Improved recognition
A self-assessment tool

Developed in the context of the “Spotlight on recognition” project

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Spotlight on recognition

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INTRODUCTION

This self-assessment tool was developed by the European University Association (EUA) in partnership with the German Rectors' Conference (HRK), the Spanish Rectors' Conference (Crue) and the Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education (Nuffic) in the context of the Erasmus+ co-funded "Spotlight on recognition" project. The project aimed to support staff at higher education institutions who are responsible for recognition processes and decisions by enhancing their capacities in terms of recognition procedures in compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC).

The tool offers a formative way for institutions to:

- benchmark their institutional recognition procedures and processes against required and good practice;
- assure and demonstrate that institutional recognition practice is fair and transparent, and that it serves the best interests of applicants, institutional staff and the institution itself; and
- identify actionable areas for improvement.

The tool thus enables higher education institutions to respond to the requirements of the LRC and the expectations for internal quality assurance as laid down by Standard 1.4 of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), and hence drive forward the vision of the European Higher Education Area.

HOW TO APPLY THIS TOOL

Target group and scope

The self-assessment tool aims to support staff of higher education institutions conducting academic recognition procedures to evaluate the extent to which the recognition procedures in place at their institutions are in line with the LRC and international good practice.

The recognition processes referred to in this tool include procedures to evaluate and recognise qualifications granting access to all three academic cycles (Bachelor's, Master's and PhD), including school-leaving diplomas. The tool was designed in line with the provisions of the LRC: recognition of qualifications giving access to higher education; recognition of periods of study; recognition of higher education qualifications; and recognition of qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation.

Besides the preparatory and follow-up steps outlined below, one core element of the tool is a table consisting of questions[1]– divided into key questions and sub-questions – about institutional recognition practice, which follows the order of the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle that is well established in quality assurance. The table also includes references to relevant chapters and sections in the European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions (EAR-HEI manual) with which to compare institutional practice, hence allowing for benchmarking against practice that is in line with the LRC and international good practice. Finally, the table also offers references to further reading that may be useful when reflecting on how to enhance institutional recognition practice. The table is by no means exhaustive, but it is meant to support institutional staff in autonomously reflecting on their current practice through a structured framework. Institutions engaging in this self-reflection are thus encouraged to consider any additional questions that may arise, as well as to adapt the tool to their own needs and choose whether to address all of the types of recognition covered by the LRC or only one. Similarly, institutions may also choose to only cover specific sections of the table.

Finally, the tool was designed with academic recognition in mind, which in institutional practice is linked to, but not synonymous with, admissions. Users of this tool are advised to keep this distinction – recognition vs admission – in mind.

1 The questions in the table that form the basis of this tool were partially inspired by the outcomes of the following previous projects with a focus on recognition: the FAIR project evaluation, the SQUARE Self-evaluation and Peer Review Protocol and the RPL in Practice self-assessment table.

How to proceed

1. Set up the self-assessment team

It is recommended to bring together a group of staff members to work on the self-assessment together in a team effort. To ensure an efficient self-assessment, the group should be as small as possible, yet cover the following remits:

- development of policies and processes relating to academic recognition;
- implementation of academic recognition policies and processes;
- internal quality assurance; and
- applicant appeals (if covered by staff/an office operating independently of admissions and quality assurance).

For an efficient division of responsibilities, it is recommended that larger teams appoint a team chair, whose responsibility will be to guide discussions and ensure the team stays on track, as well as a secretary, who will organise and take notes during meetings and conduct any potential follow-up in liaison with individual team members.

In preparation for the team's first meeting (see second step below), the team members are encouraged to read the EAR-HEI manual, which provides a practical, step-by-step guide based on the LRC, as well as the self-assessment table.

2. Agree on an approach, set a timeline and gather the data

During the first meeting, the team develops a common understanding of the work ahead in drafting answers to the self-assessment table provided below. This includes an agreement on a division of tasks and/or parts of the table, if applicable, as well as a timeline for the entire exercise, including relevant milestones. The team members then proceed to draft the answers to the questions in the table.

