that oversees the development, publication and dissemination of voluntary technical standards for non-regulated professions in Italy. The group was led by CIMEA and had representatives of the Conference of University Rectors, of Italian higher education institutions and of the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research as observers. The process took one year, and the outcome of this work, Prassi di Riferimento UNI/PdR 120:2021 (UNI Reference Practice Number 120:2021), was published in October 2021 and made available to the public in both Italian and English.[206] It begins by saying:

> The credential evaluator has advanced professional skills in the management of recognition procedures and in the evaluation and comparison of qualifications, with knowledge of the different models of education and training at national and international level. These requirements are specified, starting from the specific tasks and activities and the identification of the related contents, in terms of knowledge and skills, to also clearly identify the level of autonomy and responsibilities in line with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). (UNI PdR 120:2021, preamble)

As that description indicates, the work conducted with UNI was in some aspects a research project, defining the reference legislation, the tasks and activities of credential evaluators, their knowledge, skills, responsibilities and level of autonomy. In the context of this publication it is interesting to notice that this text, with all its subsidiary documents, served as the basis to identify, describe and define the tasks, the knowledge and skills of credential evaluators in Italy.

The credential evaluator is defined in section 3.10 as:

> professional, capable and qualified, whose responsibility is the evaluation and recognition of scholarly and academic qualifications, professional qualifications, and any other certification, even partial, present in one or more sectors of education and training of a country in terms of comparability, equivalence and nostrification of qualifications from other foreign systems, in consideration of the specific components of a qualification, i.e. the level, duration, workload, entry requirements, academic and/or professional rights. The credential evaluator is also an expert in matters of national and international legislation on the subject of recognition of qualifications and use of the tools and documentation developed in this sector (national and international qualifications frameworks, grading systems, credit accumulation systems, supporting documentation linked to qualifications, diploma supplements, etc. (UNI 2021: 9)[207]

The mapping exercise identified 15 tasks, 44 categories of knowledge (K) and 51 skills (S). A few examples of knowledge and skills follow.[208]

[205] *https://www.uni.com accessed 20 May 2025.*
[206] *https://store.uni.com/en/uni-pdr-120-2021, accessed 20 May 2025.*
[207] *PDR_credential evaluator_EN, pag. 9, §3.10: https://store.uni.com/uni-pdr-120-2021, accessed 20 May 2025.*
[208] *Ibid.*

Knowledge:
K1: Be familiar with the principles of the Lisbon Convention and its subsidiary texts, with the principles of the international conventions on the recognition of qualifications (global convention and regional conventions) and with the national legislation on recognition.
K2: Understand what information on the qualifications for which recognition is being requested is necessary and adequate for the procedures and criteria adopted to be transparent, consistent and reliable.
K30: Know the theory and practice at national and international level of the concept of substantial difference in line with the Lisbon Convention.

Skills:
S1: Know how to conduct the evaluation procedure, from the request to the appeal, in line with the principles of the Lisbon Convention and its subsidiary texts, and on the basis of national legislation on recognition.
S2: Know how to find necessary and adequate information on the qualifications for which recognition is requested for the procedures and criteria adopted to be transparent, consistent and reliable.
S34: Know how to identify differences that can be defined as substantial, in line with the Lisbon Convention, in the qualification for which recognition is requested and the corresponding qualification in the system in which recognition is sought, with respect to the purpose for which such recognition is requested.

The document establishes the distinction between two different levels of credential evaluator, Junior and Senior, and identifies the specific tasks and activities for each of the two levels.

After its publication and in compliance with and safeguarding the principles promoted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the Italian Professional Association of Credential Evaluators (APICE) was established.[209] APICE networks and supports the community of credential evaluation professionals, promoting quality and collaboration through training, research and professional development. APICE is the first national-level network in Italy (and possibly worldwide) of experts in the evaluation and academic recognition of qualifications, with the aim of enhancing the professionalism of its members, protecting their interests and looking after their permanent professional training.

As a professional association established on a voluntary and nonprofit basis, APICE aims to develop the profession itself, contributing to ensure the right of everyone to an evaluation of their qualifications according to transparent, consistent and reliable criteria and procedures. The association also aims to determine and guarantee the professional standards and ethical norms of the profession of credential evaluation, recognising its fundamental role in the implementation of national and international policies regarding the recognition of qualifications. The association was created in December 2021, just after the publication of the UNI Reference Practice; two years after the creation of the association, with 15 members, almost 100 professionals were members, from the north to the south of the country, representing one third of Italian higher education institutions and with the support of the Conference of Italian University Rectors. The list of members may be consulted through the APICE website. APICE

[209] *https://www.apice-italia.it/EN/pagina-homepage, accessed 20 May 2025.*

reflects the need of participants to be able to access continuous training and information, to share the feeling of professional identity previously lacking formalisation and a defined set of standards, and to promote their desire to create a network allowing Italian credential evaluators to learn about the experiences of colleagues who operate nationally and internationally, sharing questions and best practices.

Some 25 years after the entry into force of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, those who are in charge of recognition procedures recognize and interact with each other at international and national level with regular opportunities of networking and professional development. It would be no surprise if in the near future some child in some part of the world says to his/her parents: “When I grow up, I want to be a credential evaluator!”

UNIVERSITAS QUADERNI

N. 01
September 2025

CHAPTER 6

Recognition of Refugees' Qualifications

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Background and context

The recognition of qualifications held by refugees (hereafter: refugees' qualifications)[210] became an urgent issue in Europe following the big increase in the number of refugees arriving from the summer of 2015. Most of these refugees came from the Middle East, in particular Syria and Iraq. Europe had of course long been a refuge for people fleeing their home countries, some of whom came from elsewhere in Europe. The welcome extended to those who fled Hungary in the wake of the uprising in 1956 is only one example. The increase in the number of refugees from summer 2015 was nevertheless both sudden and substantial, so that most European governments and societies started referring to a "refugee crisis". In addition to the sudden increase in numbers, there was also a concentration in terms of the countries of origin: over 900 000 refugees arrived in Europe in 2015, but 75 per cent came from just three countries: Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. At least 3 500 died before they could reach Europe.[211]

Civil society and public authorities reacted quickly to this challenge, albeit with some exceptions. They realized that Europe was badly prepared to handle the sudden increase in numbers and that measures had to be developed to handle similar situations in the future. Nobody could predict when and how the next refugee crisis would arise, but many Europeans were conscious that a new crisis was likely. Nevertheless, that it would come with the unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was unexpected. Numbers are still fluid, because some refugees return home even as others leave, but as of February 2025 some 6.3 million refugees from Ukraine were recorded in other parts of Europe.[212] It should also be noted that in fall 2023, more than 100 000 people were driven out of Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh) by Azerbaijan's armed takeover of this area populated almost exclusively by ethnic Armenians,[213] albeit without the same international mobilization as the one in favor of Ukraine.

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[210] *The reference in the LRC is to "refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation". In the discussions leading to the adoption of the UNESCO Global Convention in 2019, the UNHCR argued that "persons in a refugee-like situation" is not – or is no longer – a category used by the UNHCR, so the Global Convention refers to "refugees and displaced persons". In both cases, it is important to note that displaced persons may be displaced within the borders of a country, as with many of those who had to flee parts of Georgia occupied by Russia. The situation of those displaced persons is in many respects similar to that of refugees; https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Housing/HousingStrategies/States/Georgia_1.pdf, accessed 20 May 2025.*

[211] *All figures come from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2015/12/56ec1ebde/2015-year-europes-refugee-crisis.html, accessed 20 May 2025.*

[212] *https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine, accessed 20 May 2025.*

[213] *https://www.cfr.org/article/photos-nagorno-karabakh-exodus, accessed 20 May 2025.*

Why is recognizing refugees' qualifications important?

Recognition can make the difference between a vicious circle and a virtuous circle. In the vicious circle, refugees have no way of having their qualifications assessed and valued; they are kept in passivity, are demotivated, and will ultimately lose some of their real qualifications for lack of use. Qualifications are like a language – if you do not use them, you lose them. They are not like riding a bike or skiing, which, once you have learned, you do not quite forget even if your skills become rusty. Passivity also leads to loss of self-esteem, and host societies easily come to see refugees as a burden – a view that refugees may ultimately come to share.

If, on the other hand, refugees' qualifications are recognized, refugees maintain and improve their qualifications, gain respect and self-esteem, and are able to use their qualifications to the benefit of their host societies. If and when the refugees are able to return home, they will bring new competences and help rebuild their societies of origin (Bergan and Skjerven 2019).

Which refugees' qualifications?

We are considering how refugees' qualifications can be recognized when they cannot be adequately documented. Refugees are often unable to take education diplomas or other documents with them when they flee, and it is difficult – often impossible – to obtain documentation, or verification when considered necessary for recognition, after the refugees have arrived in their host countries. The authorities of their country may be unwilling to help those who fled, requests for documents may put remaining family members in danger, archives may have been destroyed in war, or it may technically and practically be very difficult to obtain documentation even if it exists and even if the institution issuing the qualification is willing to cooperate.

If, to the contrary, the refugees are able to document their qualifications adequately, their cases will be treated as ordinary requests for recognition. As discussed below, the recent case of Ukrainian refugees shows that, even if refugees are unable to take their education documents with them, the authorities of their home country may make proof of their qualifications available online in secure ways.

What does the LRC say?

The Lisbon Recognition Convention (Council of Europe and UNESCO 1997a) obliges States Parties to recognize refugees' qualifications. Its Article VII reads:

> Each Party shall take all feasible and reasonable steps within the framework of its education system and in conformity with its constitutional, legal, and regulatory provisions to develop procedures designed to assess fairly and expeditiously whether refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation fulfil the relevant requirements for access to higher education, to further higher education programmes or to employment activities, even in cases in which the qualifications obtained in one of the Parties cannot be proven through documentary evidence.

Article VII was included in the LRC because in 1996–97, when the LRC was being finalized and adopted, Europe was faced with a refugee crisis, with refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina as the largest group.

After the end of the armed conflicts in former Yugoslavia,[214] the sense of urgency abated, and the first monitoring of the implementation of the LRC showed that only nine States Parties (or more accurately, education systems[215]) had adopted national regulations to implement Article VII, while in six countries regulations had been established by the competent recognition authorities[216] (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2016a: 58). When the influx of refugees to Europe increased substantially from summer 2015, Europe was therefore ill prepared to recognize their qualifications when these could not be adequately documented.

| Improving policy: a recommendation on recognizing refugees' qualifications

This lack of preparation led the Council of Europe, in an understanding with UNESCO as the other co-secretariat, to take the lead in developing, with the LRCC Bureau, a Recommendation on Recognition of Qualifications Held by Refugees, Displaced Persons and Persons in a Refugee-like Situation (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2017), which was adopted at an extraordinary meeting of the LRCC in November 2017. The Recommendation outlines the measures that countries should take to facilitate recognition as stipulated in Article VII, which include:

- reviewing and amending their national regulations and legislation;
- assessing whether applicants holding inadequately documented qualifications are likely to hold the qualifications they claim and establishing the value of those qualifications within the education system of the host country;
- taking into account the purpose of recognition;
- basing the assessment on information collected from reliable public sources as well as the person applying for recognition of their qualifications and, as appropriate, supplementing this by interviews with the applicant, examinations and any other appropriate assessment methods;
- creating and using a "background document or a similar information document"; the Recommendation specifies the information that should be included in such a document;
- ensuring that information on the assessment and recognition of refugees' qualifications is transparent, up to date and provided to refugees as early as possible.

Assessing and describing refugees' qualifications

The Recommendation refers to "background documents". Several countries had in fact developed such documents which, to varying degrees, provided a description of qualifications that had been assessed

[214] *The term is used with care, as in some places, notably Kosovo, there are still occasional violent confrontations, but it refers to the situations of de facto war that ended with the ceasefire in the Kosovo conflict.*
[215] *Belgium (Flemish Community), Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Malta.*
[216] *Austria, Finland, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden.*

even if they could not be fully documented. However, these background documents were applicable only within the country in which they were issued, and the description contained in them was often incomplete.

Therefore, the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR – see below), which had been launched in early 2017 and is referred to in the Recommendation, was developed with a double aim:

- Providing a sound methodology for the assessment of refugees' qualifications when these cannot be adequately documented. All candidates need to complete a questionnaire before the interviews and provide any documentation they may have, even if this is incomplete. All candidates are interviewed by two credentials evaluators from different countries, at least one of whom has specialized knowledge and understanding of the country from which the refugees claim to have qualifications and of the language used in the institution or education system concerned.

- Providing a description of the assessment that can be used and accepted across borders, so that the refugees will not need to undergo new assessments if they move from one host country to another.

The European Qualifications Passports for Refugees (EQPR)

Work on what became the EQPR[217] was launched in fall 2016 in the framework of the Council of Europe. The first impetus for the Council of Europe to assist refugee students came from Greece as early as April 2016, while the impetus for the EQPR came from the ENICs of Norway and the United Kingdom. The EQPR was developed using mainly methodology that had been developed for use in Norway by NOKUT – the (then) Norwegian ENIC.[218] A pilot project was launched in 2017, with the participation of the ENICs of Greece, Italy, Norway, and the United Kingdom as well as the UN High Commissioners for Refugees (UNHCR). In the course of 2017, 92 candidates were interviewed, of whom 73 received the EQPR. For practical reasons, all candidates came from refugee camps in the Attika region surrounding Athens.[219]

Refugees need to ask for an assessment to obtain the EQPR. There is no reliable information on how many refugees arrive in their new host countries without adequate documentation of their qualifications, or indeed of how many may be aware that it is possible to have their qualifications recognized. The 2017 Recommendation asks that host countries ensure that information on the assessment and recognition of refugees' qualifications be provided to refugees as early as possible, that it include information on how to apply and required documents but also alternative ways of providing the required information if documents are not available, and assessment criteria (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2017: paragraphs 22–23).

[217] *For more information on the EQPR, see https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/recognition-of-refugees-qualifications, accessed 20 February 2025.*
[218] *After reorganization, the Norwegian ENIC is now located in the Directorate for Higher Education and Skills.*
[219] *Personal communication by Samir Hećo, Council of Europe, 19 December 2023.*

By the end of the pilot project, those of us involved felt the methodology had been confirmed, as had the format for describing the assessment of refugees' qualifications. There was, however, a need to test the EQPR with a more diverse group of refugees, in different geographical contexts, and also to try out assessments based on interviews conducted online rather than face to face.

In the second phase of the EQPR, starting in 2018, face-to-face interviews were therefore conducted in both Greece, where most refugees were from the Middle East or Afghanistan, and Italy, where many refugees came from sub-Saharan Africa. Later interviews were conducted also in other countries that participated in the project. As of February 2025, 24 ENICs[220] have participated in the project, which enjoys strong support also from the UNHCR, the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research, the Conference of University Rectors of Italy, the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, and the Government of Flanders – Belgium. As of mid-April 2025, 1385 refugees had been interviewed, and of these 897 had been interviewed online. 1201 had been awarded the EQPR, and these included 788 awarded to applicants interviewed online.[221] Approximately 85 per cent of all candidates interviewed have received the EQPR, which is partly due to a pre-screening giving preference to candidates considered likely to qualify for EQPR. The success rate seems to be independent of whether applicants are interviewed face to face or online, and the pre-selection of candidates on the basis of a questionnaire and any documentation they may provide contributes to reducing the number of rejections.

Some developments are particularly important. One was the move to assessments based on online interviews. It was clear from the outset that once the EQPR was firmly established, all candidates could not be interviewed face to face. Nevertheless, it was imperative to test the methodology face to face before trying to move online, with the first modest beginnings toward the end of 2017. This was not a simulation game. We were assessing the real qualifications of real people in a very difficult situation, and they had high hopes for the difference that the EQPR could make for their prospects. We could not allow connection problems to crush those hopes. Therefore, the first online interviews were carried out with the candidates and the credentials evaluators connecting from different rooms in the same building in the Greek Ministry of Education, so that they could easily switch to face-to-face interviews if the technology did not work satisfactorily.

It did work, however, and as of 2018 more interviews were conducted online. The timing proved to be essential, because it meant that when COVID-19 struck Europe in spring 2020, the project did not have to start from scratch. Interviews could of course not be conducted during the first phase of lockdowns, as neither refugees nor credentials evaluators could go anywhere. In France, one needed to fill out a form to leave one's home, and interviewing for the EQPR was not among the valid reasons listed. As of fall 2020, interviews were relaunched, even if at a slower speed, and all were conducted online. It is unlikely the interviews could have been relaunched so quickly had the project not experimented with online interviews before COVID hit.

[220] Those of Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Croatia, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, San Marino, Serbia, Spain, and the United Kingdom.
[221] Personal communication by Samir Hećo, 17 April 2025.

