

FAIR – FOCUS ON AUTOMATIC INSTITUTIONAL RECOGNITION EXPERIMENTATION PROTOCOL

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1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) participating in the FAIR project will take part in an experiment, during which they will provide information on:

- the internal procedures they apply when processing applications for recognition of academic qualifications;
- quantitative data on the applications received and
- information on the final decision taken by the institution on recognition for admission purposes.

These guidelines have been prepared in order to provide an overview of the protocol that will be followed in the experiment. The aim of this document is to guide participating HEIs through the different steps of the experimentation phase, so as to attain a reliable assessment of the institutional recognition practices in each institution and of the extent to which they are modified during the experiment.

Before going into the details of the experimentation protocol, it is important to clarify some issues regarding the terminology that will be used in this document and throughout the trials. In the framework of the FAIR project, the experimentation will focus on *academic recognition*, i.e. recognition of qualifications for the purpose of obtaining access to the first (e.g. bachelor) or second (e.g. master) cycles of higher education studies. The definition used will be that of the European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions (EAR HEI manual)¹:

“During the process of admission, the eligibility of a candidate for access to specific programmes and/or types of programmes based on his or her academic credentials is determined. Recognition for the purposes of admission encompasses the following:

- 1. ‘General access’, which determines whether the applicant has the necessary academic credentials for access to the programmes at a certain level (for example, a qualification which would allow access to the bachelors’ programmes);*
- 2. ‘Access to specific programmes’, which determines whether the applicant meets specific admission requirements, such as a certain qualification profile, competency in certain subjects or subject clusters, if set by the admitting institution (for example, a combination of subjects, which would allow access to the bachelor’s programme in medicine).*

In case of a positive recognition decision, the candidate who meets other eligibility requirements, such as language knowledge, is granted:

- 1. Admission to the programme in an open admission system; or,*
- 2. Permission to participate in a selective admission system. ” (p. 82)*

¹ <http://eurorecognition.eu/Manual/EAR%20HEI.pdf>

There is a distinction between *recognition* and *admission*, which impacts on the organisation of the process at administrative level. The report of the Pathfinder group on automatic recognition² reads as follows:

“Access (the right of qualified candidates to apply and to be considered for admission to higher education) needs to be clearly distinguished from admission, which is ‘the act of, or system for, allowing qualified applicants to pursue studies in higher education at a given institution and/or a given programme’ (definitions from the LRC³)” (p.6)

In some institutions, internal procedures may not allow a clear distinction between recognition (access) and admission; in some organisational systems these two steps may even overlap. However, for the purposes of FAIR project institutions are asked to identify in their own internal process the steps leading to the *recognition* decision; subsequently, when applicable and if the information is available, the institutions indicate whether the applicant was granted (or not) *admission* to the programme.

2. Overview of the experimentation

Each participating institution will take part in two trials. The first trial will take place at the beginning of the project, it will focus on the institution’s existing recognition procedures and it will provide European University Association (EUA), which acts as the evaluation body in the FAIR project, with the data for a baseline assessment. Subsequently, EUA will produce a report for each institution dealing the results of the assessment and the respective recommendations. Institutions will receive their own respective report and all reports from institutions of the same country will be sent to the national ENIC/NARICs.

The role of the ENIC/NARICs is to analyse the recommendations received from EUA, and, together with each institution, to identify the main areas for improvement, using the good practice of the Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition and the European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions (EAR HEI manual) as the basis for improving procedures at institutional level. ENIC/NARICs will provide institutions with practical guidelines on how to simplify and fine-tune the main aspects of the institutional recognition procedures.

The second trial will take place after the institutions will have implemented the recommendations by ENIC/NARICs resulting from the first trial, and it will provide the data for the impact assessment report. For the purposes of FAIR project, the impact assessment report will focus on the improvements made by each institution in the practise of its recognition processes and will not provide a comparative analysis of the institutions’ performance.