Depending on the size and composition of the self-assessment team, the team members may need to conduct several interviews with relevant experts in specific fields (e.g. from the institution's IT or legal department) to gather information. The information gathered for the assessment should ultimately also be supported by evidence, which may include sections of policy documents or forms, or sample communications such as an anonymised email exchange.

The time needed to complete the full self-assessment exercise depends on the size of the team, its members' functions (and the time that members can invest in this exercise) and the size of the institution.

3. Analyse the data

Once the questions in the table have been answered and supporting evidence collected, the team proceeds with an analysis. This analysis should consider:

- whether the presented evidence is sufficient to support the answer;
- the extent to which the existing practice matches the requirements of the LRC and established good practice, and how effective it is; and
- whether and where there might be room for improvement.

After this comprehensive analysis, the team may also find it useful to summarise its key findings in the form of a SWOT analysis, entailing dividing the answers in the table into strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This may help to identify the most urgently needed areas for improvement.

The key findings, including suggestions for follow-up actions, are finally summarised in a short report, which may include the full answers to the questions in the table in the form of an annex.

4. Follow-up action

The team is expected to consult the institutional community and different stakeholder groups on its findings and potential actions to take. The consultations result in a final action plan, including concisely defined steps to take and a timeline with identified milestones. The steps to take may consist of:

- deciding on a small, manageable set of immediate improvements to be taken by individual staff members or units;
- drafting an institutional action plan for enhancing the institution's recognition policies and procedures, to be presented for adoption at the managerial level;
- deciding on a regular reconvening of the self-assessment team, to periodically repeat the self-assessment and decide on further improvement measures; and
- revising policies and processes with a view to contributing to a revision of the institution's overarching internationalisation strategy.

SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL FOR IMPROVED RECOGNITION

The self-assessment table is organised around a set of key questions (first column), which are supplemented by more detailed sub-questions (second column) that either break the key question into single elements to consider one by one or offer follow-up enquiries that invite reflection on further implications of the key question.

The third column, headed "Relevant sections in EAR-HEI manual", refers to chapters and sections in the European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions (EAR-HEI manual)[2] that outline good practice in line with the LRC and provide valuable tips for institutional implementation. Before drafting the self-assessment answers to the questions in the table, it is thus recommended to carefully read the information and referenced material provided in this column and compare it with institutional practice. Finally, the fourth column, headed "Further reading", provides links and references to selected additional sources summarising required and good practice regarding the addressed recognition practice, which might be useful in designing follow-up actions.

Key question	Sub-questions	Relevant section in EAR-HEI manual	Further reading
1. POLICIES AND GUIDELINES			
1.1. What kind of national and/or institutional regulations and guidelines for recognition procedures does your institution follow?	If your staff are following (institutional, regional, national or international) guidelines, statutes or regulations to ensure a consistent approach: to which (other) national or international reference documents do these guidelines refer directly?	• Part I, Chapter 1: Introduction to recognition, Section "The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC)"	The LRC (1997) is a legal tool that governs recognition of qualifications and study periods abroad in the European region.
1.2. At your institution, do you have a commonly applied definition of what a "substantial difference" is?	If your institution has a commonly established definition of a "substantial difference", to what extent is this definition based on the purpose for which recognition is sought and the potential of the candidate to succeed in the learning path for which they are applying?	• Part II, Chapter 6: Purpose of recognition	The Global Recognition Convention (2019), Section I, Article I contains a definition of "substantial differences".

2 This publication refers to the third edition of the EAR-HEI manual, published in 2020, which provides a practical, step-by-step guide based on the LRC. It should, however, be noted that the manual might have undergone another update at the time of reading this publication.

Key question	Sub-questions	Relevant section in EAR-HEI manual	Further reading
1. POLICIES AND GUIDELINES			
1.3. Which elements of a qualification do your staff consider during the recognition procedure in order to establish whether there is a substantial difference, and to what extent are these considered as a basis for a substantial difference?	a. Do your staff consider the following elements? ❖ Level (e.g. Master's, linked to a qualifications framework) ❖ Workload (e.g. ECTS) ❖ Quality (e.g. accreditation and external quality assurance of institution and/or programme, student grades) ❖ Profile (content and purpose of the programme through which the qualification was obtained, e.g. focus on theoretical basis (or lack thereof), multi- or interdisciplinary aspects) ❖ Learning outcomes (statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do after completion of the process of learning) ❖ Other b. Which of these are considered most essential to the evaluation?	• Part I, Chapter 2: The five elements of a qualification • Part II, Chapter 7: Learning outcomes • Part II, Chapter 9: Substantial and non-substantial differences	The brochure Substantial Differences: A Glimpse of Theory, Practice and Guidelines (2021) provides input on how to categorise the different typologies of substantial differences with the aim of supporting higher education institutions in understanding whether a difference or a set of differences should be considered substantial.