Refugees need to be assessed for the EQPR because they have been unable to take their education documents with them. It would therefore be cruelly ironic if the only material outcome of the assessment were to be another paper document which could also be lost. Therefore, developing a secure website for storing all EQPRs issued and other information on the assessments was an early priority, and CIMEA (the Italian ENIC) was instrumental in making the priority a reality. It relates not only to the *modus operandi* for carrying out the procedure but also to the issuing of the EQPR. The development of the digital platform was on the one hand a response to the immediate need to store EQPRs issued to candidates in safe conditions but on the other hand, and more importantly, it aligns the EQPR with the latest digital developments, adjusting to a procedure with blockchain technology. This effort helps the work of credentials evaluators, but above all it makes the tool portable. Candidates can potentially apply for the EQPR autonomously wherever they are. The same portability is given to credentials evaluators, who can access candidates' files either in person or whenever online interviews are conducted. In addition, the blockchain technology ensures that data are securely stored in line with GDPR[222] principles and are sharable with any third party, any time. Indeed, each EQPR holder now has access to his/her own information, and can share his/her EQPR with others for a specified period of time, for example if they are applying for access to a higher education program or a job.

For obvious reasons, the first credentials evaluators in the project learned on the job. From the very outset, all credentials evaluators needed to have minimum two years' experience with regular credentials evaluation, and a joint session for all evaluators on the first morning as well as on the final afternoon of a week-long interview session was an essential part of their learning on the job. As the project expanded, and as more and more interviews were held online with more limited opportunities for credentials evaluators to learn from each other informally, the need for an organized training program was therefore keenly felt. NOKUT developed a specific training program that all credentials evaluators who have not previously participated in the project must now undergo.[223] Those who apply must still have a minimum of two years' experience as full-time credentials evaluators. The course consists of five modules, and completing the first three is the minimum requirement for new interviewers. By the end of 2024, more than 100 credentials evaluators had undergone this training.[224] The training program also offers specific, shorter modules on individual countries. The first such module organized was on qualifications from Afghanistan, in the wake of the Taliban's renewed takeover of the country in 2021, and this module gathered more than 100 participants.[225]

Involving credentials evaluators not only from ENICs but also from universities has proved to be very effective. They strengthen the pool of evaluators, and by gaining first-hand knowledge of the EQPR, they can help convince universities to admit students on the basis of the EQPR. This was pioneered by Italy (Finocchietti and Bergan 2021), and by early 2024 some 80 EQPR holders had been admitted to higher education on this basis.[226]

[222] *The EU General Data Protection Regulation, see https://gdpr-info.eu/, accessed 20 February 2025.*
[223] *https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/european-qualifications-passport-for-refugees-from-theory-to-practice-newly-trained-credential-evaluators-start-evaluating-refugees-qualifications, accessed 20 February 2025.*
[224] *https://tinyurl.com/CoE-EQPR, accessed 21 May 2025.*
[225] *https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/eqpr-training-on-afghanistan-recent-situation-and-its-impact-on-the-education-system, accessed 21 May 2025.*
[226] *Personal communication from Samir Hećo, 19 December 2023. This was still the most recent figure available at the time of writing.*

The key characteristic of the Italian experience since the beginning in 2017 is a system-level approach involving the higher education sector with a focus on the use of the EQPR for access to higher education. Therefore, the second phase of the EQPR project and its implementation in Italy was supported by the Ministry of Education, Universities, and Research and the National Coordination on the Evaluation of Refugee Qualifications (CNVQR),[227] created under its auspices in 2016 (CIMEA 2023b). One of the main objectives of the CNVQR as an informal network of administrative sector experts in higher education institutions is to share good practices and experiences in the assessment of refugees' qualifications, even in cases where educational documentation is absent or scarce. Currently, one third of Italian higher education institutions are active members of the network (Finocchietti 2022).

Between 2018 and 2021, several EQPR sessions were held at seven Italian universities with the involvement of all the member universities of the CNVQR, where their staff members were trained in the EQPR methodology together with the team of international credential evaluators from the ENIC-NARIC centers, which are partners in the EQPR project.

According to the latest data, there are 52 EQPR holders (and hence refugee students) currently enrolled in Italian higher education institutions, in addition to the eight refugee students who were enrolled in single university courses in the academic year 2021–22. It should be recalled that in 2022, with the Russian invasion, many Ukrainian citizens arrived in Italy as refugees. Civil society, universities and other stakeholders took various actions to cope with the crisis in order to support the integration of people in the labor market and academic sectors. Moreover, with Legislative Decree n. 21 of March 2022, "Urgent measures to cope with economic and humanitarian effects of the Ukrainian crisis",[228] the EQPR became a requirement for Ukrainian citizens applying for access to health related professions, leading to an increasing number of requests from Ukrainian holders of temporary protection, for the EQPR, with the purpose of entering the labor market or proceeding with academic studies.

As a tool with a considerable potential, the EQPR is now included in the National Plan for the Integration of Holders of International Protection 2022–24 in Italy. It has a specific section related to Access to Education and Recognition of Qualifications (chapter 4.2). The plan promotes the use of the EQPR among Italian higher education institutions as a valid document for enrolment.[229]

Since 2020 in Italy, the EQPR has been included in the documentation requirements for the 100 national scholarships granted annually to refugee students for access to bachelor's, master's, single-cycle master's degrees, and research doctorates at Italian universities (CRUI, ANDISU and Ministero dell'Interno 2020). The scholarships are managed by the Conference of Rectors of Italian Universities (CRUI) and are funded by the Ministry of the Interior in collaboration with the National Association of Organizations for the Right to University Education (ANDISU). The awardees are entitled to exemption from university fees and also benefit from the free room and board and/or other services provided by the universities to promote the right to study. In 2020, 207 applications were received; out of 96 qualified applicants for the grants there were 11 recipients of the EQPR. In 2021, out of 70 grant recipients there were 14 EQPR holders.[230]

[227] *https://www.cimea.it/EN/pagina-cnvqr, accessed 21 May 2025.*
[228] *https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2022/03/21/22G00032/sg, accessed 21 May 2025.*
[229] *Information obtained in contacts between CIMEA and the Ministry of the Interior.*
[230] *Information based on a direct exchange of classified files with the Italian Rectors' Conference.*

Developing contacts with the public authorities responsible for various aspects of refugee issues, in particular those responsible for reception and immigration formalities, also matters. In this respect, the contribution of France in the project steering group was particularly important. The person responsible for education issues in the Ministry of the Interior at the time was an enthusiastic supporter of the project and established contacts to local and regional administrations. This is important, not least because when applicants are interviewed online, they need to be at a venue where connections are secure and reliable and where someone in a position of authority can verify their identity. Few if any public bodies are better placed to do so than local and regional authorities.

Why has the EQPR been a success, and how can it remain so?

The EQPR has succeeded in furthering implementation of Article VII, in particular by providing a sound methodology for assessment as well as a format for describing the assessment that can be used across borders. It would be a waste of time and resources of public authorities and of individual refugees if they had to undergo new assessments when moving to a new host country.

The shift to online interviews is also important. These interviews are more flexible and cost-effective to organize, since credentials evaluators can interview from their own organizations in different countries, and interviewees can be in a third country. None of those involved in the interviews need to travel, except for the interviewees, who need to go to a public authority that can verify their identity. The more local authorities can fulfill this function, the easier life will be for the applicants. This organization of online interviews also means that there is no longer a requirement to organize a week-long session of many interviews at a specific location. Interviews can be organized at relatively short notice as the need arises, and instead of devoting whole weeks at a time to the project, credentials evaluators can dedicate two or three hours from time to time.

Even though the EQPR is a Council of Europe project, strong support from the UNHCR, national public authorities, and (not least) over 20 ENICs is essential. Some ENICs that were initially skeptical to the project are now full participants in it. These are very positive developments, but they need to be built on further. The EQPR must be accepted throughout the European Region, in all countries that have ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention.
This will require developing attitudes among credentials evaluators and others; in some cases national legislation must also be amended to make reliance on the EQPR possible. Ultimately, assessing refugees' qualifications with a view to granting them the EQPR needs to become – and be seen as – an integrated part of what credentials evaluators and ENICs do.

However, ENICs cannot do this alone. It is important that most of those who assess refugees' qualifications come from higher education institutions. This is important for reasons of capacity, but it is equally of importance as a measure to raise awareness of and build confidence in the EQPR. The Italian experience is of great interest in this respect. The support of the UNHCR and of national public authorities as well as the continued involvement of the Council of Europe are also essential.

The EQPR can only succeed if it is considered reliable. In the early phase of the project, the fact that all interviewers were experienced credentials evaluators, that all applicants were interviewed by two evaluators from different countries, and that at least one of these knew the education system in which

the refugees had earned their qualifications and spoke the language of that country helped ensure the quality of the assessment. There were not many attempts at fraud, but in the few cases that occurred the evaluators were able to identify that the refugees had such limited knowledge of the institution from which they claimed to have their qualification – and in one case seriously mispronounced its name – that it was unlikely their claims were genuine. This quality control of the EQPR must be continued and reinforced, and the training program now required for all credentials evaluators is important in this respect.
This will make it possible for the EQPR to rely on a large pool of credentials evaluators from all over Europe, from ENICs and universities, including many with specialized competences in the education systems in which refugees have earned their qualifications and the languages spoken there. The development of the secure website for storing information about all EQPRs granted is part of the quality assurance of the EQPR, and is also an important measure to make it easier for refugees, employers, and admissions officers to use it.

The EQPR cannot function in a vacuum. Just as the strong support from the UNHCR, several national authorities, and many ENICs was essential in the early phases of the EQPR, expanding this support will be essential to its future. The support expressed by Ministers of the European Higher Education Area at their conference in Rome in November 2020 is equally important (Bologna Process 2020: 7). In particular, it will be important to make the EQPR better known and accepted by employers, whether public or private. In spite of some important success stories, this is still largely unexplored territory, and part of the challenge is that employers are a highly diverse group with few key contact points.

The Council of Europe has followed many EQPR holders in their further careers. In addition to monitoring the success rates of the assessments (see above) and the number of EQPR holders who have secured a place of study in higher education, there are several individual stories of how the EQPR has facilitated refugees' professional opportunities and development. One example among several is Anwar al-Hourani, a Syrian refugee who was the first recipient of an EQPR in 2017, in Greece, and who later moved to Norway. As her profession, physiotherapy, is regulated, she cannot presently exercise it, but her work in a Norwegian NGO is as close to exercising her profession as she can come without formal professional recognition. It will be important to maintain or even improve the success rate in the assessments and to present more stories of how refugees and societies have benefitted from the EQPR for both study and work. The combination of statistical evidence and powerful narratives will help gainsay those who maintain that anything short of classic recognition is of little value – or who would rather that this were the case.

Like Anwar al-Hourani, many refugees have their qualifications in regulated professions. Which professions are regulated varies from country to country, but they are typically areas in which malpractice can lead to serious and immediate consequences, such as in medicine, dentistry, engineering, or law. An exception is the teaching profession, which is regulated in some but not all countries, and in which the consequences of inadequate competence are less immediate if not less serious. Few if any would argue that the EQPR could or should replace professional licensing examinations but why could it not be used to facilitate the access of qualified candidates to the exams and other procedures that may lead to licensing with a view to exercising regulated profession? During the COVID-19 pandemic, advanced students in health professions were encouraged to work under the supervision of duly

licensed health professionals. In particular in Italy and France, this was also applied to EQPR holders with relevant qualifications (Bergan and Skjerven 2020), whereas in other countries this proposal was met with skepticism, possibly also with reluctance by the licensing bodies for other reasons.[231]

The global context

Two very relevant global aspects should also be closely considered and understood in relation to development of the LRC. The first of these is the UNESCO Global Convention (UNESCO 2019a), which was adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in November 2019 after being in development for over a decade. The convention needed 20 ratifications to enter into force, which happened in the first quarter of 2023, and the first Conference of the States Parties was in July 2023. As of June 2025, 38 States had acceded to the Global Convention.[232]

The Global Convention builds on the regional conventions of UNESCO, including the Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention, as also with regard to the recognition of refugees' qualifications. The Global Convention states:

> Each State Party shall take the necessary and feasible steps, within its education system and in conformity with its constitutional, legislative and regulatory provisions, to develop reasonable procedures for assessing fairly and efficiently whether refugees and displaced persons fulfil the relevant requirements for access to higher education, to further higher-education programmes, or to the seeking of employment opportunities, including in cases where partial studies, prior learning, or qualifications acquired in another country cannot be proven by documentary evidence. (UNESCO 2019a: Article VII)

This article in the Global Convention is very similar to Article VII of the LRC. However, it emphasizes "reasonable procedures" and it also includes partial studies and prior learning, which it could be argued are stronger elements in the newer Global Convention than in the LRC. In addition, the definition of the groups included does not mention "persons in refugee-like situations" in the Global Convention, and the argument for that was that it is not a legal term like refugees or displaced persons. In practice though, the text provides the same starting point in developing procedures to enhance the rights of refugees and other vulnerable groups to have their qualifications assessed, even when documentary evidence cannot be provided.

An important step in the further operationalization of this article in the Global Convention will be, as decided by the First Extraordinary Conference of the State Parties of the Convention in March 2024, to develop research papers on "the recognition of refugees' qualifications and the development of complementary pathways", which were presented at the Second Session of the Intergovernmental Conference of the States Parties in June 2025. For the purposes of these studies, elements in this chapter may prove useful.

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[231] *https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/council-of-europe-and-unhcr-support-member-states-in-bringing-refugee-health-workers-into-the-fight-against-covid-19, accessed 21 May 2025.*

[232] *For an overview of ratifications (as well as the text of the Convention), see https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/global-convention-recognition-qualifications-concerning-higher-education, accessed 19 June 2025.*

The other element is the development of UNESCO's Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants (UQP), which builds on the exact same methodology and idea as the EQPR, but with a global (non-European) scope and operated by UNESCO. The scheme has from the start been financially supported by Norway (see Chapter 8 The Global Perspective).

The first assessments of the UQP took place in Zambia at the end of 2019 (Malgina *et al*. 2020), and the next country included was Iraq, in which the first UQPs were issued in 2021 (Hovdhaugen *et al*. 2021). As of 2025, the UQP was being implemented in Zambia, Kenya and Uganda, and there are plans for further expansion.[233]

According to the UNHCR, only 7% of refugees have access to tertiary and higher education. In comparison, the figures for primary and secondary education are 68% and 37% respectively.[234]

One of the key obstacles preventing refugees' access to higher education is the lack of recognition of their prior learning, qualifications, and credentials. The UQP is a practical tool for recognition that helps ensure access to tertiary and higher education for refugees and vulnerable migrants. Drawing from the experiences and success of the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR – see above), UNESCO has been working to upscale the UQP and turn it into a universal tool for displaced populations to improve their inclusion and integration in higher education to be used in all UNESCO regions except the Europe region, for which the agreement is that the EQPR will be used. In collaboration with national tertiary and higher education authorities and institutions, UNESCO is targeting the different obstacles hindering refugees' and migrants' pursuit of their studies. The UQP is one of UNESCO's flagship initiatives contributing to the Global Compacts on Refugees and on Migration.

To enable holders of qualifications to get access to further education or employment, networks and eco-systems must be established to support the scheme, including for example UNHCR, ministries of Education, ministries of Employment, ministries of Internal Affairs, universities and organizations for universities, and other organizations considered appropriate in the particular national context. The need for such networks and support structure is probably even greater in other UNESCO regions than in Europe. The scheme can, in particular, claim success in Zambia, where by the end of July 2024 a total of 93 applicants had received the UQP.[235] There are also documented examples of holders of the UQP who have gotten access to further higher education inside or outside of Zambia, financially supported by UNHCR's DAFI Scholarships.[236]

The UQP has also been mentioned in the follow-up document of the 2018 Global Education Meeting (UNESCO 2018a), highlighted in the 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO 2018b), and in the Joint Statement – Transforming Higher Education in Emergencies from Commitment to Action (UNESCO 2023).

[233] *https://www.unesco.org/en/emergencies/qualifications-passport, accessed 21 May 2025.*
[234] *https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/education, accessed 21 May 2025.*
[235] *https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-qualifications-passport-gives-hope-zambian-students-who-fled-conflict-sudan#:~:text=Zambia%20was%20a%20pioneer%20and,highest%20number%20in%20the%20world., accessed 21 May 2025.*
[236] *https://globalcompactrefugees.org/good-practices/dafi-scholarship-programme-opening-higher-education-refugees, accessed 21 May 2025.*

Refugees from Ukraine

When Russia invaded Ukraine, it drove many people to flee their homes. The refugees were mainly women and children because men between the ages of 18 and 60 were required to remain in Ukraine and help in the defense effort. Many of the refugees were highly educated, and many had been unable to take their diplomas and other education documents. Nevertheless, the qualifications held by Ukrainian refugees could be more easily recognized because of the ways in which the Ukrainian authorities made it possible to verify their qualifications.

