

Catalysts for automatic recognition

ENIC-NARIC centres providing national guidance through improved AR regimes

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Executive Summary

Achieving mutual automatic recognition of access and higher education qualifications from European Union and European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries, is a priority in the creation of the European Education Area by 2025, as well as a long-term objective for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

This report presents the findings of a series of measures to improve fair and automatic recognition in a set of 11 ENIC-NARIC centres. In doing so it aims to inform ENIC-NARICs and national and European policy makers about good practice supporting automatic recognition. The report also aims to contribute to a wider discussion on how to achieve automatic recognition.

Focusing on the ENIC-NARIC centres has two benefits. Firstly, it improves recognition practices at the centres, contributing to more consistent and smooth recognition. Secondly, under the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC), ENIC-NARICs are tasked with supporting implementation of the Conventions principles in the national context. As such, ENIC-NARICs fulfill a central role in recognition, including automatic recognition, and as a catalyst for practices in the national context. Notably in their services and other outreach provided to national higher education institutions.

To improve practices, first an analysis of current automatic recognition practices was made. This exercise was carried out through the use of a report template, which was submitted by the participating ENIC-NARIC. Based on an analysis of the submitted report templates, potential improvements were identified and suggested to the participating ENIC-NARIC centres, with a view to achieving full automatic recognition as laid down in a roadmap. After peer - consultation and review of these roadmaps by the project team, final roadmaps were produced and actions were implemented.

This exercise led to the following conclusions and recommendations:

- All ENIC-NARIC centres already applied automatic recognition to a wide range of qualifications qualifying for automatic recognition and only few areas of improvement were identified. This positive finding was a slight surprise since the project team had expected to identify more “blind spots”. This finding may nuance the image of the state of implementation and inform where to focus efforts when implementing automatic recognition;
- Various models of automatic recognition can be applied by a centre simultaneously, therefore it can be a good strategy to explore expanding automatic recognition to qualifications not yet covered by automatic recognition procedures;



- It is useful to periodically review the automatic recognition procedures in place. This concerns both the eligibility for automatic recognition and innovative ways of implementing the procedure (i.e. use of new automatic recognition tools such as the EHEA qualifications table produced in the I-AR project, new treaties, etc.);
- ENIC-NARIC centres should continue to share information on best practices in implementing automatic recognition procedures and on qualifications qualifying for automatic recognition, such as in the EHEA qualifications table. The recommendation is to keep this table updated for the benefit of the Networks and other stakeholders as it functions as a practical tool;
- Automatic recognition can only be fully implemented in a well-functioning national recognition infrastructure and in the context of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. An example is the absence of the national appointment of competence, which is not only an obstacle for the implementation of automatic recognition, but fair recognition in general;
- ENIC-NARICs, through their usual services (i.e., evaluations) and tasks such as information provision (information on website) share information on automatic recognition, as this is embedded in their usual services;
- This action is implemented as part of the Erasmus+ Key Action 3 NARIC “Implementation of Automatic Recognition in the Networks” (“I-AR”) project.



1 Introduction

Under the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC), ENIC-NARICs (European National Information Centres- National Academic Recognition Information Centres) are tasked with supporting the implementation of the Conventions' principles in the national context. This report presents the outcomes of a series of measures to improve fair and automatic recognition in a set of 11 ENIC-NARIC centres. In doing so, the report aims to contribute to the wider discussion on automatic recognition and provide a compendium of good practice for the benefit of all centres of the ENIC-NARIC Networks.

This introduction chapter provides the rationale for undertaking this activity, as well as the leading research question and the methodology used. The last paragraph elaborates on the presentation of results and content of the report.

1.1 Rationale

ENIC-NARICs fulfill a central role in recognition and as such their policies function as a catalyst for practices in the national context.

Given this role and the current high ambitions for achieving fair and automatic recognition in the EHEA and EU, the I-AR project aimed to review the recognition procedures of 11 ENIC-NARICs in the project team, with the aim to significantly improve the AR regimes in line with the council recommendation and other existing good practice.

1.2 Goal

The goal of this specific activity of the I-AR project is to systematically analyse and improve automatic recognition in the ENIC-NARIC centres.