Key question	Sub-questions	Relevant section in EAR-HEI manual	Further reading
2. IMPLEMENTATION OF PROCESSES – ORGANISATIONAL ASPECTS			
2.1. Bearing in mind the distinction between recognition and admission, is your institution responsible for processes and decisions on both recognition and admission?	a. Which decisions are taken within your institution and which outside? b. If there is a division of remits, through what mechanisms does your institution ensure that this division contributes to – instead of hindering – the consistency, fairness and transparency of the conducted procedures?	• Part I, Chapter 1: Introduction to recognition, Section “Diversity of recognition procedures”	N/A
2.2. If your institution is engaged in both recognition and admission processes and decisions, is the same unit involved or do two separate units handle these two processes?	a. If the same unit is in charge of both processes, what mechanisms are in place to ensure that there is a clear understanding and separation of the processes in place for reaching recognition/access and admission decisions? b. If two separate units are in charge of the two processes, what mechanisms are in place to avoid overlapping processes and contradictory decisions?	• Part III, Chapter 12: Institutional recognition practices, especially Section “Admission: Recognition and selection”	N/A
2.3. Which organisational units at your institution are involved in recognition processes and decisions: a central admissions office, decentralised admissions offices, faculties, others?	If several organisational units are involved, what mechanisms are in place to ensure that the processes and decisions are consistent and correct?	• Part III, Chapter 12: Institutional recognition practices	N/A
2.4. When processing recognition applications, how do your staff ensure that a consistent approach is being applied, both with regard to similar qualifications and across the years?	N/A	• Part III, Chapter 12: Institutional recognition practices	N/A

Key question	Sub-questions	Relevant section in EAR-HEI manual	Further reading
2. IMPLEMENTATION OF PROCESSES – INFORMATION PROVISION			
2.5. How user-friendly and exhaustive is the information for potential applicants that is available online, e.g. on the institutional website?	a. Is the information provided online easy to find for potential applicants? b. Is the information provided online easily understandable from a layperson's and non-native speaker's perspective? c. Is the information provided online complete in the sense that it allows (most) potential applicants to initiate a recognition procedure without having to ask for further information? d. Is the information provided online available in more than one language (e.g. the national language and English)? e. Does your institution's website feature an organigram or flowchart, or similar visuals, depicting how decisions are taken and by whom?	• Part III, Chapter 11: Transparency and information provision	The brochure Information Provision on Recognition of Qualifications: A Practical Guide for Higher Education Institutions (2021) aims to support international relations and admission officers, registrars and staff in charge of information management and provision at higher education institutions in improving the quality and relevance of information provision on recognition of qualifications. It also contains a set of pertinent questions for self-assessment.
2.6. To what extent is the general information provided online complemented by more individualised information provision (e.g. email exchange or in-person meeting)?	N/A	• Part III, Chapter 11: Transparency and information provision	The brochure Information Provision on Recognition of Qualifications: A Practical Guide for Higher Education Institutions (2021) aims to support international relations and admission officers, registrars and staff in charge of information management and provision at higher education institutions in improving the quality and relevance of information provision on recognition of qualifications. It also contains a set of pertinent questions for self-assessment.