The key factor was the digital infrastructure for recognition of educational qualifications that had been developed in Ukraine long before the full-scale Russian invasion. Launched already in 2011, the Unified State Electronic Database on Education (EDEBO)[237] is the official national register that includes information on educational documents issued by Ukrainian educational institutions. It includes verified information on periods of study that have not resulted in a complete degree. The data flow and validity of the register owes its success to the fact that EDEBO includes the register of the state-recognized schools, VET, and tertiary education institutions. Building on this, the database is also used for administering the annual enrollment in VET and tertiary education.

The register on educational documents[238] has long since come to be the focal point for recognition bodies tasked with verifying Ukrainian educational documents. It encompasses around 42 million records from about 2000 onward, the vast majority of which come from secondary education (22.7 million) and higher education institutions (15.2 million).[239] The register enables any user, without prior registration, authentication, or verification of her/his authenticity, to verify an educational document provided the user knows its serial number and the full name of its holder. This easy access to the details of qualifications that do not require any form of identification is fully secure since the serial number of educational documents is a difficult identifier to obtain for any other third party who is not a qualification holder or an awarding educational institution. Yet, even this case would not pose any security challenges, as the third party does not receive the educational document itself, but only the information contained in it. Shortly after a request has been filed, a database extract is generated that includes all the key specifications of the awarded qualification, such as its date of issue, the awarding institution, the degree title, the study program, and the professional qualification awarded. The extract can also be digitally signed by the EDEBO administrator and e-mailed to the address provided within three working days free of charge.

In addition to the register of educational documents, EDEBO also provides self-service[240] for qualifications holders. Self-service is available to all qualifications holders or current students at Ukrainian education institutions who can authenticate themselves in the system via a digital signature and have a valid tax number included in their EDEBO study record. The added value of self-service is particularly clear in two cases: if the series number of the educational document is unknown, or if a student wishes to have her/his incomplete qualifications validated.

[237] *https://info.edbo.gov.ua/about/, accessed 21 May 2025.*
[238] *https://info.edbo.gov.ua/edu-documents/, accessed 21 May 2025.*
[239] *https://www.ehea.info/Upload/ANNEX_4.pdf, accessed 21 May 2025.*
[240] *https://info.edbo.gov.ua/check-person [in Ukrainian], accessed 21 May 2025.*

The limitations of EDEBO for recognition bodies include the accessibility of its interface, which is available in Ukrainian only, the lack of information on diploma supplements, and missing records for educational documents issued prior to the 2000s. Specifically, the EDEBO register includes records on higher education, VET and professional pre-higher education qualifications that have been used for admission to further studies since 2012, 2013, and 2020 respectively. In addition, the database comprises all educational documents in higher, VET and professional pre-higher education awarded since June 2015. For security reasons, EDEBO contains no information on educational qualifications from or study periods at military higher education institutions.

The availability of official information on educational documents in a digital format has been perceived as fundamental to a smooth and easy recognition process, particularly during the 2022–23 influx of Ukrainian refugees (ENIC and NARIC Networks 2023). The war-induced increase in the use of EDEBO as a digital information source signals a change in the format of education credentials that can be recognized. Currently, many Ukrainian refugees can have their qualifications adequately documented even if they lack the hard copy of their diplomas. The use of digital databases, often as the single available source of documentary evidence of educational documents, sets the case of Ukraine apart from other refugee crises, referred to earlier in this chapter, and demonstrates significant potential for recognition in a digital format.

The smooth recognition of Ukrainian qualifications can also be attributed to the fact that European recognition bodies are familiar with the Ukrainian education system. The Ukrainian authorities have ensured this wide awareness with the structural reforms undertaken by Ukraine as an EHEA member and as a member state of both UNESCO and the Council of Europe. Ukraine has made its educational qualifications well known to at least the other EHEA members and the States Parties to the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

Finally, the support structures initiated by the European Commission[241] and the ENIC-NARIC Network (Lantero *et al*. 2022) for fast-track recognition of Ukrainian qualifications have enabled many Ukrainian refugees to gain quick access to further studies and employment.

Complementary to the EDEBO database, in 2022 the Ukrainian authorities started work on a digital educational credentials project aimed at providing wider and easier access to study records for qualifications holders. The project was inspired by similar cases of digital documents available in the national digital identity wallet 'Diia',[242] currently used by half of all Ukrainian citizens (20 million users recorded as of early 2024). Following the work on digital transformation of the existing processes, the project was finally launched in March 2024.[243]

The digital educational documents in Diia are closely intertwined with the EDEBO register of educational documents, as they reflect the information on qualifications, from school to tertiary level, already available in the database. Unlike the EDEBO excerpts of educational documents generated in a free format, Diia produces digital credentials whose digital copies are sharable, subject to the

[241] *https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32022H0554, accessed 21 May 2025.*
[242] *In Ukrainian, 'Diia' means 'action' or, taken as an acronym, is interpreted as 'State and Me' (Derzhava i Ya).*
[243] *https://mon.gov.ua/news/u-zastosunok-diya-dodano-dokumenti-pro-osvitu, accessed 21 May 2025.*

user's permission, and verifiable through in-built QR-codes and barcodes with deep links.[244] The digital education credentials follow the officially recognized structure of diplomas across various levels of education and are available in both Ukrainian and English.

It is useful to remember that the key objective of the Diia project is to further debureaucratize public services provided by Ukrainian national authorities.[245] Thereby, the digital educational credentials bring added value to the qualifications holders rather than the recognition bodies. The service facilitates both the process of obtaining a digital electronic copy of one's diploma, particularly in cases when the use of the EDEBO self-service is impossible or complicated, and also the process of sharing it with third parties. Diia reflects the data available in other public registers, but it does not collect, process, or store any data on its own servers, making the use of its mobile application and a web-portal safe and secure – and this functionality is especially important in times of increasing threats to cybersecurity.

Although the launch of digital education credentials in Ukraine is groundbreaking, it should be treated as the initial step toward developing the national digital recognition infrastructure, which still is susceptible to certain challenges.

Given the crucial role of diploma supplements for recognition procedures, the national authorities should take all measures to include this information on the EDEBO register of educational documents and upgrade the Diia service accordingly.

Older education qualifications remain outside the scope of recognition bodies, whether through EDEBO or the Diia service. This problem could be aggravated further with diploma supplements once they become part of the database. Digitalization of paper-based educational qualifications and study archives of Ukrainian education institutions would be key to enabling recognition for thousands of qualification holders.

The digital transformation of Ukrainian educational qualifications should extend beyond the national-level tools and mechanisms. To facilitate the cross-border use of public services and in the spirit of the envisaged EU accession, the Ukrainian national authorities should establish proactive coordination mechanisms with European initiatives in the realm of digital credentials, such as the European Digital Credentials for Learning[246] and the European Digital Identity.[247]

Conclusions and recommendations

Trying to describe what various aspects of recognition would have been like in Europe without the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and without the role it plays within the European Higher Education Area, may be somewhat akin to engaging in counterfactual history, but it seems incontestable that,

[244] *According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a deep link means a hyperlink that connects a user to a specific piece of information rather than the home page of the website, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/deep-linking, accessed 21 May 2025.*
[245] *https://ssir.org/articles/entry/wartime_digital_resilience#, accessed 21 May 2025.*
[246] *https://europa.eu/europass/en/stakeholders/european-digital-credentials, accessed 21 May 2025.*
[247] *https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/european-digital-identity_en, accessed 21 May 2025.*

without the LRC, refugees would have faced considerably greater problems in obtaining recognition of their qualifications. The fact that the first monitoring of the LRC (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2016a) was made available at approximately the same time, summer 2015, when the number of refugees arriving in Europe increased dramatically is also an important factor – the circumstances prevent us from describing this as a happy coincidence.

The response to developments in 2015 and the following years illustrates many of the elements that need to come together to develop coherent policy and practice. The LRC provided the legal basis, and this was developed further with a subsidiary text – the 2017 Recommendation adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee. The EQPR was developed to put Article VIII of the LRC as well as the new Recommendation into practice.

The EQPR illustrates the need for various actors to come together. The initial suggestion from Greece that the Council of Europe seek to assist refugee students was received very favorably in the Council's Education Department. The EQPR was then developed on the basis of the experience of Norway with the recognition of qualifications that could not be fully documented, and the ENICs of Italy and the United Kingdom supported and joined the pilot project. So, crucially, did the UNHCR. This combination of two international organizations with different mandates with respect to education and refugees, the commitment of four ENICs with advanced recognition expertise, and the strong financial and political support of public authorities from several countries, in particular Italy and Norway, came together to make an effective response to a challenging situation. An important part of the challenge was overcoming some initial skepticism both within the Council of Europe Secretariat and in many ENICs, several of which later adhered to the EQPR. Initial objections ranged from the use of the term "passport" to the notion that it would be possible to assess recognition on the basis of imperfect documentation. The EQPR is, of course, not the only possible response to refugees' need for recognition but it has proved its worth, helping many EQPR holders continue their studies and/or find relevant jobs. As the current situation of Ukrainian refugees demonstrates, the EQPR is essential when qualifications cannot be fully documented but credentials evaluators, higher education institutions, and public authorities also need to adjust their views of what they consider adequate documentation. The system that Ukraine has put in place provides secure and verified information on Ukrainian qualifications online. However, this very promising development also requires that we develop our attitudes.

The strong cooperation between international organizations, national public authorities, and ENICs has been reinforced by involving higher education institutions in the project, as the experience of Italy especially shows. Increasing the involvement of higher education institutions, especially of credentials evaluators and admissions officers but also the institutional leadership, will be crucial to making the EQPR a "normal part of recognition". An equally important but possibly more difficult challenge will be to involve employers and their organizations.

It is further positive to see the developments of the sister scheme with a different geographical scope, UNESCO's Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants (UQP), which is based on the same methodology as the EQPR. The UQP is showing good progress, in particular in Africa. It is important that the Council of Europe and UNESCO cooperate regarding the two schemes to secure the necessary synergies.

As we have seen, defining and obtaining acceptance of a role for the EQPR in the process leading to recognition for the purpose of exercising a regulated profession will be an important challenge in enabling refugees to make good use of their qualifications. The experience of COVID-19, particularly the response of France and Italy, indicates some paths to pursue.

If the EQPR provides a way to assess higher education qualifications – including secondary qualifications providing access to higher education, which are also covered by the LRC – could one imagine similar arrangements for other kinds of qualifications? The answer must in principle be yes, but with important caveats. Vocational education and training is highly complex, and it does not benefit from the kind of international cooperation on recognition that is rooted in the LRC and the ENIC Network. It may also be easier for both employers and education providers to assess vocational qualifications informally than it is to do so for higher education qualifications.

The EQPR is far more than a document: it attests an assessment of a qualification or a set of qualifications by qualified credentials evaluators. Another question is, therefore, whether the EQPR could be a model for assessing qualifications beyond those of refugees. Again, the answer must be that the methodology developed for the EQPR is in principle not limited to refugees. In most ways, a non-documented qualification held by a refugee is not different from a similar qualification held by someone else. However, this kind of assessment is a second-best option. Ideally, documents are assessed on the basis of adequate documentation, which is a less costly and probably also a more secure procedure.

Public authorities as well as ENICs, higher education institutions, and employers need to accept that assessing refugees' qualifications will remain more costly than ordinary recognition cases in the foreseeable future in spite of all efforts to reduce the costs and ensure the quality of the assessments by, for example, conducting assessments online, providing a secure website for storing information on individual EQPRs, and requiring that all credentials evaluators participating in the assessment undergo specialized training. Whether they will be willing to invest in providing this kind of assessment for people who are in a less vulnerable situation than refugees is a question that cannot be answered in this chapter.

UNIVERSITAS QUADERNI

N. 01
September 2025

CHAPTER 7

The Lisbon Recognition Convention in a Transatlantic Perspective

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07

Introduction

The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) was and is in essence a European endeavour. While it is true that the "Europe Region" of UNESCO also covers other countries[248] and while several of these countries took part in the process and became signatories to the Convention, one may still argue that the main impact of the LRC has been in Europe, although it did inspire the main concepts of the new generation of UNESCO regional conventions as well as the Global Recognition Convention.

Nevertheless, first the development and then the implementation of the LRC cannot be seen as entirely separate from the "transatlantic debate" between actors in Europe and the United States of America at higher education institutions and at organisations that specialise in international recognition of qualifications – or international credential evaluation, which is the more frequently used term in North America. Thus it makes sense, in an effort to understand the LRC, as this publication tries to do, to devote space to the transatlantic dimensions.

In this chapter, we examine and reflect on key developments in credential evaluation in the USA since the early 1990s and on how these were related to the LRC process – and related more broadly to the much more intensive contact since then between North American and European recognition/credential evaluation experts.

This text is based on a number of conversations with Margit Schatzman and Mariam Assefa. Both have been active in the field of international credential evaluation: Margit as a staff member and later president of ECE (Educational Credential Evaluators) and Mariam (now retired) as executive director of WES (World Education Services). Both complement their practical and managerial experience in this field with decades of active contribution to transatlantic collaboration and to the enhancement and maintenance of professional standards in credential evaluation.

Every conversation between Americans[249] and Europeans on credential evaluation – and on any educational topic for that matter – starts with an explanation that the US simply does not have a single system of education, that education is not seen as a responsibility of the federal public authorities and

[248] *See https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/region-definition, accessed 17 May 2025.*
[249] *People in the USA tend to refer to themselves as "Americans" although of course the Americas contain many different countries and even North America consists of Canada and Mexico in addition to the USA.*

that the only generic statement one can make is that one cannot make generic statements. The USA consists of 50 states plus the District of Columbia. Any appearance of a 'system' in US higher education is either erroneous or self-regulated rather than state/federal imposed, or so fraught with exceptions and loopholes as to deny it the nature of a system. As a consequence, knowledge of how things are actually organised is often scattered and occasionally contradictory.

As stated on the website of the Department of Education, education in the United States is primarily a responsibility of the individual states and even local communities. It is these states and local communities, as well as public and private organisations of all kinds, that establish schools and colleges, develop curricula, and decide requirements for enrolment and graduation.

Trends and developments in the United States of America

When we look at the field of credential evaluation within the US – before looking at the transatlantic dimensions – we see that the position of the university-based credential evaluator has changed significantly. In the early 1990s, the dominant pattern was that universities and colleges would do their own evaluation of foreign credentials; external services like those of WES and ECE were used by a very small fraction of higher education institutions and thus for only a very small fraction of the total number of foreign credentials. This has changed. While many universities and colleges still do their own assessments – it is difficult to estimate the proportion – outsourcing credential evaluation to outside agencies has changed from 'a rare exception that may raise some eyebrows' to a well-accepted practical solution. The number of organisations that offer such credential evaluation services has mushroomed. With private evaluation services ranging from larger non-profit agencies like ECE and WES, to for-profit enterprises, to small one-person operations moving in and out of the industry,[250] it is difficult to gauge the exact number of such services.

Since the late 1990s, the paradigm for admission of foreign students in the US has changed dramatically. Before this period, the dominant approach was 'These students want to get in, but we must make sure we only admit the suitable ones'. Within a matter of years, this changed to 'We need (lots of) international students to meet our financial needs and targets'. In admission, the centre of gravity moved from the credential evaluators to the international marketing and recruitment officers. Credential evaluation in higher education institutions was no longer a career step that could open further career possibilities. Using the terminology of statistics, the centre of gravity moved from the need to avoid 'false positives' – people who would be admitted without being qualified – towards the need to avoid 'false negatives', meaning people who were not admitted although they could have done fine. This applied not only to universities and colleges in need of students bringing in tuition fees. It also applied wherever there were shortages in the labour market, with Canadian immigration policy as a case in point.

The credential evaluation agencies and their staff members became increasingly active in developing quality standards in the field. In part, this can be seen as a response to the mushroom-like growth of such credential evaluation offices and the total number of evaluations that they provided (not only to universities and colleges, but also to other clients in the economy: to professional bodies – in engineering, health and other fields – and to employers). This led to the development of quality standards for

[250] *"Industry" is the term typically used in a North American context.*

organisations in the field and saw the rise of a National Association of Credential Evaluation Services (NACES).[251] Leading figures in credential evaluation services also took the initiative in developing quality standards and practices in credential evaluation itself: **T**he **A**ssociation for **I**nternational **C**redential **E**valuation **P**rofessions (TAICEP) is an international association with members from over 30 countries, with 70% of members from the US and Canada and 21% from Europe.[252]

NB It would be erroneous to conclude that there was a growing communis opinio in the American credential evaluation community because of these efforts towards shared quality standards. Credential evaluation services with different approaches to the European three-year bachelor's degree could and did coexist, each serving the part of the higher education clientele that found their approach convincing. This growing role of credential evaluation services coincided with a decreasing role for the Admissions Section (ADSEC) of NAFSA[253] and the international section of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO).[254] At the same time in Europe, the European Association for International Education (EAIE)[255] was formed, with a professional section for Admission and Credential Evaluation (ACE);[256] and the national services for recognition of qualifications grew into active ENIC and NARIC networks (see Chapter 5 Governance and Implementation). Experts from ACE and even more strongly from the ENIC and NARIC networks played a major part in the development of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2010).