In addition, the I-AR project aimed to conduct a meta-analysis of the activity to benefit the wider discussion on the implementation of automatic recognition in the ENIC-NARIC Networks and, in doing so, the EU and EHEA.



1.3 Methodology

The methodology used for the implementation of the AR regimes is threefold:

1. Analysis of current automatic recognition practices:

ENIC-NARICs analysed their offices' procedures in view of automatic recognition arrangements. This included the role of internal databases and public information on recognition standards.

Each ENIC-NARIC identified areas for improvement and provided strategies to implement/improve automatic recognition regimes.

Each ENIC-NARIC reported their findings using a template (annex 1) to allow for efficiency and comparability between centres (in view of the meta-analysis). The coordinator also produced guidelines to ensure clarity in expectations on how to complete the exercise.

2. The consortium reviewed the findings providing 'tops' and 'tips' to support automatic recognition and existing good practice,

3. Final plans were produced using the consortium's feedback. These include roadmaps for the implementation of AR regimes.

To analyze the automatic recognition procedures, the organizing principle of the template was the different services offered by a centre. For example, these can include recognition statements but also country profiles and databases, among others. For each service the following descriptors were identified:

- The model used for automatic recognition, if any;
- The description of the automatic recognition regime (i.e., how the model is applied) and whether this is outlined in the guidelines of the quality assurance procedure;
- Whether the identified target group of the services (i.e. individual applicants, higher education institutions) are informed about the principle/concept of automatic recognition.

Project partners were encouraged to list services that overlap and enter "idem" for similar solutions. A longer description of the models could be provided in a separate space.



1.4 Content

The introduction of the report is covered in chapter 1. The second chapter lists the outcomes of the analysis, focusing on the following five enquiries of the reporting template:

- 2.1 Description of ENIC-NARIC centres' automatic recognition practices;
- 2.2 Are there countries / qualifications currently (not) covered by your service that would qualify for de facto automatic recognition?
- 2.3 Are there automatic recognition models not yet applied that could be applied?
- 2.4 Are there procedures in which automatic recognition is not yet / fully applied where it could be applied?
- 2.5 Other (i.e. communication, quality assurance, other).

The last chapter includes the conclusion and recommendations following the findings of chapter 2. Annexes 1 and 2 list the templates used.

1.5 About the I-AR project

The "Implementation of Automatic Recognition in the Networks" (I-AR) project is co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme and coordinated by Nuffic. It aims to implement fair automatic recognition in the ENIC-NARIC Networks. To this end it offers guidance on policy developments in recognition on European and national levels.

The activities of the I-AR project include the following:

- European level
 - Creating a table with system-level comparisons of qualifications in EHEA that national authorities can use to apply de facto automatic recognition or enter into (non) legally binding AR agreements between countries, and as such supports efficient and consistent implementation.
 - Producing a 2nd edition of the EAR manual supporting fair and automatic recognition practices in the EU/EHEA.
 - Analysing the implications of the Global Recognition Convention on the Lisbon Recognition Convention to support streamlined implementation in line with the LRC and automatic recognition.
- National level
 - Providing national guidance through improved AR regimes in ENIC-NARIC offices.



- Institutional level
 - Building capacity among higher education institutions by strengthening the link between ENIC-NARIC and HEIs, improving information provision on fair and automatic recognition, and organising national seminars on automatic recognition for higher education institutions.

Funding and partners

The I-AR consortium consists of the following partners: ENIC Ukraine and the ENIC NARICs of Flanders, Lithuania, Poland, Norway, Austria, Italy, France, Estonia, Ireland, Czech Republic, Denmark and The Netherlands (coordinator), EUA, ESU and ECA.



2 Outcomes

The analysis and improvements of automatic recognition practices within the centre's recognition procedures were conducted by ENIC Ukraine and the ENIC NARICs of Flanders, Lithuania, Poland, Norway, Austria, Italy, France, Estonia, Ireland, and The Netherlands, under the strategic guidance of the Steering Group. The outcomes are listed below.

2.1 Description of ENIC-NARIC centres AR practices

The main observation is that all participating ENIC-NARIC centres have automatic recognition practices in place. Different models for automatic recognition are applied, and in many cases different models are applied simultaneously.

For example, in some countries there are bilateral and multilateral legally binding agreements, and for those countries for which no legally binding agreements exist, de facto automatic recognition was applied for qualifications meeting the criteria for automatic recognition (as outlined in the Council Recommendation 2018.)