Key question	Sub-questions	Relevant section in EAR-HEI manual	Further reading
2. IMPLEMENTATION OF PROCESSES – INFORMATION PROVISION			
2.7. Throughout the entire course of information provision, either online or in person, how do you ensure that the applicant is always informed about the exact steps ahead and about what to expect, e.g. in terms of the time until a decision is taken?	N/A	• Part III, Chapter 11: Transparency and information provision	The brochure Information Provision on Recognition of Qualifications: A Practical Guide for Higher Education Institutions (2021) aims to support international relations and admission officers, registrars and staff in charge of information management and provision at higher education institutions in improving the quality and relevance of information provision on recognition of qualifications. It also contains a set of pertinent questions for self-assessment.
2.8. Do your staff have guidelines on the maximum amount of time that should pass between the submission of an application and the communication of the recognition decision?	a. What is the maximum amount of time recommended or stipulated by these guidelines? b. In practice, how long does it typically take to communicate the recognition decision? c. What mechanisms are in place to ensure that the maximum amount of time is not exceeded and that recognition procedures are efficient and swift, yet without compromising the quality of the procedure?	• Part III, Chapter 11: Transparency and information provision	The brochure Information Provision on Recognition of Qualifications: A Practical Guide for Higher Education Institutions (2021) aims to support international relations and admission officers, registrars and staff in charge of information management and provision at higher education institutions in improving the quality and relevance of information provision on recognition of qualifications. It also contains a set of pertinent questions for self-assessment.

Key question	Sub-questions	Relevant section in EAR-HEI manual	Further reading
2. IMPLEMENTATION OF PROCESSES – INFORMATION PROVISION			
2.9. In the case of a negative or only partially positive recognition decision, how exhaustive and transparent is the information provided about the reasons for the decision?	a. How detailed is the explanation? b. Is there a special procedure for appeals, and is this information provided to applicants in the case of a negative, partial or alternative recognition decision? c. To what extent does your institution's website provide information on or links to legal or regulatory texts that an appellant applicant might wish to consult? d. In what languages are these texts available?	• Part II, Chapter 6: Purpose of recognition • Part II, Chapter 9: Substantial and non-substantial differences • Part II, Chapter 10: Alternative recognition and the right to appeal	N/A
2. IMPLEMENTATION OF PROCESSES – SPECIAL PROCEDURES AND DECISIONS			
2.10. Which procedures are in place at your institution for applicants in a refugee-like situation with insufficient or missing documents?	N/A	• Part V, Chapter 21: Qualification holders without documentation	Section VII, Article VII of the LRC and its subsidiary text Recommendation on the Recognition of Refugees' Qualifications under the Lisbon Recognition Convention and Explanatory Memorandum specifically address the recognition of qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation.
2.11. To what extent does your institution use the full range of recognition decisions, including partial, alternative and conditional recognition?	N/A		N/A

Key question	Sub-questions	Relevant section in EAR-HEI manual	Further reading
2. IMPLEMENTATION OF PROCESSES – SPECIAL PROCEDURES AND DECISIONS			
2.12. To what extent does your institution apply automatic recognition?	To what extent does your institution automatically recognise the level, quality and workload of qualifications from specific institutions or countries?	• Part I, Chapter 1: Introduction to recognition, Section “Automatic recognition”	The Council of the European Union issued a Recommendation on Promoting Automatic Mutual Recognition of Higher Education and Upper Secondary Education and Training Qualifications and the Outcomes of Learning Periods Abroad (2018). In addition, the project publication The Triangle of Automatic Recognition: Guidelines for the Application of De Facto Automatic Recognition (2020) offers practical advice and guidelines on how to implement automatic recognition.
2.13. How does your institution ensure a proper balance between applying consistent evaluation criteria on the one hand, and taking an applicant-centred, flexible approach that focuses on the requirements that are relevant for the specific recognition purpose on the other?	N/A	• Part II, Chapter 6: Purpose of recognition • Part III, Chapter 11: Transparency and information provision	N/A