At a more formal level, a working group appointed by UNESCO's European Centre for Higher Education (CEPES) reviewed the perceived and actual recognition of studies completed by European and US students on both sides of the Atlantic from 1992 through most of 1994. The working group consisted of nine members from Europe and one from the United States. The Working Group report (UNESCO 1994) formulated recommendations for recognition of qualifications and fair assessment of educational credentials, which in many ways foreshadowed the Lisbon Recognition Convention. From the US side, the National Council on the Evaluation of Foreign Educational Credentials (then still active, but dissolved in 2006) formally responded to the report.

So, both in North America and in Europe, there was growth in the number of specialists and specialised organisations, active in setting quality standards in the recognition field, and in contacts between them.

In the field of accreditation and quality assurance, there have been significant changes in both institutional and programmatic accreditation in the US in this century. These changes have included the central role of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)[257] and various political influences that have, especially recently, very much impacted the higher education quality assurance landscape. These changes are too complex to be treated in the context of this publication. Judith Eaton identifies six trends, among those the driving force of accountability and the growing dominance of government (Eaton 2014).

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[251] *https://www.naces.org/, accessed 17 May 2025.*
[252] *https://www.taicep.org/taiceporgwp/, accessed 17 May 2025.*
[253] *NAFSA: Association of International Educators: https://www.nafsa.org/, accessed 17 May 2025.*
[254] *https://www.aacrao.org, accessed 17 May 2025.*
[255] *https://www.eaie.org/, accessed 17 May 2025.*
[256] *Eventually the EAIE dissolved its 'professional sections' and replaced them with 'expert communities', later renamed 'communities of practice'.*
[257] *https://www.chea.org/, accessed 17 May 2025.*

Relevance of the LRC in the United States of America

First and foremost, it must be noted that while the US may be a signatory to the Lisbon Recognition Convention – and the Department of Education participated in the preparatory discussions – this has no formal meaning in the US. This is not only because the US has so far not ratified the Convention, but more importantly because the federal government has no mandate to make binding commitments on behalf of US higher education institutions. The relevant text of the Convention stipulates:

> Where the competence to make decisions in recognition matters lies with individual higher education institutions or other entities, each Party according to its constitutional situation or structure shall transmit the text of this Convention to these institutions or entities and shall take all possible steps to encourage the favourable consideration and application of its provisions. (Article II.1.2)

There is an ENIC in the US, currently (in 2025) within the US Department of Education. But its impact in US higher education is negligible, although US ENIC representatives like E. Stephen Hunt have been influential within the ENIC Network itself. In addition, outside the more knowledgeable experts in credential evaluation services in the US, few people have heard of the LRC and even fewer can explain what it is about. Yet, one may well argue that the Lisbon Recognition Convention has been relevant to developments in the US.

The upsurge in the contacts between American and European credential evaluators in the 1990s contributed to the quality and depth of thinking about international credential evaluation and international recognition on both sides of the Atlantic. If one wants to have a friendly debate on what one sees as fallacies in the methods of esteemed opponents, one is inevitably more inclined – because it is a friendly debate – to also critically examine possible fallacies in one's own methods. In this sense, the joint ADSEC–ACE seminars in 1994 in Miami Beach and in Cambridge (UK) and the Milwaukee Symposium of June 1996 (see Fletcher and Aldrich-Langen 1998) gave important fuel to both the genesis of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the professionalisation of quality standards in North America (see Thompson 1996).

It may be hard to say – and maybe not very relevant – to what extent the LRC development influenced thinking in North America or vice versa. One might argue that the process was a reflection of a broader optimism about progress in the world after the demise of the Soviet Union, its dominance over many countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the fall of the Berlin Wall. It seems evident that the fact that critical self-examination grew on both sides of the Atlantic at a time also of increasing cross-fertilisation between both sides, helped improve fairness and transparency in the whole field. Although it is beyond the purpose and topic of this publication, one cannot fail to note how much the world and particularly the Transatlantic perspective has changed and is changing since 2024-2025. In particular, the publication, and this chapter, cannot take adequate account of the rapidly developing policies of the Trump Administration with regard to the international aspects of higher education.

Concurrent developments in Europe and North America in dealing with foreign credentials did not stop with the adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 1997. Where in Europe the movement towards "automatic recognition" (treated in more detail in Chapter 4 New Developments in Recognition) can be seen as drawing a distinction between recognition of the fact that a person has a valid degree and

their ability to gain admission to specific academic or professional activities on the basis of this degree, similarly in the US people began to underline that admission of a person with a foreign credential to an academic programme or professional activity did not mean that the degree was accepted as fully equivalent to a specific degree from an American institution. Rather, it meant that the foreign degree was accepted as sufficient to enter into that specific study programme or type of activity.

Returning to the legal function of the LRC and the absence of any legal meaning of the LRC in the US, one may argue that, here again, the difference in impact of the LRC in Europe and in the United States may be a bit less than one could expect. Arguably, the impact of the LRC in Europe has been greater on the culture and professional standards in assessment of foreign credentials than on the legal enforceability of the articles of the Convention. And the impact on culture and practice has been greater on the community of professional credential evaluators outside higher education institutions than on staff of the universities and colleges themselves.

Learning outcomes

As education is intended to bring students to higher levels of knowledge, skills and understanding, it is not surprising that both in North America and in Europe there has been a growing and continuing attention to learning outcomes as a basis for the assessment of foreign credentials. Credential evaluators are aware that they compare processes to estimate the comparability of outcomes: they analyse the educational programme that led to the foreign degree in order to determine if that process is similar enough to the programme of the home degree to assess the degrees themselves as similar. So this is an assessment by proxy. If adequate information were available about the learning outcomes guaranteed by the foreign degree and by the home degree, a comparison between these learning outcomes would provide a more solid basis for credential evaluation and recognition.

But – both in Europe and in North America – credential evaluators have not found access to adequate tools to use learning outcomes as the basis of their work, and they still find that higher education institutions do not provide adequate information on the learning outcomes of their degrees. Adequate information would mean that they not only give adequate information on what the graduates are good at, but also on how good they are at it. The concept of learning outcomes in higher education is treated in greater detail in Chapter 2 Key Concepts – along with some challenges and developments that follow from this concept, and their relevance for recognition of qualifications.

In Chapter 4, more information is given about the VALUE[258] tool developed by AAC&U[259] and how 'value' is used in a European context in the LOUIS[260] approach. Neither VALUE nor LOUIS was developed with assessment of foreign credentials/qualifications in mind: VALUE was developed mainly to assess non-subject-specific undergraduate learning in the US, while LOUIS uses the VALUE tool mainly to enhance the articulation of meaningful intended non-subject-specific learning outcomes throughout university education.

[258] *VALUE: https://www.aacu.org/initiatives-2/value, accessed 17 May 2025.*
[259] *The American Association of Colleges and Universities at https://www.aacu.org/, accessed 17 May 2025.*
[260] *LOUIS: https://aurora-universities.eu/louis/, accessed 17 May 2025.*

The Bologna Process and transatlantic recognition

Historically, one dominant factor in the transatlantic discussion of assessment of higher education credentials was the much higher level of diversity in the US compared to Europe. European universities (mainly Western Europe before the demise of the Soviet Union) were seen as a fairly homogeneous set of institutions, with fairly comparable entrance levels, a fairly comparable doctoral degree and a shared focus on disciplinary studies from start to finish. Higher education in the US was much more diverse – reflecting the absence of federal government competence in education as well as the much greater size and diversity of the American society and economy.

This systemic difference between Europe and North America has changed. The Bologna Process, launched by the Bologna Declaration (Bologna Process 1999) after the Sorbonne Declaration (Bologna Process 1998) had served as an important precursor and stimulator, led all countries to adopt the same system of bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees. But while this may superficially seem to reduce complexity in European higher education, which was at the start more homogeneous than higher education in the US, at closer look the opposite may seem to have occurred. Under the common denominator of the bachelor's–master's–doctoral system, diversity and heterogeneity in European higher education has grown to the extent that it may now be seen as much more similar to the situation in the US than before. Research-oriented and application-oriented programmes go under the same degree name, graduate programmes may be mono-, multi-, inter-, or transdisciplinary in nature. Programmes with highly selective admission and programmes with more open access lead to the same degree.

This increased heterogeneity was not caused by the Bologna Process itself. It is more a reflection of the growth of different forms of professional education at higher education institutions (as against research oriented academic education). It may also be seen as a reflection of the greater variation in functions and quality of higher education in Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union compared to the previous more homogeneous nature of Western Europe – which dominated the transatlantic discourse. The Bologna Process allowed for this increased diversity between and within countries in Europe; but the diversification of higher education programmes – in function and target groups – was more a reflection of the needs of society and the economy.

The end result was that, before the Bologna Process, many things in higher education in Europe were similar in nature but different in name and, after the launch of the Bologna Process, are similar in name but different in nature. In that sense, higher education in Europe is now much more similar to higher education in the US, where the similarity in the names of the degrees was always a thin veil over a vast difference in the function and quality of programmes.

In conclusion

Although the US Government participated in the development of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the US has not ratified the LRC, and the Convention as a legal document has had no formal impact on credential evaluation practice in the US. There has, however, been an impact from the increased contacts between credential evaluators in Europe and the US since 1989 on both the development of the Lisbon Recognition Convention itself and on the further professionalisation of credential evaluation in both Europe and the US. The broad implementation of the three-cycle degree system in Europe through the Bologna Process has had an impact on the assessment of European higher education qualifications in the US.

UNIVERSITAS QUADERNI

N. 01
September 2025

CHAPTER 8

A Global Perspective on Recognition

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A long and winding road to a global standard-setting instrument

Although the issue of the equivalence and recognition of qualifications in higher education, as a means of reinforcing and promoting intellectual solidarity and understanding around the world through education, was at the origins of UNESCO's mission, it took almost eight decades for this activity to acquire an adequate international legal framework that would include all UNESCO Member States. On 25 November 2019, UNESCO's General Conference adopted the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education (UNESCO 2019a). In March 2023 the Convention came into force. At the time of writing (June 2025), 38 Member States had ratified it[261] and first steps were being taken to set the policies and procedures for its implementation.

There were many reasons why it took such a long time to develop a global recognition convention. The most significant factors in this long process were the challenges of comparing degrees across developed and developing countries in the 1960s, the geo-political developments at regional level (using the UNESCO definition of regions[262]), the differences in terminology used and the shifting priorities of Member States.

This chapter highlights the main issues that remain now that this legal instrument, the first of a global nature dealing with higher education in the UN system, has come into force, and we pay special attention to the impact of the 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC), a legal instrument jointly developed by UNESCO and the Council of Europe, on developments that would lead to the acceptance of a global instrument.

When UNESCO's education programme was first established, it included activities aimed at determining "equivalences of diplomas".[263] The programme envisaged an Information Centre and a Clearing House for international exchange of personnel.[264] One of its tasks was to conduct a survey of the equivalence of various higher education diplomas (Ochs 1986). The second General Conference of UNESCO, in Mexico,

[261] *For an overview of ratifications, see https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/global-convention-recognition-qualifications-concerning-higher-education?hub=70286#item-2 (scroll until the end), accessed 19 June 2025.*
[262] *UNESCO's five regions are: Africa, Asia and the Pacific, the Arab States, Europe and North America, Latin America and the Caribbean.*
[263] *Although 'equivalence' and 'diplomas' were later replaced by 'recognition' and 'qualifications' as broader terms, this terminology was present in UNESCO and Council of Europe instruments until the early 1990s.*
[264] *'Personnel' is the term used by Ochs; the reference is in effect to higher education teaching personnel.*

adopted a resolution supporting the programme 'Work with universities' (UNESCO 1947). One of its six specific objectives was to "address problems of the difference in university degrees across the world" (Uvalić-Trumbić 2009).

However, the initiative to develop normative instruments in the field of academic mobility and the recognition of qualifications started almost two decades later. At its 66th session, in 1963, the Executive Board requested the Director-General "to submit a preliminary evaluation of the technical and legal aspects of preparing an international convention or recommendation on the equivalence of secondary school-leaving certificates and of university diplomas and degrees" (UNESCO 1963).

Since that date, the concept and nature of the action to be followed by UNESCO has been reviewed by successive sessions of its governing bodies. While maintaining the ultimate objective – the preparation of a global standard-setting document – but keeping in mind the challenges involved, Member States concluded that the matter could be approached more successfully at regional level.[265] Consequently, six normative instruments to regulate the mutual recognition of higher education studies and degrees were adopted during the 1970s and the early 1980s, starting with the Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (June 1975). This was followed by four similar conventions covering all regions of the world – the Arab States (1978), Europe (1979), Africa (1981), and Asia and the Pacific (1983). Within this framework, the International Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab and European States bordering on the Mediterranean (the Mediterranean Convention), adopted in December 1976, was the only inter-regional convention.[266]

Nevertheless, the ideal of inter-regional, worldwide mutual recognition of qualifications – UNESCO's initial objective – was not abandoned. A joint meeting of the five regional committees and one inter-regional committee was convened in 1992 in Paris to explore the feasibility of adopting a Universal Convention on the Recognition of Studies and Degrees in Higher Education.[267] Consensus could not be reached and it was decided to pursue the process at regional level. The aspirations for a worldwide instrument resulted in a normative instrument of a less binding nature: the Recommendation on the Recognition of Studies and Qualifications in Higher Education, adopted by the 27th session of the General Conference of UNESCO in November 1993 (UNESCO 1993). As less binding than a convention, the Recommendation does not require ratification by Member States.

The political changes in Europe in the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, were one of the reasons for the further regional strengthening of the recognition conventions. European integration in higher education was part of this process (see Chapter 1 The Road to Lisbon). This resulted in the Council of Europe and UNESCO joining forces to develop a new and stronger joint convention on the recognition

[265] *The 15th session of the UNESCO General Conference (1968) authorized the Director-General "to encourage the holding of meetings ... with a view to promoting the conclusion of regional and multilateral agreements in this field" (Ochs 1986: 2).*
[266] *Full titles: International Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab and European States bordering on the Mediterranean (1976); Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab States (1978); Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States (1981); and Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas, and Degrees in Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific (1983).*
[267] *'Universal' was the term used by UNESCO in 1992 to refer to a convention of global coverage.*

of qualifications in Europe, the 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC). This convention came to play a significant role in the Bologna Process, a unique regional higher education reform.

The feasibility of a Global Convention[268] on the Recognition of Qualifications was again raised in November 2011 at the Intergovernmental Conference of States in Tokyo, at which the revised Asia-Pacific Convention was adopted. The momentum gained through the new generation of regional recognition conventions stimulated the debate, and the revised Asia-Pacific Convention represented a particular landmark in this respect, stemming from the most populous region of the world with rising student and academic mobility to, within and from the region. In addition, all Member States of UNESCO had been invited to the conference and representatives of all regions attended.

The debate supported the idea of a global convention, on the understanding that regional specificities would continue to be respected. There was a proposal that after the global convention came into force, States Parties would be bound by both the global convention and the regional conventions (Lee and Uvalić-Trumbić 2012).

The discussion concluded with the adoption of a proposal for a feasibility study to inform the elaboration of a possible Global Convention. The Feasibility Study was submitted to the Executive Board in 2013 (UNESCO 2013b) and so began the process of developing the Global Convention (UNESCO 2013c). This process included the establishment of a drafting committee (2016), which held three meetings, the circulation of a formal draft (2017), written consultations with the Member States of UNESCO (2017–18), the organisation of two Intergovernmental Consultation Meetings, one in December 2018 and one in March 20219, to finalise the draft, and the setting up of an Intergovernmental Committee, which met twice in 2019. The culmination of this process was in November 2019, when the final draft was adopted at UNESCO's General Conference. The Convention came into force in March 2023, when the 20th member state ratified it (UNESCO 2019a: Art. XVIII).

A shift of paradigm: the Lisbon Recognition Convention

The LRC was one of the important developments that led to the Global Recognition Convention by marking a paradigm shift in recognition. Its provisions inspired a number of elements in the development of the text of this new convention, giving greater rights to applicants for recognition and holders of qualifications, establishing basic principles for recognition and sharing transparency tools through its subsidiary documents. One can argue that the adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention helped to stimulate and inspire the revision of all the UNESCO regional conventions as a first step towards a legal instrument of global coverage.

In comparison to UNESCO's conventions from the 1970s and 1980s and the Council of Europe conventions from the 1950s and 1960s, the LRC shifted the focus significantly in favour of the applicants, who are entitled to fair recognition of their qualifications within a reasonable time limit, according to transparent, coherent and reliable procedures. Reasons for refusal have to be stated, and the applicant has the

[268] *It was only at the Tokyo Conference of States in 2011 that reference was made to a "Global Convention".*

right to appeal. Most importantly, recognition should be granted unless a substantial difference can be demonstrated between the qualification for which recognition is sought and similar qualification(s) in the system of the country where the application for recognition is submitted. This means that the burden of proof of a substantial difference lies with the body assessing the qualification and no longer with the applicant.