All 23 participating institutions are expected to collect information on the procedures applied to the applications for academic recognition which they receive between 01.03.2015 and 30.06.2015 for the first trial and from 01.03.2016 to 30.06.2016 for the second trial. Only applications for accessing first and second cycle studies will be considered. For details on the sampling method please see paragraph 4.2.

² http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/SubmittedFiles/12_2014/154205.pdf

³ <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/QueVoulezVous.asp?NT=165&CL=ENG>

The expected timeline of activities is the following:

1. First trial: baseline assessment	
Preparatory activities (scorecard, individual training for institutions etc.)	1 January 2015 – 1 March 2015
First trial (including post-trial interviews)	1 March 2015 – 1 September 2015
Baseline assessment report	1 September 2015 – 1 October 2015
2. Second trial: impact assessment	
Implementation of improved recognition procedures in HEIs	1 December 2015 – 1 March 2016
The second trial (including post-trial interviews)	1 March 2016 – 1 August 2016
3. Final assessment report	
Impact assessment report	1 August 2016 – 1 October 2016

3. Communication policy

In order to ensure a smooth and efficient communication flow, each institution appoints a liaison person for the experiment. The liaison person will act as an intermediary between the EUA and the institution: should more than one respondent per institution take part in the survey, the liaison person will pass on relevant information to them; at the same time, the liaison person is expected to collect relevant information and data from all respondents involved in the experiment and to pass it on to the EUA.

The FAIR liaison person at EUA is project officer Francesca Maltauro Francesca.maltauro@eua.be.

4. First trial: baseline assessment

4.1 Preparatory activities

For the purposes of collecting data on institutional recognition processes and on the applications dealt with, a baseline assessment form and a scorecard have been developed as the first step. These tools will be used by all institutions in both sets of trials. In order to facilitate data collection, the baseline assessment form will consist of an online survey, whereas the scorecard will be an Excel file.

Before the start of the trial, each institution should:

1. Determine who will complete the baseline assessment survey and the scorecard

The aim of the trial is to map the way recognition procedures of the applications for first and second cycle studies are implemented throughout the institution and to collect specific information on each application

processed during the agreed time-frame. It is the organisational structure of an institution – centralised or decentralised – which will determine who responds to the survey and completes the scorecard:

- *Either*: one central office deals with all applications for recognition received, evaluates credentials and makes all recognition decisions. In this case one respondent will collect all the data on the applications received, complete the survey online and the scorecard.
- *Or*: within the institution there are multiple offices dealing with applications for recognition (for instance each faculty has its own office) and each of these offices carries out credential evaluations and makes recognition decisions. In this case, the work of each office must be mapped. Thus, each office responds individually, completing the survey online and the scorecard.

2. Take part in the virtual training

Each institution will have the possibility to attend an individual session to clarify any issues on the survey. The session will be a skype call or a videoconference – depending on the preferences of the institution. The exact date is set after the kick off meeting. Each institution can decide who attends the meeting from their side.

The objectives of the meeting are the following:

- To address questions on the survey: in order to facilitate discussions institutions are recommended to send any pre-prepared questions one day before the videoconference. Any additional questions that may arise will be dealt with during the videoconference. See also annex.
- To agree individual deadlines and timeline with each institution, including the timing of the post-trial interview.
- To agree with EUA on the use of electronic databases in order to extract the data required by the scorecard.
- To discuss with EUA relevant issues regarding the sampling of applications (expected challenges etc.)
- To inform EUA about the organisational model of the institution and the selection of respondents to the survey, in order to ensure a reliable data collection procedure.
- To collect contextual information that may be relevant for EUA to carry out the assessment: in particular, institutions are invited to provide EUA with information on specific aspects of national legal frameworks in the field of recognition of foreign degrees and on the organisational structure of the institution for procedures regarding recognition/admission.