4 models of automatic recognition

In the EHEA, four different models of automatic recognition can be distinguished¹. These models can co-exist and be used simultaneously in the national context. There is no “best” model, only the model(s) that best fit the specific national context:

1. Legal bilateral and multilateral agreements

Already prior to the 2015 Yerevan communiqué legally binding bilateral and multilateral agreements on the automatic recognition of qualifications came into use. Especially neighbouring countries took the initiative to come to formal agreements on the automatic reciprocal recognition of qualifications. Bilateral agreements exist between countries with legally binding recognition decisions as well as countries where recognition decisions are advisory. Currently we count a number of bi- and multilateral agreements within all regions of the EHEA. An example is the Benelux – Baltic treaty on automatic recognition (2021).

¹ Source: Nuffic, [A short path to automatic recognition. 4 models](#), 2020.



2. A legally binding unilateral list of degrees

This model is not based on a bi- or multilateral agreement, as countries can decide unilaterally which qualifications from which countries to include. In Portugal, where a country list was introduced in 2007, a commission including representatives from the Ministry of Higher Education and higher education institutions was established to decide on the qualifications and countries qualifying for automatic recognition.

3. Non-legal bilateral and multilateral agreements

These are “soft” agreements between countries on the mutual reciprocal recognition of qualifications. The Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition (2015) recommended regional cooperation within recognition as a steppingstone towards the final achievement of automatic recognition within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In response to this recommendation the Nordic-Baltic countries jointly developed an admission manual.

4. ‘De facto’ automatic recognition

In this model, automatic recognition - following the criteria of the Council Recommendation - is simply applied in practice, without referring to legally binding and formal procedures. Often there are guidelines in place and the ENIC-NARIC makes these available to higher education institutions and others via the website, databases, and other channels.

Criteria for automatic recognition

The Council Recommendation 2018 defines automatic recognition as follows:

Automatic recognition is system level recognition (level and quality) and occurs on basis of pre-set criteria:

1. The NQFs, the national qualification frameworks should be referenced the qualifications framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF);
2. The higher education system should have the three-cycle structure of Bachelor-Master-Doctorate and if applicable, the short cycle (based on the EHEA and EQF);
3. The external quality assurance should be carried out by a quality assurance agency which is registered at the EQAR, the European Quality Assurance Register. This registration implies that the quality assurance agency works according to the principles of the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area.



While the focus of this project has been EU and EHEA, automatic recognition can also apply to qualifications from other countries. These can be part of legally binding bilateral or multilateral treaties, but also de facto arranged, for example via comparison tables comparing the countries' qualifications in relation to those of the recipient country, with the agreement to recognize certain qualifications on a certain level and accept the quality assurance if it meets the set.

2.2 Are there countries / qualifications currently (not) covered by your service that would qualify for de facto AR?

In most ENIC-NARIC centres, qualifications that qualified for automatic recognition were covered by an automatic recognition procedure (either via the legally binding or de facto models). After an evaluation of all qualifications qualifying for automatic recognition, no "blind spots" were found.

Only in a few cases automatic recognition could be expanded:

- In one country the legislation was changed during the project, removing obstacles and allowing for automatic recognition in line with the Council Recommendation 2018.

Example 1: Support implementation of expanded automatic recognition

"To implement the new legislation on automatic recognition, the following support actions were undertaken:

1. Internal training for employees on changes in national legislation and on automatic recognition;
 2. Publication of the information regarding the automatic recognition and the new legislative act on the centre's website;
 3. Dissemination of information about new legislation, automatic recognition in admissions officers' network;
 4. Promotion of the new legislation as part of the national seminar on automatic recognition (part of the I-AR project)."
- In another case automatic recognition was applied to a historically grown set of countries, and it was possible to extend the list by evaluating which other countries applied for automatic recognition;



Example 2: Assessment of countries qualifying for automatic recognition

“While assessing which other countries would qualify for automatic recognition, we were inspired by the extensive table of 41 EHEA countries developed in the I-AR project. The table indicates the qualifications that might qualify for automatic recognition and is based on information provided by their country. Instead of establishing our own list of countries and qualifications qualifying for automatic recognition, it seemed a much better option to use this commonly created table”.