Furthermore, the LRC emphasizes the importance of information and networking at expert level. Reliable and comparable information became a key factor in the promotion of recognition; the role of national information centres became crucial and networking between them was institutionalized through the establishment of the ENIC Network,[269] which meets annually. The Intergovernmental Committee (LRCC) was the formal implementation mechanism of the LRC, but the ENIC Network was designated as a supplementary body implementing the Convention, ensuring the legitimacy and continuity of the information provision within the Network, as well as sharing expertise on issues of common interest for fair recognition of qualifications. The provision of information on the national criteria and procedures used in the process of assessing higher education qualifications for the purposes of recognition is a specific obligation undertaken by parties to the Convention.

In addition to providing a solid legal framework, the LRC promotes good recognition practices through other instruments, such as codes of good practice or recommendations adopted by the LRCC. These instruments, though not legally binding, ensure that the LRC can be adapted to changes in higher education systems and recognition practice in Europe, led by the Bologna Process (see Chapter 5 Governance and Implementation).

Finally, the LRC (Article VII) introduced a specific provision dealing with the existing refugee crisis in Europe, stemming in particular from the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a consequence of the wars in former Yugoslavia that led to its break-up. Article VII was also designed to potentially gain importance if global disruptions caused by geopolitical aggression again led to massive refugee crises around the world (see Chapter 6 Refugees' Qualifications).

| Regional conventions

Starting with the LRC, a new generation of regional conventions was developed within the UNESCO framework. This process resulted in revised conventions for all five UNESCO regions. These are:

- the LRC (Council of Europe and UNESCO 1997a),
- the Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education (UNESCO 2011),

[269] *The European Network of National Information Centres (ENIC Network) was formally established in Budapest in June 1994, merging the existing UNESCO network of the National Information Bodies (NIBs) and the Council of Europe network of the National Equivalence Information Centres (NEICs). It promoted strong cooperation links to the related network of National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARICs) of the European Commission. See also Chapter 1 The Road to Lisbon.*

- the Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States (UNESCO 2014),
- the Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO 2019c), and
- the Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab States (UNESCO 2022c).

The International Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab and European States bordering on the Mediterranean (UNESCO 1976) was not revised. After the 8th session of its Intergovernmental Committee (in Mostar, 2010), the Mediterranean Convention became dormant, possibly because it was considered no longer needed once a Global Convention came into force and the Convention for Arab States was revised. This is regrettable for several reasons, and there may be a need to reconsider the role of the Mediterranean Convention. Firstly, in a broader policy context, this particular convention is ratified by Arab and European States bordering on the Mediterranean, a sub-region with high mobility and migration rates. Secondly, human and financial resources were invested in promoting networking, information exchange and capacity development activities at professional level based on decisions by the Intergovernmental Committee of State Parties to the Convention (UNESCO 2005a).

A pilot project, ReQuaf MEDA (2004–05), coordinated by UNESCO and the French ENIC, allowed sharing of experiences between ENIC centres in the Northern Mediterranean countries (France, Italy, Slovenia) and focal points in Southern Mediterranean countries (Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia). The pilot project was supported by the Council of Europe and the Dutch ENIC (NUFFIC) and funded by the EU TEMPUS programme. As a result, the Mediterranean Recognition Information Centres (MERIC) network was launched in Rabat in December 2006, and a MERIC Charter (reproduced in Appendix 8) was adopted, defining its tasks and responsibilities. The MERIC Charter was presented to the 8th session of the Mediterranean Convention Intergovernmental Committee, as the official body consisting of representatives of States Parties (Mostar 2010). Finally, these past achievements may inspire UNESCO to continue providing the Secretariat to the Intergovernmental Committee, thus honouring its commitment under Article 9 of the Mediterranean Convention. This may be facilitated by the fact that some networking activities have been ongoing, aimed at revitalising the MERIC network.[270]

While it could be argued that many of the basic elements of the LRC have inspired the revised conventions, it is important to stress that the regional conventions also take regional specificities into consideration. The most significant basic element based on the LRC is providing greater rights to applicants to have their qualifications assessed by the competent authority of the state where recognition is sought. This implies that the burden of proof that a substantial or significant difference exists lies with the host countries and not with the applicant. The Global Convention provides a definition of substantial differences as:

[270] *MERIC-net, available at http://www.meric-net.eu/en/index.aspx, accessed 17 May 2025.*

> significant differences between the foreign qualification and the qualification of the State Party which would most likely prevent the applicant from succeeding in a desired activity, such as, but not limited to, further study, research activities, or employment opportunities (Article I).

There were variations to the text and terminology in some regional conventions, such as using 'fundamental' instead of 'substantial' differences (e.g. the revised Arab convention) or 'national implementation structures', not centres (e.g. the revised African convention) but the basic notions remained the same.

The revision of the regional conventions went in parallel with the finalisation of the Global Convention but there was no fundamental questioning of whether a global convention was needed. One of the strongest arguments in favour of a global standard-setting instrument was the fact that academic mobility flowed mainly between (rather than within) the regions. More importantly, the unprecedented transformations in higher education in recent decades required a more innovative and comprehensive outlook on how they affected the recognition of qualifications. Finally, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[271] placed a new emphasis on tertiary education as indispensable in reaching the Agenda 2030 targets. The sections below examine these changes in more detail.

The changing landscape of higher education

In the 21st century, higher education institutions are called upon to innovate in their provision of learning to embrace ever larger numbers of students, and a greater diversity of learners, through different modes of delivery. Massification of higher education participation, diversification of higher education provision, increased student mobility, greater concern for inclusion and equity in higher education marked this changing landscape.

The demand for higher education continued to grow, especially in the global south. Global enrolment ratio (GER)[272] rose from 19% in 2000 to 42% in 2022. In absolute numbers, enrolments increased from 100 million in 2000 to some 254 million in 2022.[273] Predictions are that enrolments will come close to 600 million in 2040 (Calderon 2018). While some countries, however, have witnessed a high increase in enrolments, as high as 91% between 2000 and 2018, especially in the global south, other more advanced higher education systems experience stagnation or decline in student enrolments (Varghese 2024).

In terms of changing mobility flows, out of the 254 million students enrolled in higher education institutions around the world, more than 6.4 million were studying abroad in 2019, up from 2 million in in 2000. An increase of mobile students is noted in all regions, although unevenly between regions. The mobility flows have not only increased but have drastically changed over the past 25 years. According to UNESCO's Institute of Statistics (UIS), North America and Western Europe hosted 49% of international students in 2019, while only 13% of the global internationally mobile students came from these regions.

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[271] *Available at: https://sdgs.un.org/goals, accessed 17 May 2025.*
[272] *Global enrolment rate (GER) is the percentage of the age cohort 18–22 enrolled in higher education.*
[273] *See https://www.unesco.org/en/higher-education/need-know, accessed 17 May 2025.*

Countries in Central and Eastern Europe also hosted a larger proportion of students (13%) than they sent abroad (7%). In all regions, the proportion of students hosted was less than the proportion of students originating from these regions (UNESCO 2022d).

The growth of student mobility stalled due to the COVID-19 pandemic but a rebound was noted in 2022 and 2023. Although the top host countries have shifted, the US and the UK remain the leading hosts of international students. Nevertheless, compared to 2001, in 2023 their share had decreased from 28% to 17% for the US and stayed stable for the UK (11%) (Martel 2024).

Within the category of mobile students, refugees represent a particular group. Among the world's 82 million refugees, only 7% of eligible youth are enrolled in higher education, whereas comparative figures for primary and secondary education are 68% and 34% respectively. Over half of these students are enrolled outside their home region, and this number is set to increase over the coming years. Yet millions of students face challenges and hurdles when they seek to get their qualifications recognized to study or work in another country and they need tools to facilitate academic and student mobility between countries and regions.[274]

Another more recent feature in the changing landscape of higher education is the aim for more inclusive, equitable higher education for all in a lifelong perspective. This objective has also been one of the targets of the 2015 UN Sustainable Developments Goals, acknowledging higher education as an important element of development. Target 3 of SDG 4 "Quality Education" is to ensure "equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university"[275] by 2030. Generally, a greater insistence on social equity and justice and a reminder of the importance of values in higher education are increasingly being highlighted by the global academic community in the context of a crisis of trust in public institutions.

To what extent have these aspirations been attained? Although statistics demonstrate that the global enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education has increased, regional and national disparities persist. While the GER has increased in low- and middle-income countries among the richest percentile of the population, less than 1% of the poorest quintile in the same countries are enrolled in higher education (UNESCO 2017b; UNESCO 2018b). Furthermore, a very small number of countries around the world have in place policies to promote equitable access to higher education (Salmi 2018).

Data from the UNESCO-IESALC Observatory[276] indicate that only 37% of all countries worldwide recognize the right to higher education in their national legislation. There does not seem to be a link between the country's income level and the recognition of this right. This suggests that inclusion of the right to higher education in national legislation is impacted more by political and socio-cultural considerations than by income level.

Diversification of provision is one of the means to widen access to higher education that is supported by some governments. It demonstrates a shift from the traditional model of higher education provided

[274] *See https://www.unesco.org/en/higher-education/need-know, accessed 17 May 2025.*
[275] *https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/4-quality-education/, accessed 17 May 2025*
[276] *https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389677, accessed 17 May 2025.*

and funded exclusively by the state which was prevalent in many countries, particularly in countries of the global South that lacked public higher education institutions. Diversification trends include privatization (especially in Africa), a trend which some consider the fastest-growing sector of higher education (Altbach *et al*. 2009). Among other trends are internationalization of higher education, including cross-border provision (also called transnational education or franchises), when not only students, researchers and staff, but entire institutions and programmes move across borders,[277] and competence-based education, which takes into account prior learning and is based on students' mastery of knowledge rather than relying on time-based learning structures that revolve around credit hours and grades. Open and distance learning (ODL) has also become a prominent part of the diversification of higher education and an important vector of internationalization, inclusion and widening access.

Demographic and economic factors have further accelerated this diversification, with rapidly aging populations and changing labour market requirements for new skills and competences. New shorter courses, in some cases referred to as micro-credentials, are becoming more common, and digital certificates and badges are now more widely accepted in the context of both new skills and competences needed by employers and in the digitalization of higher education (see also Chapter 4 New Developments in Recognition, §4.3 on micro-credentials). Both massification and diversification of learning, alongside changing mobility flows, require greater scrutiny of the quality of provision and their close link to the recognition of qualifications.

| Quality assurance and the recognition of qualifications

The role of quality assurance has increased significantly, largely as a response to the massification of enrolments, the growing diversification of higher education provision, and increasing changes in mobility flows, particularly of the growing refugee population. Quality assurance is under constant pressure to change and adapt, not least in the abrupt changes higher education has had to face in times of emergency, demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Another type of pressure is the reduced public financing of many higher education systems (Uvalić-Trumbić and Martin 2021).

The recognition of qualifications was impacted by the diverse changes facing higher education. The Global Convention had to adapt not only to changing mobility flows and migration but also to the fast transformations of higher education over the past decades, some of which have been described in the section above. Thus, stronger links between quality assurance and recognition were inevitable and are reflected in the texts of both the new generation of regional conventions (except in the LRC for reasons of timing) and the Global Convention itself.

The LRC underlines the significance of quality assessment and its relevance in recognizing foreign qualifications in article VIII.1, which specifies the information that must be supplied:

> in the case of Parties having established a system of formal assessment of higher education institutions and programmes: information on the methods and results of this assessment, and of the standards of

[277] *"Cross-border higher education includes higher education that takes place in situations where the teacher, student, programme, institution/provider or course materials cross national jurisdictional borders" (UNESCO 2005b: 3).*

> quality specific to each type of higher education institution granting, and to programmes leading to, higher education qualifications;

One should not forget that at the time of the development of the LRC, there was not yet an overarching framework for quality assurance and accreditation of higher education systems across all European member states covered by the Convention. A number of European countries were considered as pioneers in quality assurance such as the United Kingdom, France and the Netherlands, followed by Denmark (Van Damme, van der Hijden and Campbell 2004).

The European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) was established in 2000,[278] three years after adoption of the LRC and a year after its entry into force. The International Network for Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education (INQAAHE) was created as early as 1991, but at the time of its founding it had only eight members.[279] The Bologna Process made a major impact in rendering quality assurance one of the pillars of the EHEA, first by the Prague Communiqué (Bologna Process 2001) which called for greater cooperation in quality assurance in Europe and closer links between recognition and quality assurance networks. The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) of 2005, revised in 2015 (Bologna Process 2015a), provide a supporting tool. The European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR),[280] founded in 2008, lists agencies that comply with the ESG.

As pointed out by Mills (2022), the 1997 LRC mentions quality assurance only once (as "quality assessment"), while the 2011 Tokyo Convention, the second in the new generation of UNESCO recognition conventions, more explicitly refers to quality assurance, defining it as "the ongoing process of evaluating and enhancing the quality of a higher education system" (UNESCO 2011: Art. I). This could be read as a growing evolution and development of QA in the years following the adoption of the LRC, both within the Bologna Process in Europe and globally. The 2014 Addis Convention for Africa additionally adopted the language of qualifications frameworks, defining these as "systems for classification, registration, publication and articulation of quality assured qualifications" (UNESCO 2014: Article I) bringing in another major development notion into recognition practices.

At the beginning of the millennium UNESCO developed a global outreach in internationalising quality assurance and accreditation, linking it to the recognition of qualifications, reflecting globally the processes at European level, within the Bologna Process.

A first attempt to develop a global framework for quality assurance was presented at an expert group meeting at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, memorable by the dates on which it was held, 10–11 September 2001, because the second day of the meeting coincided with the terrorist attacks in the US. During the meeting, the need for an international regulatory framework for quality assurance, accreditation and the recognition of qualifications that could assume the role of 'meta-accreditation' was presented (Van Damme 2001). The initial idea was to establish a partnership between UNESCO,

[278] *https://www.enqa.eu/about-enqa/, accessed 17 May 2025.*
[279] *See https://www.inqaahe.org/about-us/mission-values-and-purposes/, accessed 17 May 2025.*
[280] *Founding Assembly of the European Quality Assurance Register in Higher Education, Bologna Follow-up Group, 2008; see https://www.ehea.info/cid103099/eqar-founding-assembly.html, accessed 17 May 2025.*

the International Association of University Presidents (IAUP) and the International Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (INQAAHE), with the purpose to develop "a clearinghouse of trustworthy quality assurance and accreditation systems in the world, based on mutually accepted definition of concepts and basic standards and criteria" (Van Damme 2001: 11) through a World Quality Register (WQR) under the auspices of UNESCO. The WQR concept was explored in various fora, but was not considered feasible at the time. UNESCO's position was that an intergovernmental organization could not presume to tell a government that its agency was 'not good enough' for the WQR, quality assurance being a national prerogative (Uvalić-Trumbić 2007). The concept, however, did inspire the founding of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) within the Bologna Process. EQAR was launched in 2008 based on a decision by EHEA Ministers (Bologna Process 2007) with a relevant governance structure[281] which provided it with its legitimacy.

Instead, UNESCO promoted a platform for dialogue through the launch of the Global Forum on international quality assurance, accreditation and the recognition of qualifications (UNESCO 2002). The Global Forum held three conferences, two in Paris (2002, 2005) and the third one in Dar Es Salaam (2007).

The mission of the Global Forum was to link existing frameworks dealing with the recognition of qualifications and quality assurance, by offering a platform for dialogue between different stakeholders, policy makers, higher education institutions, and students, but also private sector representatives, at a time when new alternative providers were becoming more numerous. One of the objectives was to address new challenges related to access, equity and quality as a response to the diversification of higher education provision. The first conference of the Global Forum (2002) recommended that the regional recognition conventions, inspired by the LRC, should be revised (Uvalić-Trumbić 2004).

In addition, one of the outcomes of the first Global Forum, convened as an expert group not requiring Executive Board decisions, was a proposal by participants to join forces with the OECD to develop *Guidelines on the Quality Provision of Cross Border Higher Education* (UNESCO 2005b).[282] The aim of preparing these Guidelines was to develop an internationally agreed framework. The Guidelines were perceived as an educational response to the inclusion of higher education within trade in services under the General Agreement of Trade in Services (GATS) (World Trade Organization 1995). The final text was presented to decision-making bodies of UNESCO and the OECD in 2005, and the Guidelines were launched through a joint Press Conference at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. While the Guidelines do address the specific issue of cross-border higher education and its quality, their primary objectives were to support and encourage international cooperation and understanding in the area of quality assurance in general, to protect students and other stakeholders from disreputable providers, and to encourage the development of quality cross-border higher education that meets human, social, economic and cultural needs.