4.2 The first trial

1. Institutional data collection

As mentioned above, the institutional data collection required to carry out the baseline assessment will take place by means of an online survey. Before the beginning of the trial phase, EUA will send to each institution's liaison person: the baseline assessment form in pdf format to provide a general overview; the link to the online tool hosting the baseline assessment survey; the Excel file containing the scorecard template. The liaison person will forward the link to the survey and the files to the appropriate respondent(s). The liaison

person will make sure that respondent(s) carry out the baseline assessment survey through the online tool, and that the Excel file containing the scorecard template is filled in correctly.

The baseline assessment survey is divided into 2 sections:

Section 1: Background information

This section is meant to provide the setting where recognition procedures take place within the institution: relevant organisational aspects, division of tasks and responsibilities within the institution. Further, institutions will also provide information on the total number of credential evaluations carried out during the previous year.

Section 2: Process description

This section looks into how the recognition procedures are implemented, for instance their degree of consistency within the institution and their alignment to the existing legal framework such as Lisbon Recognition Convention⁴ (LRC). The respondents are asked to provide feedback on the use of tools which are expected to facilitate recognition, such as National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs), Diploma Supplement (DS), ECTS credits etc. Quality assurance processes and transparency are also mapped, as well as the use of information technology. The respondent will be asked to fill in a separate table to describe the recognition process from the moment the qualification is submitted by the applicant until the decision.

The scorecard:

The Excel file containing the scorecard requires respondents to provide detailed information on the applications received: geographical origin, type and level of the qualification, as well as the final decision taken by the institution (full recognition, partial recognition, denial of recognition). The respondent is asked to explain the motivations of the decisions made and to provide information on the time used to process each application. Finally, the respondent may provide an additional piece of information regarding the admission decision (whether the applicant has been admitted or not), when available.

Respondents are advised to complete the online survey at the beginning of the trial, in order to provide necessary background information on the general recognition principles and procedures followed in the institution.

The scorecard collects detailed information on the applications received by the institution, on the final decision taken by the institution regarding the recognition of the qualification, and on the overall time used to process the application and to take the recognition decision. Therefore, it can be completed only once the application has been processed, and the decision on the recognition has been taken. In order to complete the scorecard, institutions can decide whether they will collect the required data using the Excel template provided by the FAIR project, or whether they will provide EUA with an Excel file of data exported from their own electronic database. The latter will also be acceptable as long as the Excel file contains the same information as the FAIR scorecard template.

⁴ <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/QueVoulezVous.asp?NT=165&CL=ENG>

Further information and definitions of some key entries in the scorecard template are explained in the Annex to these guidelines.

2. Sampling applications

The number of applications received by the institutions participating in the FAIR project varies significantly across levels (first and second cycle) and across institutions. Where the volume of applications is very large, institutions are asked to work to a ceiling of 100 applications for each cycle. If an institution receives fewer than 100 applications at a given level, it is expected to track all the applications received for that level.

When the number of applications exceeds 100 and the institution chooses which to include in its sample, it is crucial to ensure that the applications are representative in terms of diversity in:

- Geographical origin;
- Disciplinary area and programme applied for;
- Timing of the receipt of the application (peak and low application period) and
- Type of programme applied for (English vs national language programmes etc.)

3. Interview

Once the respondent – or all respondents within an institution – finalise the online survey and the scorecard, the interview previously scheduled will take place. During this discussion the institutional representatives will be invited to provide feedback on various aspects of the trial. The goal of this interview is to provide EUA with additional information that will help to better understand the recognition procedure in place, and current or potential obstacles. The participants are not expected to prepare any interventions or presentations for this interview.

4.3 Baseline assessment report

Based on the data provided by the institution and the post-trial interview, EUA will draft a baseline assessment report on the status of recognition procedures in each participating institution. The individual reports will discuss the specific recognition procedure issues which have emerged during the trial, identifying both good practices (in line with LRC and EAR manuals) and obstacles to smooth recognition. A draft report will be sent to each institution for a check on factual errors. The institutions will be asked to respond within one week after the receipt of the draft report.