- In a similar case the identified group of qualifications qualifying for automatic recognition could be expanded after additional research was conducted during the project.

Example 3: Actively evaluate which countries and qualifications qualify for automatic recognition

“To expand the qualifications qualifying for automatic recognition, our centre investigated the eligibility of a number of countries for automatic recognition at master’s level. We found it useful to actively look for countries eligible for automatic recognition and consider the conditions. Additionally, we will now look into which secondary and short cycle qualifications are eligible for de facto automatic recognition and implement automatic recognition for eligible countries”.

In one case, the ENIC-NARIC had no competence for recognition of certificates giving access to higher education. Any changes in the scope of automatic recognition require serious law amendments.

Example 4: Lobbying to expand legal competences

“An entity responsible for issuing recognition statements for certificates giving access to higher education should be appointed. The ENIC-NARIC centre will continue to bring this up with relevant authorities and continue to provide space for discussion on the topic during events organized. Meanwhile it also keeps contact and dialogue with all institutions involved in establishing and exercising rules of recognition of certificates”.

2.3 Are there AR models not yet applied that could be applied?

This question relates to 2.1 on which practices were in place. Most ENIC-NARIC centres already applied the automatic recognition models available and appropriate for the national situation. As outlined under 2.2, automatic recognition procedures were expanded in a few cases, either on de jure or de facto basis. This is also reflected in this paragraph since most



project members indicated that all available and/or applicable automatic recognition models for the national context were already applied.

Only two cases were reported:

- One example was the development of an informal network as part of the EU co-funded project “MAREN - - Mediterranean Automatic Recognition Network,” which involves Italy, France, Croatia, Spain and Portugal. The network is working on common tools to support automatic recognition, including a table of comparison of Bologna and pre-Bologna qualifications by 2024;
- In another case, a centre saw the added value of developing a legally binding unilateral list:

Example 5: Use of a unilateral list

“The legally binding unilateral list requires a change in legislation (Law on Science and Higher Education) to create a legal basis for the list. Next it requires to draft such list. Therefore, we plan to draft a proposal for the amendments to the law submitted to the Ministry, followed by a discussion with the officials of the Ministry regarding the proposal and finally a testing of the tool itself”.

2.4 Are there procedures in which AR is not yet / fully applied where it could be applied?

For the overall majority, automatic recognition has been included in the centre’s recognition procedures where possible and no additions are made to what has been identified in the previous paragraphs. The main area of improvement identified is in the area of digitizing processes, which may facilitate automatic recognition.

2.5 Other (i.e. communication, quality assurance, other)

In this section various suggestions were provided on how automatic recognition could be further implemented, mostly externally. For a more extensive list, we refer to the publication: “Automatic recognition of foreign qualifications. Building institutional capacity in the ENIC-NARIC Networks”.



Example 6: Include updates in internal guidelines and quality assurance system

“Include our expansion of country profiles and qualifications qualifying for automatic recognition, in the internal guidelines, which are part of our internal quality assurance system”.

Example 7: Communication about automatic recognition via website

“Improve the center’s website and update the information with the latest information on automatic recognition. This should not only include procedural information, but also events such as national webinars on automatic recognition”.

Example 8: Use of chatbot

“Use a chatbot to offer 24/7 communication with applicants, ensuring consistent and automated responses, including on automatic recognition”.

Example 9: Align procedures with the development of an electronic application system

“Review and adjust the internal recognition procedure in the ENIC-NARIC centre in connection with the development of the new electronic system for application processing”.

Example 10: Increase internal visibility and information sharing

“De facto automatic recognition is not yet properly documented on our internal wiki page and should be further included in the training for new employees at intermediary organisations to ensure correct implementation, and also avoid our credential evaluators losing time explaining decisions to intermediary organisations”.

Example 11: Continuous support to stakeholders

“Continue research, training and studies to make sure that automatic recognition and available tools are effectively used and implemented at national level”.