[281] The founders were the E 4 members (EUA, EURASHE, ESU, ENQA), in addition to national public authorities responsible for higher education, later joined by Education International and Business Europe.
[282] The UNESCO/OECD Guidelines on Quality Provision in Crossborder Higher Education were adopted by both international organizations separately; the texts were identical, but their status differed, due to internal legal conditions. In UNESCO they were adopted as a Secretariat document, in OECD as a Recommendation.

Although voluntary and non-binding, the Guidelines, which bear the stamp of both UNESCO and the OECD, have gained visibility and impact since their publication. They are addressed to governments, but also to other stakeholders: higher education institutions and academic staff; students' bodies; quality assurance and accreditation bodies; academic recognition bodies; and professional bodies. In the European context, the Guidelines were picked up in the London Communiqué (Bologna Process 2007) as a tool to promote the external dimension of the Bologna Process. Another consequence of the Guidelines was to inspire the development of the UNESCO-APQN Toolkit: regulating the quality of cross-border higher education in Asia and the Pacific (UNESCO-APQN 2006). Finally, the 2022 UNESCO World Higher Education Conference pointed out the need to revise the cross-border guidelines to include new developments and highlight emerging challenges for quality. However, it is still too early to see tangible results from the 2022 World Conference.

UNESCO's activity in promoting quality assurance culminated with the support of the World Bank in launching and reinforcing the development of the international and regional quality assurance networks. The Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity (GIQAC) started in 2007 and, over a period of five years, supported capacity-building for quality assurance in different regions of the world. Thus, regional quality assurance networks for Asia-Pacific (APQN), the Arab States (ANQAHE), Latin America and the Caribbean (RIACES), Africa (AfriQAN) and the oldest global network INQAAHE were launched or reinforced. Over the years, these networks have developed and, by the time of the adoption of the Global Convention, had strengthened and created sub-networks through cross-border collaboration and support in sharing good practices.

In the Global Convention, reliable and comparable quality assurance is a key building block for developing and maintaining trust in the recognition of qualifications. It calls for the promotion of a culture of quality assurance in higher education institutions and systems and for the development of "the capacities necessary to ensure reliability, consistency and complementarity in quality assurance, in qualifications frameworks and the recognition of qualifications" (Article II.7). Quality assurance is part of a number of other articles which deal with new providers of higher education (e.g. cross-border, prior learning, non-traditional providers) underlining that recognition should be granted to a diverse range of qualifications on the condition they were subject to comparable quality assurance mechanisms. The QA networks reinforced or created by GIQAC could have the potential to become one of the implementation structures of the Global Convention.

The adoption of the Global Convention may inspire other global initiatives which were rejected in the past. For instance, the concept of meta-accreditation and the creation of a World Quality Register dating from the beginning of this millennium, mentioned above, is being revived by INQAAHE. This network is in the process of exploring the launch of a Global Council for Recognition of Quality Assurance Providers in Tertiary Education with the objective of becoming a reference to safeguard the quality of tertiary education around the world, to create a Global Recognition Register and to facilitate regional and global recognition of qualifications. The draft text of the Global Council is still under legal discussion (INQAAHE 2024).

What does the Global Convention bring to the international academic community?

The fact that consensus could be reached between countries as diverse as UNESCO's Member States on a text dealing with policy areas which are primarily national prerogatives, such as the recognition of qualifications and quality assurance in higher education, is in itself significant.

The greatest value of the Global Convention, however, lies in its basic principles and objectives, inspired by those of the LRC. The Convention underscores the greater rights of applicants to have their qualifications assessed for the purpose of further study or employment. Recognition should be non-discriminatory and done in a fair, transparent, and timely manner; it can be withheld only if the competent authorities of the receiving country provide evidence of significant differences existing between the higher education systems of the sending and receiving countries.

As rightly noted in a recent article (Bergan 2024b), it is encouraging to see that the Global Convention embraces political considerations and individual rights. Furthermore, as a global framework, it includes some fundamental values of higher education: greater individual rights for students to the assessment of their qualification, in a non-discriminatory manner; the protection of institutional autonomy, trust and confidence through the promotion of academic integrity and ethical practices; and inclusive and equitable access to quality higher education in the perspective of lifelong learning and education for sustainable development. In the European context, these elements were reinforced by the EHEA Statement on Fundamental Values adopted by the Tirana Ministerial Conference (Bologna Process 2024a).

As new elements, the Global Convention calls for reliability, consistency and complementarity between the recognition of qualifications, quality assurance and qualifications frameworks. It addresses non-traditional learning modes, takes account of learning outcomes, and introduces validation of prior learning. The Global Convention can also be seen as aiming at reducing brain drain and promoting brain circulation by removing barriers to mobility and thus contributing to the attainment of the targets of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education.

The greatest focus is on transparent information and networking, thus launching a global community of recognition practitioners, inviting them to cooperate closely with international quality assurance practitioners, who are more advanced in global networking. Whereas in the 1990s recognition and quality assurance functioned on parallel tracks, in the present process mutual confidence and trust between the two are basic conditions for success. The stipulations of this legal instrument are not supranational, as sometimes feared. The text adopted underlines that these stipulations should be based on existing national laws and includes the caveat for implementation "to the extent of the possible". The Global Convention itself offers a much-needed global framework for the recognition of qualifications, with a right for applicants to appeal.

As an important equity issue, the Global Convention addresses the needs of a vulnerable segment of the population, refugees and displaced persons, by offering them opportunities to continue their studies in countries which will accept them. As an instrument aimed at helping to implement this particular article in the Convention, the UNESCO Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable

Migrants (UQP),[283] was developed. The UQP is based on the methodology of the existing European Qualifications Passport[284] developed by the Council of Europe and the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (Malgina *et al*. 2020). According to UNESCO, there were 70.8 million forcibly displaced persons in the world in 2018 with only three per cent of eligible refugees having equitable access to higher education studies. By 2024 the number of enrolments into higher education for refugees had increased to 7% and the aim set by UNHCR is that 15% of eligible refugees have access to higher education studies.[285]

UNESCO successfully tested its first pilot of the Qualifications Passport (UQP) in September 2019, in Zambia, in cooperation with the Zambia Qualifications Authority, NOKUT and UNHCR. In addition, by 2024 the UQP had been tested and implemented in Iraq and Uganda, and experts from Kenya had also participated. For 2025, assessments are scheduled for Zambia, Kenya, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Togo and South Sudan (see also Chapter 6 Refugees' Qualifications).

Next steps

It took some time from the adoption of the Global Convention at UNESCO's General Conference in November 2019 until it entered into force three months after the 20th ratification in March 2023. The first ratification came in May 2020 (Mørland, Snildal, and Skjerven 2020). In the following months, Member States from all UNESCO regions followed suit. As of June 2025, 38 States have become parties to the Global Convention.

An important first step was the preparation of *A Practical Guide to Recognition: Implementing the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education*, which was developed by UNESCO with the assistance of Norway's ENIC (UNESCO 2020).

The First Intergovernmental Conference of the States Parties to the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education was held at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris on 5 July 2023. The 21 States Parties that had ratified the convention by that date were represented in the meeting. The States Parties took the first formal decisions in the implementation of the convention. Firstly, there were elections to the Bureau for the next two years. One Member State from each of the six electoral groups put forward a candidate as Vice-Chair: Estonia, Ivory Coast, Japan, Nicaragua, Tunisia, and the United Kingdom. In addition, Stig Arne Skjerven (Norway) and Melanie Rosenbaum (Holy See) were elected Chair and Rapporteur in a personal capacity.

Secondly, the conference adopted the Rules of Procedures for the Convention. Ahead of the conference there had been an informal working group, consisting of the States Parties and the Secretariat. The critical discussions in the working group on the roles of the Bureau and the Secretariat, and on the draft Rules of Procedures, ensured that the States Parties, through the Bureau, had a strong, decisive and clear role. The draft Rules of Procedures prepared by the informal working group were adopted with only minor amendments.

[283] *https://www.unesco.org/en/emergencies/qualifications-passport, accessed 17 May 2025.*
[284] *EQP at https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/recognition-of-refugees-qualifications, accessed 17 May 2025.*
[285] *https://www.unhcr.org/au/15-2030-global-pledge-refugee-higher-education-and-self-reliance, accessed 17 May 2025.*

In addition, the Secretariat had suggested that the Intergovernmental Conference adopt a work programme. However, more than two-thirds of the State Parties decided that the draft required further work and decided to organize an Extraordinary Session of the Conference to adopt the Work Plan, based on the work taking place in a working group which was to develop a draft interim work plan and to hold consultations. The First Extraordinary session of the Intergovernmental Conference of the States Parties[286] to the Global Convention took place on 7 March 2024, and the only agenda item was the adoption of the interim work plan.[287]

The interim work programme, which had been developed by a working group of State Parties and supported by the Secretariat, was adopted with no substantial changes. The most important decision taken was to establish an open-ended working group with a core of eight members (at least one from each electoral group),[288] paying due regard to geographical balance and expertise, to review and finalize, in consultation with States Parties to the Convention, the draft operational guidelines initially prepared by the Secretariat and to submit them for consideration and adoption at its second ordinary session, to take place in June 2025. The operational guidelines will be a crucial element for States Parties and others for the implementation of the aims, principles and obligations of the convention, and the objective is to assist States Parties and others who are still in the early stages of implementation.

Secondly, the conference also requested the Secretariat to prepare a recommendation on the relationship between the Global Convention and the regional conventions on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education (including the LRC), in consultation with the Bureau of the Intergovernmental Conference, the States Parties to the Convention, and the bureaus of the regional recognition convention committees. The Secretariat was requested to submit the recommendation for consideration by its third ordinary session, in June 2027. This process will be key in determining the relationship between conventions which all have sovereign governing bodies and far from identical State Parties.

Thirdly, the Conference requested the Secretariat to prepare, in consultation with the Bureau, research papers to deal with quality assurance (including that of transnational education, which could be understood as cross-border higher education – which is the term in the convention itself), recognition of refugees' qualifications and development of complementary pathways. These research papers were presented at the second ordinary session of the Intergovernmental conference, which took place in June 2025. They will serve as a basis for developing subsidiary texts on these topics, which will in turn be examined and adopted at its third ordinary session. In addition, the Secretariat was requested to complement the research papers with capacity development activities, and advocacy and communication activities as specified in the interim work programme.

[286] *By then, the number of States Parties to the Convention had grown to 28.*
[287] *https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/extraordinary-session-intergovernmental-conference-states-parties-global-convention-higher-education, accessed 17 May 2025.*
[288] *The UNESCO electoral groups are Group I; Western Europe; Group II: Eastern Europe; Group III: Latin America and the Caribbean; Group IV: Asia and the Pacific; and Group V: Africa and the Arab States.*

Conclusion

Why is it significant that a global convention was adopted at a time when the internationalization of higher education is changing due to populism and xenophobia, war and aggression, erosion of fundamental values and a general decrease of trust in public institutions?

One of the reasons is a sense of ownership. The Global Convention will be implemented in close cooperation with the bodies overseeing the Council of Europe/UNESCO 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention and the more recently revised regional ones, which will gradually replace the regional conventions of the 1970s. Another reason is the need to acknowledge the unbundling of higher education and its digitalization, including new credentials, through a global framework for recognition. A third reason is an imperative to ensure better access to education for increasing migration populations. Finally, the Convention fulfils UNESCO's objective of achieving recognition of higher education qualifications universally and crowns its long-standing activities for recognition (originally equivalence) of degrees that go back to the foundation of its higher education programme in 1947.

Although it is too early to assess the impact of the Global Convention on recognition practices for students and graduates around the world, it is evident that there is an increased sharing of knowledge across regions through enhanced cooperation between the new generation of regional conventions on the one side and their contribution to the implementation of the Global Convention on the other. In addition, tools such as the Practical Guide to Recognition (UNESCO 2020) developed by UNESCO to help the implementation of the Global Convention, and the Operational Guidelines, adopted at the Second session of the Intergovernmental Conference of the State Parties of the Global Convention in June 2025 (UNESCO 2024b: point 5), will certainly help develop practices at national and regional levels. As was the case with the Lisbon Recognition Convention, creating a community of practitioners and furthering their professional development, plus the future development and adoption of subsidiary texts, will be significant in facilitating recognition, as will using and adapting existing national legislation. Another important text to be developed concerns the relationship between the global convention and the regional conventions, and this text is scheduled to be adopted by the respective governing bodies in 2027 (*ibid*.: point 6).

Although there are several challenges ahead, and some uncertainty as to its effectiveness, the adoption of this particular convention brings hope. At a time of threat to multilateralism, in a world marked by greater inequalities, shifting geopolitics, wars and aggression, it should open the door to a better world for mobile students, researchers and faculty, continuing the path charted by the LRC. The success of the Global Convention will depend on the will and ability of States Parties to engage but even more so on the readiness of practitioners to share practices across borders.

It is encouraging to see that the Communiqué adopted by the Ministerial Conference of the EHEA held on 29–30 May 2024 in Tirana reinforces this global cooperation between Europe and other UNESCO regions and calls on its Member States to ratify the Global Convention:

> We welcome the adoption of the Global Policy Forum Statement and ask the BFUG and its working structures to continue to develop and strengthen dialogue and collaboration with macro regions on

> various levels and with appropriate interlocutors. This includes reciprocal referencing of qualifications frameworks and credit systems, ratification and implementation of the UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, as well as the second generation regional recognition conventions, and alignment and mutual understanding of quality assurance principles. (Bologna Process 2024b: 6)

The Global Policy Forum at the Tirana Ministerial Conference of the EHEA declared the Global Convention to be a landmark achievement as an important step towards reaching SDG 4. The participants in the Global Policy Forum committed to working towards greater exchange of knowledge about higher education systems, policies and instruments (Bologna Process 2024c).

For one of the co-authors of this chapter (Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić), these conclusions are particularly meaningful. She had the honour to lead the UNESCO delegation at the 2010 Budapest–Vienna Ministerial Conference that marked the official launch of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and to coordinate the meeting of the Global Policy Forum. In her remarks in Budapest, she expressed the hope that strengthening higher education in Europe would go hand in hand with the greater international openness of the Bologna Process so that all parts of the world can learn from each other and she announced the launch of the Global Policy Forum as a first step in this direction (Uvalić-Trumbić 2010).

The adoption of the Global Convention not only crowned UNESCO's long-standing activities towards achieving the objective of an international legal instrument for the recognition of qualifications, but it has also provided a suitable framework for these global exchanges of knowledge to develop further. The Global Convention has come into force at a critical time in the overall international policy context. Just as the LRC played a positive role after the fall of the Berlin Wall in reinforcing European integration processes (see Chapter 3 The LRC in a Broader Context), the Global Convention could help build bridges between Member States from different world regions for the sake of their increasingly mobile young populations.