Key question	Sub-questions	Relevant section in EAR-HEI manual	Further reading
2. IMPLEMENTATION OF PROCESSES – TOOLS AND RESOURCES			
2.14. How frequently do your staff receive support from your national ENIC-NARIC centre in the form of advice or training?	N/A	• Part III, Chapter 12: Institutional recognition practices	N/A
2.15. How do your staff verify the legitimacy, authenticity and quality of a qualification?	How well do the information sources you consult during the evaluation process fit your needs?	• Part II, Chapter 3: Accreditation and quality assurance • Part II, Chapter 4: Diploma and accreditation mills • Part II, Chapter 5: Authenticity • Part V, Chapter 20: Qualifications awarded by institutions not recognised by national education authorities	N/A
2.16. Where do you seek information about the level, workload, profile, quality and learning outcomes of a qualification?	How well do the information sources you consult during the evaluation process fit your needs?	• Part II, Chapter 7: Learning outcomes • Part II, Chapter 8: Credits, grades, credit accumulation and credit transfer • Part IV, Chapter 13: How to find and use information • Part IV, Chapter 14: Diploma Supplement (and other information tools) • Part IV, Chapter 15: Qualifications frameworks	N/A

Key question	Sub-questions	Relevant section in EAR-HEI manual	Further reading
3. CAPACITY-BUILDING			
3.1. How does your institution ensure that its staff have the relevant knowledge and skills to perform recognition procedures?	a. How does your institution ensure that new staff members receive relevant training? b. How does your institution ensure that all staff members have opportunities to enhance their capacities or refresh their knowledge and skills? c. How does your institution ensure that its staff members regularly exchange information about cases and good practice?	N/A	N/A
3.2. How often are your staff in contact with peers from other institutions or countries, e.g. in an online forum or annual seminars?	a. If never or hardly ever, are your staff provided with information about available opportunities for peer exchange? b. If occasionally or regularly, how useful do your staff find such opportunities for peer exchange in their work?	N/A	N/A

Key question	Sub-questions	Relevant section in EAR-HEI manual	Further reading
4. MONITORING AND IMPROVING			
4.1. How does your institution ensure that its recognition processes are up to date and fit for purpose?	How does your institution ensure that its recognition processes reflect developments in the field of recognition in a timely manner?	• Part III, Chapter 11: Transparency and information provision	Standard 1.4 of the ESG expresses the expectation that institutions should consistently apply predefined and published regulations covering all phases of the student "life cycle", including recognition. In addition, the LIREQA project report Integrating Academic Recognition and Quality Assurance: Practical Recommendations contains a set of recommendations that aim to help ensure fair recognition via quality assurance mechanisms.
4.2. To what extent does your institution collect and analyse data (e.g. number of applications, number of negative recognition decisions) on recognition?	If applicable, which indicators does your institution use to evaluate the quality of its recognition procedures?	• Part III, Chapter 12: Institutional recognition practices	Standard 1.4 of the ESG expresses the expectation that institutions should consistently apply predefined and published regulations covering all phases of the student "life cycle", including recognition. In addition, the LIREQA project report Integrating Academic Recognition and Quality Assurance: Practical Recommendations contains a set of recommendations that aim to help ensure fair recognition via quality assurance mechanisms.

Key question	Sub-questions	Relevant section in EAR-HEI manual	Further reading
4. MONITORING AND IMPROVING			
4.3. How does your institution monitor whether its recognition procedures are in line with institutional regulations and applied consistently?	N/A	• Part III, Chapter 12: Institutional recognition practices	Standard 1.4 of the ESG expresses the expectation that institutions should consistently apply predefined and published regulations covering all phases of the student "life cycle", including recognition. In addition, the LIREQA project report Integrating Academic Recognition and Quality Assurance: Practical Recommendations contains a set of recommendations that aim to help ensure fair recognition via quality assurance mechanisms.
4.4. How regularly are these procedures reviewed and revised with a view to enhancing their quality?	Could you provide a few examples of recent enhancement measures taken?	• Part III, Chapter 11: Transparency and information provision • Part III, Chapter 12: Institutional recognition practices	Standard 1.4 of the ESG expresses the expectation that institutions should consistently apply predefined and published regulations covering all phases of the student "life cycle", including recognition. In addition, the LIREQA project report Integrating Academic Recognition and Quality Assurance: Practical Recommendations contains a set of recommendations that aim to help ensure fair recognition via quality assurance mechanisms.

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The “Spotlight on recognition” project aimed to support staff at higher education institutions who are responsible for recognition processes and decisions by enhancing their capacities in terms of recognition procedures in compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

This publication contains a self-assessment tool developed to support staff of higher education institutions in evaluating the extent to which the recognition procedures in place at their institutions are in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and international good practice.

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