3 Conclusions & Recommendations

Following the above findings, the project team in summary formulated the following conclusions and recommendations:

- After systematically evaluating where improvements could be made in internal procedures, it appears that most ENIC-NARIC centres already applied automatic recognition to most qualifications qualifying for automatic recognition. In other words, many qualifications in the EHEA (and even beyond) meeting the criteria for automatic recognition, are in fact covered by automatic recognition procedures. This finding was a positive surprise to the project team members, who had expected to identify more “blind spots” based on external reports;
- While an ENIC-NARIC centre in the EHEA or EU may conclude it already has all automatic recognition procedures in place, it is still useful to periodically review which countries are eligible for automatic recognition and consider the conditions. In fact, updating the internal procedure and related information can be considered part of the Plan Do Check Act (PDCA) cycle. Additionally, it may explore favorable collaborations, as outlined in this document;
- ENIC-NARIC centres can collaborate in sharing information on qualifications meeting criteria for automatic recognition, such as in the EHEA qualifications table. The recommendation is to keep this table updated for the benefit of the Networks and other stakeholders as it functions as a practical tool;
- Absence of the national appointment of competence can be an obstacle for the implementation of automatic recognition, as shown by the case of certificates providing access to higher education. This situation may apply to other countries in the ENIC-NARIC Networks and these “gaps” in covering competences should be further identified, i.e. by encouraging ENIC-NARICs to map their national recognition context, including responsibilities for each education level;
- Various models of automatic recognition are applied simultaneously and in expanding automatic recognition, different types of models were used to complement current ones. The choice of model may depend on the own national context but also on the countries involved, which model for automatic recognition works best or is at a point in time the highest achievable.



Annex 1. Template describing AR in office

Identify recognition services in your office		Identify use AR models		Description AR regime		Communi- cation	Are there any services not listed where you could apply AR? Please explain	General comments
List name of recognition service offered (recognition statements, country profiles)	List target group (ie individuals, HEIs, labor market)	AR (partially) applied? (yes, no)	If applied, which model(s)?	Describe the AR regime implemented?	Is the regime included in your internal guidelines for QA?	Do you communicate the AR procedure to the public? If so, how?		



Annex 2. Roadmap improve AR

Identified Areas for improvement of information provision on AR to HEIs	Description current situation	Description ideal situation	Actions to achieve ideal situation		State of Play - March			
What actions could you take to improve information provision on AR?			General actions required (bullets)	Step by step plan, incl. timeline	Actions implemented	Preliminary result of the Action	Good practice/ lessons learned	Remaining Actions (after project lifetime)
1. Are there countries / qualifications currently (not) covered by your service that would qualify for de facto AR?								
2. Are there AR models not yet applied that could be applied?								
3. Are there procedures in which AR is not yet / fully applied where it could be applied?								
4. Other (ie communication, quality assurance, other)								
ie: communication AR to the public, inclusion in internal quality assurance procedures etc								



Colophon

I-AR Consortium

ASSOCIAZIONE CIMEA - CIMEA, Italy

ASSOCIATION EUROPEENNE DE L'UNIVERSITE - EUA

AUSTRIAN FEDERAL MINISTRY OF EDUCATION,
SCIENCE AND RESEARCH (BMBWF) - ENIC NARIC
AUSTRIA, AUSTRIA

EDUCATION AND YOUTH BOARD - Education and
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STICHTING NUFFIC - Nuffic, The Netherlands

VLAAMSE GEMEENSCHAP - ENIC-NARIC Flemish
Community, Belgium

STUDIJU KOKYBES VERTINIMO CENTRAS -
LITHUANIAN CENTRE FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT
IN HIGH EDUCATION - SKVC, Lithuania

NARODOWA AGENCJA WYMIANY
AKADEMICKIEJ - THE POLISH NATIONAL AGENCY
FOR ACADEMIC EXCHANGE - NAWA, Poland

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NASJONALT ORGAN FOR KVALITET I
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UDARAS NA HEIREANN UM CHAILIOCHTAIGUS
DEARBHU CAILIOCHTA - QUALIFICATIONS AND
QUALITY ASSURANCE AUTHORITY OF IRELAND
QUALITY AND QUALIFICATIONS - QQI, Ireland

UDDANNELSES- OG FORSKNINGSSTYRELSEN -
DANISH AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND
SCIENCE - ENIC-NARIC Denmark

Design

Osage



Nuffic Kortenaerkade 11
2518 AX The Hague
PO Box 29777 2502 LT The Hague
T +31 (0)70 4260 260 www.nuffic.nl



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