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APPENDIX 1

Overview of Relevant Intergovernmental Conventions and other Legal Texts on the Recognition of Qualifications in the Frameworks of the Council of Europe and UNESCO at the Time of the Development of the LRC

Europe

Conventions in the framework of the Council of Europe

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

ETS No. 49 Protocol to the European Convention on the Equivalence of Diplomas Leading to Admission to Universities (1964)

ETS No. 21 European Convention on the Equivalence of Periods of University Study (1956)

ETS No. 32 European Convention on the Academic Recognition of University Qualifications (1959)

ETS No. 69 European Agreement on Continued Payment of Scholarships to Students Studying Abroad (1969)

ETS No. 138 European Convention on the General Equivalence of Periods of University Study (1990)

Conventions in the framework of UNESCO

International Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas, and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab and European States bordering the Mediterranean (1976)

Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas, and Degrees concerning Higher Education in the States belonging to the Europe Region (1979)

Recommendation in the framework of UNESCO

Recommendation on the Recognition of Studies and Qualifications in Higher Education (1993)

Subsidiary Texts (all in the framework of the Council of Europe)

First Declaration on the Application of the European Convention on the Equivalence of Diplomas leading to Admission to Universities (1974)

Second Declaration on the Application of the European Convention on the Equivalence of Diplomas Leading to Admission to Universities (1974)

Principles of Good Practice in Academic Recognition Procedures (1990)

General Declaration on the European Equivalence Conventions (1992)

Explanatory Report on Convention No. 138 on the General Equivalence of Periods of University Study (1995)

European Union Directives

Council Directive 89/48/EEC of 21 December 1988 on a General System for the Recognition of Higher Education Diplomas Awarded on Completion of Professional Training of at Least Three Years' Duration

Council Directive 92/51/EEC/ of 18 June 1992 on a Second General System for the Recognition of Professional Education and Training to Supplement Directive 89/48/EEC

| Other regions

Conventions in the framework of UNESCO[289]

Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (1974)

International Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab and European States bordering on the Mediterranean (1976)

Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab States (1978)

Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States (1981)

Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas, and Degrees in Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific (1983)

[289] *Note: these conventions have now been replaced by the second generation of UNESCO regional conventions, of which the LRC was the first, and supplemented by the UNESCO Global Convention, adopted in 2019.*

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APPENDIX 2

Ad Hoc Expert Group for the Feasibility Study for a Joint Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on Academic Recognition for the Europe Region

A2

Mr. Iulian Beju, Ministry of Education, Romania

Ms. Eva Egron-Polak, Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada

Professor Maria da Graça Fialho, Universidade de Lisboa

Professor Vladimir I. Filippov, Rector, Russian University of Peoples' Friendship

Professor Suzy Halimi, President, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle/Paris III

Ms. Chantal Kaufmann, Ministry of Education of the French Community of Belgium

Mr. Kees Kouwenaar, NUFFIC (Dutch ENIC)

Mr. Nizam Mohammed, University of London

Dr. Günter Reuhl, Zentralstelle für ausländisches Bildungswesen im Sekretariat der KMK (German ENIC)

Professor Włodzimierz Siwiński, Rector, Universytet Warszawski

Professor Ergün Togrol, Istanbul Teknik Universitesi

Ms. Irja Persson Utterhall, Göteborgs Universitet

Mr. Peter van der Hijden, Commission of the European Communities

Source: Council of Europe and UNESCO 1994: 50–51

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APPENDIX 3

Ad Hoc Expert Group for the drafting of a Joint Council Of Europe/UNESCO Convention on Academic Recognition for the Europe Region

Mr. Kees Kouwenaar, NUFFIC (Dutch ENIC), Chair from the second meeting of the group

Mr. Iulian Beju, Ministry of Education, Romania

Ms. Eva Egron-Polak, Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada

Professor Maria da Graça Fialho, Universidade de Lisboa

Professor Vladimir I. Filippov, Rector, Russian University of Peoples' Friendship

Professor Suzy Halimi, President, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle/Paris III

Ms. Chantal Kaufmann, Ministry of Education of the French Community of Belgium

Mr. Nizam Mohammed, University of London (chaired the first meeting of the group)

Dr. Tibor Gyula Nagy, Hungarian ENIC

Dr. Günter Reuhl, Zentralstelle für ausländisches Bildungswesen im Sekretariat der KMK (German ENIC)

Ms. Irja Persson Utterhall, Göteborgs Universitet

Mr. Peter van der Hijden, Commission of the European Communities

Source: Uvalić-Trumbić and Bergan 1996: 23–25

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APPENDIX 4

Overview of successive drafts of the Lisbon Recognition Convention

A4

First Outline of the Draft Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention and Explanatory Report on Academic Recognition in Europe (12 January 1995)

Second Outline of the Draft Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention and Explanatory Report on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the European Region (20 March 1995; following the first meeting of the ad hoc Expert Group, Bucharest, 9–11 February 1995)

Third Outline of the Draft Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention and Explanatory Report on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the European Region (2 June 1995; following the first meeting of the ad hoc Expert Group, Bucharest, 9–11 February 1995 and the meeting of the ad hoc Working Party on Definitions, Den Haag/The Hague, 15–16 May 1995)

Fourth Outline of the Draft Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention and Explanatory Report on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region (28 September 1995, following the second meeting of the ad hoc Expert Group, Strasbourg, 5–7 July 1995)

Fifth Outline of the Draft Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention and Explanatory Report on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region (26 June 1996, following the meetings of the Higher Education and Research Committee (CC-HER) of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 27–29 March 1996 and the UNESCO Regional Committee for Europe, Rome, 16–17 June 1996). A bilingual edition was also produced intended for the Editorial Group meeting at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris (10–11 July 1996)

Sixth Outline of the Draft Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention and Explanatory Report on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region (12 September 1996, prepared for the Consultation of Potential Signatory States, at Den Haag/The Hague, following the meeting of the Editorial Group)

Seventh Outline of the Draft Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention and Explanatory Report on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region (17 December 1996, following the Consultation of Potential Signatory States at Den Haag/The Hague)

Source: Uvalić-Trumbić and Bergan 1996: 16.

The final version of the Lisbon Recognition Convention was then adopted by the Diplomatic Conference in Lisbon on 11 April 1997.

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APPENDIX 5

Texts adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee
(in reverse chronological order)

Recommendations

Recommendation on the Recognition of Qualifications Held by Refugees, Displaced Persons and Persons in a Refugee-like Situation, November 2017

Revised Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees and Explanatory Memorandum, June 2004, revised February 2016

Recommendation on the Use of Qualifications Frameworks in the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications, June 2013

Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and Explanatory Memorandum, 2001, revised 2010

Revised Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education, June 2007

Recommendation on International Access Qualifications, 1999

Reports and other texts

Monitoring the Implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention – Monitoring Report, December 2022

Guidelines for National Online Information Systems, June 2019

Monitoring of the Implementation of Article VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, Final Report, June 2019

Monitoring the Implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention – Final Report, February 2016

Statement of the Committee of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region on the recognition of the qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation, February 2016

The Diploma Supplement, June 2007

Joint ENIC-NARIC Charter of Activities and Services, June 2004

Source: https://www.enic-naric.net/page-enic-naric_reference_documents, which provides weblinks to all the texts in the different language versions.

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APPENDIX 6

Presidents of [and co-secretaries to] the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee and the ENIC Network

Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee

Presidents of the LRCC are elected to serve from one ordinary plenary session to the next and are re-eligible once. Until 2001, the LRCC met every two years; since then, it has met every three years.

Birutė Mockienė (Lithuania) 1999–2001

Andrejs Rauhvargers (Latvia) 2001–07

Carita Blomqvist (Finland) 2007–13

Gunnar Vaht (Estonia) 2013–19

Luca Lantero (Italy) 2019–

ENIC Network[290]

Presidents of the ENIC Network are re-eligible once. The term of office was one year until 2017, when it was changed to two years.

Tibor Gyula Nagy (Hungary) 1994–96

Kees Kouwenaar (Netherlands) 1996–97

Marianne Hildebrand (Sweden) 1997–99

Andrejs Rauhvargers (Latvia) 1999–2001

Jindra Divis (Netherlands) 2001–03

Gunnar Vaht (Estonia) 2003–05

Yves Beaudin (Canada) 2005–07

[290] *The authors are grateful to Gunnar Vaht for his assistance in establishing and confirming the list.*

Françoise Profit (France) 2007–09

E. Stephen Hunt (USA) 2009–11

Allan Bruun Pedersen (Denmark) 2011–13

Kevin Guillaume (Belgium (French Community)) 2013–15

Claudia Gelleni (France) 2015–17[291]

Stig Arne Skjerven (Norway) 2017–20[292]

Jenneke Lokhoff (Netherlands) 2020–23[293]

Chiara Finocchietti (Italy) 2023–

Co-Secretaries to the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee and ENIC Network

The Council of Europe and UNESCO jointly provide the Secretariat to both bodies, and each organization appoints one Secretariat member to fulfill both functions. Until its closure in 2011, UNESCO/CEPES served as the UNESCO Co-Secretariat; since then this function has been fulfilled by the Higher Education Section at UNESCO Headquarters. The Council of Europe Co-Secretariat has since the outset been provided by the Education Department, even if the Department has undergone reorganization from time to time.

Council of Europe Co-Secretaries

Sjur Bergan 1994–2008

Jean-Philippe Restoueix 2008–2019

Katia Dolgova Dreyer 2019–

[291] Claudia Gelleni was the first ENIC President elected to a two year term, following a change of the terms of reference. She did not run for a second term.
[292] Stig Arne Skjerven was reelected to a second two year term in 2019 but left office in summer 2020 because he took up a new position outside the recognition field.
[293] Jenneke Lokhoff served for the remainder of Stig Arne Skjerven's term as interim President and was elected to a full two year term in her own right in 2021.

UNESCO Co-Secretaries

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić 1994–1999

Lăzar Vlăsceanu 1999–2008

Peter Wells 2008–2012

Liliana Simionescu 2013–2018

Peter Wells 2019–2020

Vanja Gutović 2021–2024

Noah Sobe 2025–

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APPENDIX 7

Notable Contributors to the Development of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and to Recognition Policy and Practice

This appendix provides brief biographies of some former colleagues of ours who contributed decisively to the development and/or implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention or to the pre-LRC work on recognition in Europe. We do not attempt to provide a complete overview of all who may have deserved a mention, and the overview is limited to persons who have not been active in the field for some time. Hence, many persons who have contributed significantly are not mentioned because they are still active in the field, or were very active until quite recently.

Beaudin, Yves

Yves E. Beaudin was the longtime Head of the Canadian ENIC and contributed decisively to the work of both the ENIC Network, of which he was President in 2005–07, and the LRCC, to which he was an observer. He also contributed to several working groups. Yves Beaudin was instrumental in bringing about Canada's ratification of the LRC. He died in early 2023.

Dalichow, Fritz

Fritz Dalichow, as a staff member of the Erasmus Bureau, which assisted the European Commission in implementing its program for the recognition of qualifications, played a seminal role in setting up the NARIC Network in 1984 as well as in the conceptual and practical work on recognition of higher educational qualifications. He was, among other things, the moving force behind the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and played a key role in making the NARIC Network a vibrant community.

d'Avignon, Nicole

Nicole d'Avignon was the first Head of the Canadian ENIC and played an important role in furthering recognition between Canada and Europe as well as an active role in the ENIC Network. She was one of the Vice Presidents of the Diplomatic Conference that adopted the LRC in April 1997.

Deloz, Maurits

Maurits Deloz was Director General for Higher Education in the Flemish Ministry of Education in the 1980s. He played an important role in establishing the NEIC Network of the Council of Europe in the early 1980s and remained its Chair after his retirement from the Ministry. He played a role in preparing the establishment of the ENIC Network in 1994, which marked the end of his involvement with recognition policy in Europe.

Fialho, Maria da Graça

Maria da Graça Fialho was Deputy Director General for Higher Education in the Portuguese Ministry of Education in the early 1990s, on leave from her position as a professor at the University of Lisbon. She played an important role within the ENIC and NARIC networks and hosted the first meeting ever held between the networks of the Council of Europe, the European Commission, and UNESCO in Lisbon in June 1992. This meeting provided an important impetus towards establishing the ENIC Network in 1994, by merger of the separate networks of the Council of Europe and UNESCO. Maria da Graça Fialho was a member of the ad hoc Expert Group advising the Council of Europe and UNESCO on the development of the LRC.

Hagen, Jon Erik

Jon Erik Hagen played a crucial role in establishing the NEIC Network, which was the Council of Europe precursor of the ENIC Network. He made his organization, NUFFIC, host the first meeting in 1983, took care of the 1984 and 1985 meeting reports and supported the Council of Europe and the Flemish host in organizing the 1985 Bruges meeting. He also served as Vice-President of the ENIC Network. Jon Erik Hagen led NUFFIC in its mobility and recognition efforts from 1980 until 1996. He died in July 2024, aged 88.

Hunt, E. Stephen

Earl Stephen Hunt headed the US ENIC for many years and was President of the ENIC Network 2009–11. He contributed strongly to the work of both the ENIC Network and to the LRCC, where he was an observer. Stephen Hunt was particularly influential in discussion of 'substantial differences' and co-edited a book on the topic in the Council of Europe Higher Education Series. He died in October 2023.

Kaufmann, Chantal

Chantal Kaufmann was the longtime Head of the ENIC-NARIC of the French Community of Belgium and was an active participant in the ENIC Network. She was the General Rapporteur for the Council of Europe conference on "Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications: Challenges for the Next Decade", which was held in Malta in October 1994 and played an important role in preparing the work on the LRC. Chantal Kaufmann was a member of the ad hoc Expert Group advising the Council of Europe and UNESCO on the development of the LRC, and she also served as Vice President of the ENIC Network in 2000–01.

Lourtie, Pedro

Pedro Lourtie was Director General for Higher Education in the Portuguese Ministry of education at the time of the Diplomatic Conference that adopted the LRC in April 1997. As host of the conference, he was elected its president and played an important role in the final negotiation of the text. Pedro Lourtie later also played an important role in the early years of the Bologna Process.

Mockienė, Birutė

Birutė Mockienė was the first Head of the Lithuanian national information center when this was established, soon after independence in the early 1990s, and served as the first President of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee 1999–2001 after having been Vice President of the ENIC Network in 1994–96. She was also a member of the Council of Europe committee responsible for higher education

and of its Bureau, and she contributed to several working groups in the ENIC Network. Birutė Mockienė died in 2006.

Nagy, Tibor Gyula

Tibor Gyula Nagy was Head of the Hungarian national information center in the 1990s and hosted the first meeting of the ENIC Network in Budapest in 1994. He was the obvious choice as its first President, both because of his strong position in the network and because his profound knowledge and understanding of Russia (where he had undertaken parts of his studies) was seen as important at a time when that country, significant because of its size and history, seemed to be opening up. He served as President for two full terms, until 1996. Tibor Nagy also played a key role in organizing the 1989 conference on recognition that was the first East–West conference of its kind. He died in 1999.

Rauhvargers, Andrejs

Andrejs Rauhvargers was the second President of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee (2001–07) and was also President of the ENIC Network in 1999–2001. He contributed to many working groups on a range of topics, including joint degrees and qualifications frameworks. He represented Latvia in the Bologna Follow Up Group for many years and played a key role in the consideration of recognition issues in the European Higher Education Area as well as in drafting its stocktaking and monitoring report. He also wrote two important studies on university rankings for the European University Association.

Reuhl, Günther

Günther Reuhl was the longtime Head of the German ENIC-NARIC (Zentralstelle für ausländisches Bilgingswesen) and an active participant in the ENIC Network. He chaired the first ENIC working group, which aimed to provide an overview of qualifications from what were then the new member countries from Central and Eastern Europe. Günther Reuhl was also the initial Chair of the ad hoc Expert Group advising the Council of Europe and UNESCO on the development of the LRC.

Zgaga, Pavel

As the then Slovenian Deputy Minister of Education, Pavel Zgaga was one of the Vice Chairs of the Diplomatic Conference that adopted the LRC in April 1997. He was one of the contributors to the drafting of the Bologna Declaration, which he signed on behalf of Slovenia. He later became Minister of Education before returning to his professorship at the University of Ljubljana. As an emeritus professor, Pavel Zgaga is still one of Europe's leading educational researchers, and he has played a key role in developing cooperation among Western Balkan universities in this area.

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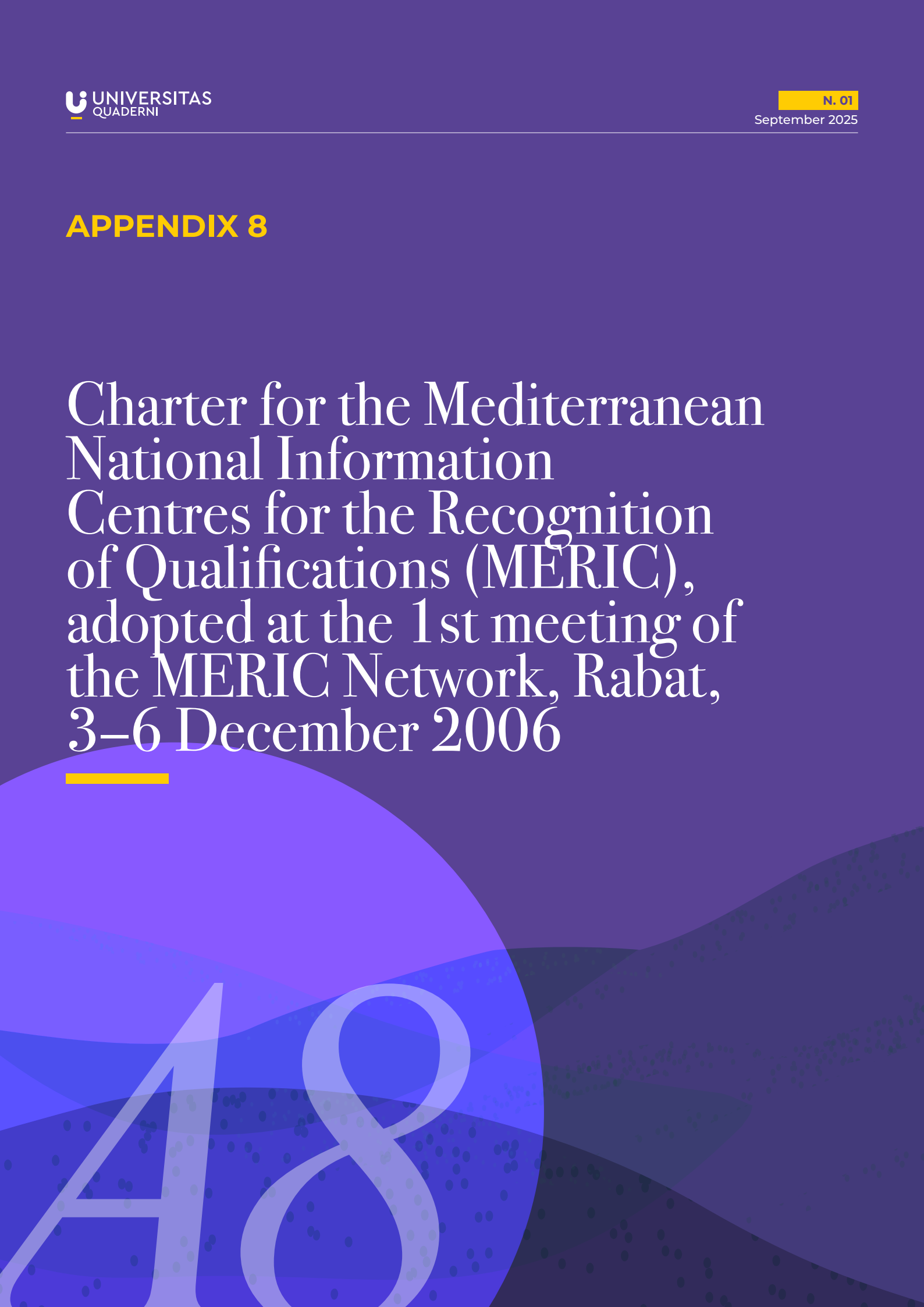
APPENDIX 8