5. In-between the trials

The baseline assessment reports will serve as basis for the work of the ENIC/NARICs to elaborate an individualised set of recommendations for each institution. The purpose of these recommendations is to support HEIs in overcoming the obstacles that have been identified during the analysis, as well as to identify the main areas for improvement by applying the principles and practices outlined by the Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition and by the EAR HEI manual.

At this stage HEIs will start working on the implementation of the recommendations they have received, supported by the respective ENIC/NARICs. If and when necessary, HEIs may adapt their existing procedures so that the suggested changes can be introduced. During this phase institutions will collaborate and communicate closely with ENIC/NARICs and to seek their support for the correct interpretation and implementation of the recommendations.

The work of ENIC/NARICs with each HEI to overcome the procedural challenges will be paralleled by the work of the competent Ministries at national level, which are expected to remove from national legal frameworks those obstacles which prevent the implementation of elements of automatic recognition. Before entering the implementation phase, all participating institutions will take part in a project team meeting, during which recommendations and measures will be presented and discussed.

6. Second trial: impact assessment

The purpose of the second trial is to carry out an impact assessment: it will measure whether the implementation of the elements suggested by the ENIC/NARICs have led to improvements in recognition practices within the participating institutions. To this end, the sample, the tools and the procedure used in the trial will remain unchanged:

- The institutions will appoint respondents according to the same principles as the ones described in chapter 4.1 point 1.
- Upon request, EUA will provide a second virtual training, as described in paragraph 4.1 point 2. Should any difficulties arise during the trial, institutions are invited to contact EUA so that they can be addressed in a timely manner.
- The institutions will be asked to collect the data through the online survey and the scorecard described in paragraph 4.2 point 1.
- At the end of the experiment a post-trial interview with the institution will take place, following the same pattern of the first trial.

7. Impact assessment report

At the end of the second trials, EUA will analyse the institutional results and produce an overarching report providing an analysis of the new recognition procedures and their impact, including identifying the progress made, lessons learned, good practices and challenges encountered.

Annex: Explanations of scorecard entries

Nr	Selected applications have to be numbered, and the number corresponding to each application must be indicated in this column, so that institutions know which application they are referring to. (internal reference number can be used)
Country of origin	Please indicate the country where the credentials to be recognised have been issued.
Level of qualification	Please indicate the level of the applicant's prior qualification: i.e. secondary school (leaving) qualifications; VET: Vocational Education and Training qualification; AD: Associate Degree; first cycle degree (i.e. bachelor degree); second cycle degree (i.e. master degree); DR: Doctoral Degree
Specific type of qualification	Specific types of qualifications using abbreviation: JD: Joint Degree, TNE: Transnational education; RPL: Recognition of Prior Learning; ODL: Open Distance Learning; RQ: Refugee Qualifications
Level applied to	Please indicate the level for which the applicant is applying: first (e.g. bachelor) or second (e.g. master) cycle studies
Application received (date)	Please indicate the date when the application was received by your institution
Form of recognition	<p>Full recognition: the credentials submitted by the applicant have been fully recognised by your institution.</p> <p>Partial recognition (i.e. non full recognition): only part of the credentials submitted by the applicant has been recognised by the institution, or conditional recognition has been granted, or an alternative form of recognition has been suggested.</p> <p>Denial of recognition: the credentials submitted by the applicant were not recognised.</p>
Decision taken (date)	Please indicate the date when your institution took the decision on the recognition.
Reason	Please provide the reason explaining the above decision i.e. why the credentials have been fully recognised/ not fully recognised/why recognition was denied
Applicant informed (date)	Please indicate the date when your institution informed the applicant on the decision taken.
Reason communicated to applicant	Please indicate if your institution informed the applicant on the reason of recognition decision or not.
Specify any delay	In case the usual/expected time/deadlines for completing the process have been exceeded, please specify the reason.
Admission offered	In case of a positive recognition decision, please indicate if the applicant has been offered admission or not, if the information is available