Charter for the Mediterranean National Information Centres for the Recognition of Qualifications (MERIC), adopted at the 1st meeting of the MERIC Network, Rabat, 3–6 December 2006



Section I. Tasks and activities of a national recognition information centre

The tasks to be fulfilled by a national recognition information centre are the following:

- Provide adequate and reliable information, within an explicitly stated reasonable time, on qualifications, education systems, and recognition procedures to individual holders of qualifications, higher education institutions, and other stakeholders to be defined;
- Provide information, advice or formal decision on the recognition of qualifications on the basis of their assessment by applying existing criteria and procedures. The criteria should be made explicit by each national centre on the basis of guidelines agreed within the Mediterranean Region;
- Provide information to holders of foreign diplomas on their rights regarding recognition;
- Serve as the main information point at national level on the recognition of higher education qualifications as well as qualifications giving access to higher education;
- Cooperate with other information centres, higher education institutions, their networks and other relevant actors in the national context;
- Contribute, as appropriate, to the development of higher education policies and regulations at national and regional level (Mediterranean Convention) in recognition and, as relevant, related areas;
- Participate in the elaboration and/or dissemination of publications and other information material on its own education system and contribute to publications, surveys, comparative studies and other research activities undertaken by UNESCO and other international organizations;
- Collect and regularly update information on: education systems, qualifications frameworks, foreign qualifications and their comparability to the qualifications of its own country, legislation on recognition of qualifications and quality assurance, officially recognised and/or accredited/evaluated institutions, access requirements;

- Develop cooperation with relevant organisations in countries in other regions of the world working in the field of recognition;
- Gather and regularly up-date information on the national education system in the format given in the Appendix to the present document;
- Carry out other tasks as appropriate. Please specify them;
- Contribute to the establishment and operation of the Mediterranean network on the recognition of qualifications.

Section II. Resources and Expertise

II.1. Staff expertise

The staff of a national information centre should be versed in evaluating foreign qualifications in line with international best practice in methodology and procedures of recognition, including:

- Conducting research into home and foreign education systems and qualifications frameworks;
- Identifying the status of the institution awarding a qualification;
- Identifying the value of a given qualification by taking into account the academic and professional rights that qualification gives to the holder in the country in which it was conferred;
- Identifying the most appropriate comparison to the foreign qualification in the home education system and justifying any substantial difference;
- Understanding the principles and methods of quality assurance;
- Making use of the outcomes of quality assurance in the assessment of qualifications.

II.2. Staff requirements

The centre shall be adequately staffed by each country taking into account: the size of the country, the numbers of institutions, the number of national and foreign students, the average number of applications for recognition, the intensity of information flow and the specific position of the centre within the legal and administrative framework and higher education system of the given country.

The staff of a national information centre should meet the following basic requirements:

- Higher education qualification or equivalent;

- Familiarity with the national and international legal framework for recognition;
- Analytical skills;
- Ability to present complex information in a clear and transparent manner;
- Working knowledge of English and at least one other foreign language;
- Computer literacy and skills in using ICT.

II.3. Documentation

Each centre is expected to have access to electronic and printed documentation, including:

- Reference works on foreign education systems;
- Reference works on the education system of the country in which the centre is working:
  _national education legislation and regulations (in national and foreign language),
  _legislation and regulations in the field of recognition of qualifications and quality assurance,
  _lists of officially recognised and/or accredited/evaluated institutions/programmes,
  _description of the national education system and, where appropriate, qualifications framework,
  _description of the national criteria and procedures for recognition of foreign qualifications;
- National/international institutional catalogues;
- Recognition conventions, bilateral and multilateral agreements, other relevant documents.

II.4. Technical equipment

Each centre is expected to have appropriate hardware and software equipment in order to:

- Maintain e-mail connection;
- Have access to the Internet;
- Publish on the web;
- Maintain a database of previous evaluations carried out by the centre.

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Brief Biographies of Editors and Authors

Sjur Bergan was Head of the Council of Europe's Education Department until 1 February 2022. He was the main Council of Europe official responsible for the development of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and he was co-secretary of the ENIC Network until 2009.

Sjur represented the Council of Europe in the Bologna Follow Up Group and Board between 2000 and April 2022, chaired working groups on structural reforms, and was a member of the EHEA groups on the fundamental values of higher education 2018–24. He led the Council of Europe projects on Competences for Democratic Culture and the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees.

Sjur was series editor of the Council of Europe Higher Education Series. He is the author of *Qualifications: Introduction to a Concept and Not by Bread Alone* as well as numerous book chapters and articles on education and higher education policy.

He holds honorary doctorates from the University of Oslo (2024) and Dublin City University (2022) and honorary professorships from Al-Farabi National Kazakh University and Astana IT University (2022). He is the recipient of the 2019 European Association for International Education Award for Vision and Leadership.

Letizia Brambilla Pisoni has an academic background in languages and international relations. She has been a Senior Credential Evaluator at CIMEA since 2017, working in the academic recognition and higher education sector with a focus on Middle East and African countries. Her areas of expertise are in the field of the recognition of refugees' qualifications with partial or missing documentation, in supporting development of digital platforms for improving transparency and efficiency of recognition procedure, and in international relations in higher education. Since 2021 she has been executive assistant to the Director General of CIMEA, supporting institutional relations and activities.

Chiara Finocchietti is Director of CIMEA–NARIC Italia. A geographer, she comes from the world of research, is an expert in the field of recognition of qualifications and higher education systems, and is the author of various publications on the subject of credential evaluation, internationalisation of higher education, ethics in education, recognition of refugees' qualifications, micro-credentials, transnational

education, digitalisation and artificial intelligence. She is a member of various international groups on higher education policies and practices, and is currently co-chair of the EHEA Thematic Peer Group on the Lisbon Recognition Convention and President of the ENIC Network.

Kees Kouwenaar retired in July 2021 as Secretary General of the Aurora Universities Network, a group of research intensive universities dedicated to societal impact. He served Aurora on secondment from his employer, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. As part of his role with Aurora, he coordinated the network's successful application to be one of the (then 41) European University alliances and led the implementation of that programme.

After his retirement, he set up and coordinated the LOUIS part of the Aurora Competence Framework. He still supports and advises the LOUIS team. From 2013, he was initiator and director of the Mastermind Europe initiative, a new approach to admission to master's programmes, based on clearly articulated competence requirements.

Between 1987 and 1997 he directed the NUFFIC department for Credential Evaluation. He was lead expert, workshop chair and final rapporteur for the Lisbon Recognition Convention of 1997. He served as President of the ENIC network and the EAIE's professional section for admission and credential evaluation. Between 1997 and 2013 he managed internationalisation at NUFFIC, and also directed units for development cooperation in the legal domain (2002–08) and for the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (2008–12).

Luca Lantero is the Director General of CIMEA, the Italian Information Center for Academic Mobility and Equivalence.

He is one of the main experts at Italian and international level on higher education systems, on bogus diplomas and accreditation mills, transnational education, accreditation, and the digitalization of processes applied to recognition, particularly with the advent of blockchain and AI.

From 2018 to 2020 he was the Head of the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) Secretariat of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

He is currently President of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee and Head of the ASEM Education Secretariat.

In 2022, Luca was elected a member of the Bureau of the Ethics, Transparency, and Integrity (ETINED) platform of the Council of Europe.

In 2024, he was appointed Associate Professor of the European Law & Governance School (ELGS) and Director of the Institute for Higher Education Law and Governance (IHELG) housed by the European Public Law Organization (EPLO).

He is the Director of the Centre for preventing and countering fraud in education and one of the expert partecipating in the Recognition and AI Working Group, both initiatives established by the Council of Europe.

His scientific output is extensive and he participates in national and international research projects and programmes in the field of higher education studies. He is currently the Editor-in-Chief of Rivista Universitas.

Erwin Malfroy is legal and policy adviser at the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training. From 1996 to 2006, he was Coordinator of the ENIC-NARIC-Vlaanderen team. He was a member of the NARIC Advisory Board (1997–2000) and participated in many working groups of the European Union, the Council of Europe and UNESCO, including Diploma Supplement (1996–98), International Access Qualifications (1998), Recognition of Refugees' Qualifications (1999–2000), Transnational Education (1999–2000), Criteria and Procedures (2000–01), Substantial Differences (2005–08), and the Pathfinder group on Automatic Recognition (2012–15).

Erwin is co-creator of the "Vienna Sententia" (2006), the joint declaration on the automatic recognition of accredited qualifications of many European Consortium of Accreditation (ECA) members as well as many ENICs and NARICs. He also served as Legal Assistant to the independent Flemish Higher Education Council for disputes concerning decisions on study progress and examination results (2006–08). He played a key role in the legal arrangements for automatic recognition within Benelux and between Benelux and the Baltic States. Throughout his career, Erwin served as speaker and chair at sessions and seminars at the annual EAIE conferences.

He graduated in 1988 with a Master of Law degree at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

Helene Peterbauer is a policy analyst in the European University Association's Institutional Development Unit, whose work focuses on issues of learning and teaching as well as academic recognition. She represents EUA in the Council of Europe ad hoc Working Group on Automatic Recognition and the Bologna Follow-Up Group's Thematic Peer Group B on Recognition in Line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention, as well as several Erasmus+ funded projects with a focus on recognition.

From 2020 until 2022, she coordinated the Erasmus+ funded "Spotlight on Recognition" project, which developed a self-assessment tool supporting higher education institutions in evaluating whether their recognition practices are in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and international good practice.

Prior to joining EUA, Helene worked as a researcher and lecturer at the University of Vienna. She holds master's degrees in German Studies and Scandinavian Studies as well as a doctoral degree in Scandinavian Studies, all from the University of Vienna.

Stig Arne Skjerven is the first elected Chair of the Conference of the State Parties of UNESCO's Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education. He was instrumental in the work of various phases of the establishment and implementation of the Global Recognition Convention, and as part of the Expert Group developing the draft, conducting intergovernmental negotiations and leading working groups.

Stig Arne served as Chair of the ENIC Network in 2019–21. He was also instrumental in the establishment of the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (Council of Europe) and the UNESCO Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants. His experience extends to roles like Norway's Deputy Permanent Delegate to UNESCO, Director of Norway's ENIC-NARIC office, and Director of Academic Affairs at a Norwegian Higher Education Institution, as well as project management of quality assurance in higher education, and various roles involving communication, policies, global partnership, and capacity building in higher education.

Serena Spitalieri is Head of the Credential Evaluation and Information Center within CIMEA–NARIC Italia. She has research and teaching experience in the field of fraudulent documents and diploma mills, transnational education, international higher education systems, and digitalization. Since 2018, she has been responsible for following the design and digital developments linked to CIMEA's workflow assessment, with a particular focus on new technologies such as blockchain and Artificial Intelligence (AI) applied to the Education and Credential Evaluation field.

Serena holds an Executive master's degree in Design, Creativity and Social Practices from the Politecnico di Milano and is currently a PhD student at the Department of Business Economics of the Roma Tre University, researching issues relating to the internationalization of university education systems: environmentally-friendly effects, digitalization, sustainability and new organizational models. She is currently working on a research project on the potential use of AI in the credential assessment workflow in collaboration with IALAB – the Laboratorio de Innovación e Inteligencia Artificial of the Universidad de Buenos Aires.

Serena is currently the President of APICE, the first Italian Professional Association of Credential Evaluators.

Kateryna Suprun is a doctoral researcher in Administrative Sciences at Tampere University. Prior to this, Kateryna acquired increasing responsibilities as a civil servant at the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine: she represented Ukraine in the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG), co-chaired the BFUG in spring 2020, and was a member of the Drafting Committee for the Rome Ministerial Communiqué adopted in 2020. Kateryna also represented Ukraine in the European Commission Advisory Groups on the European Qualifications Framework and Europass and worked on educational reform initiatives as part of World Bank projects in Ukraine.

Kateryna has extensive experience in education policy, governance, and digital transformation, alongside managing education in an emergency in Ukraine. She coordinated the launch of digital educational

credentials in Ukraine in the Diia digital wallet to support the recognition of Ukrainian qualifications. Her research interests include public policy, higher education funding, governance and management, and intergovernmental relations. Kateryna holds a joint Master of Sciences in Research and Innovation from Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences / Danube University Krems (Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters Programme in Research and Innovation in Higher Education, MARIHE).

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, after serving as Secretary-General of the Association of Universities of Yugoslavia, began her career in UNESCO in 1990, working in its European Centre for Higher Education (CEPES) in Bucharest. She was the UNESCO project officer responsible for the development and adoption of the 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention, co-secretary of the ENIC network from 1994 to 1999, and co-secretary of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee until 1999, when she moved to UNESCO Headquarters in Paris to lead the Higher Education Section. She facilitated projects such as the Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education and the Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity-Building for developing countries, and served as Executive Secretary to the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education. That same year she was voted I*nternational Higher Education Professional of the Year* by her peers worldwide. She has received a number of international awards.

After retiring from UNESCO, Stamenka was Senior Advisor for International Affairs to CHEA (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, USA) (2012–20); Honorary Member of the International Advisory Board of the Shanghai Academic Rankings of World Universities (ARWU) (2011–20); Education Master at the DeTao Masters Academy (Shanghai, China) (2011–19); and consultant to UNESCO. She continues to live and work in Paris.

Jens Vraa-Jensen holds a Master of Science degree in Geography from the University of Copenhagen and recently retired from Dansk Magisterforening (DM), which is the trade union for most higher education teachers and researchers in Denmark. DM is a member of Education International (EI), which is the global union of teachers' trade unions at all levels of education. Jens represented DM in EI and its European regional organization ETUCE, including the ETUCE Higher Education and Research Standing Committee (HERSC) for more than 20 years. He served as chair of this committee for 10 years.

Jens represented teachers' trade unions in several national and international seminars, conferences and committees, including the Bologna Follow Up Group and the UNESCO World Conferences on Higher Education, and was observer to the Council of Europe Education Committee – at that time known as CDPPE.

Robert Wagenaar is Professor of History and Politics of Higher Education at the University of Groningen and has since 2014 been Director of the International Tuning Academy. The Academy is an education and research centre focused on the reform of higher education programmes. It has published the bi-annual indexed *Tuning Journal for Higher Education* since 2013.

Robert was Dean of Studies at the Faculty of Arts 2004–14, responsible for the quality of teaching and learning of 5 500 students. Since 2006 he has been president of the transnational interdisciplinary

Erasmus Mundus Master programme Society, Politics and Culture in a Global Context: Euroculture, involving eight EU and four non-European institutions.

Robert Wagenaar has been directly involved in many international initiatives such as ECTS (since 1989), the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area and the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. He has (co-)coordinated 42 large scale international projects. His most recent projects are Measuring and Comparing Achievements of Learning Outcomes in Higher Education in Europe (CALOHEE) (2016–24) and Integrating Entrepreneurship and Work Experience into Higher Education (WEXHE) (2017–19), with its follow-up Electronic Work-based Learning (eWBL) (2022–24), all co-financed by the EU. His research interests are in higher education innovation and policy making.

Yurii Zuban is Associate Professor and Head of the E-Learning Technologies Center at Sumy State University. From 2008 to 2013 he led the Regional Center for Distance Learning at Sumy State University, where he focused on developing learning management systems and integrating distance education throughout Ukraine. Since 2012, he has directed the E-Learning Technologies Center, emphasizing online educational platforms and immersive learning solutions. In recognition of his contributions to distance learning, Dr. Zuban received the State Prize of Ukraine in Education in 2017.

In 2019, he became Head of the Educational and Methodological Sub-Committee on Distance Learning under the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. Dr. Zuban is a founder of the Immersive Educational Laboratory at Sumy State University. Additionally, he has served as an Online Education Specialist for the Ukraine Improving Higher Education for Results Project (UIHERP) since December 2023. His work continues to influence the development of effective online education in Ukraine. Yurii Zuban obtained his PhD in Information Technologies from the Kharkiv National University of Radio Electronics in 2004.

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