

FAIR report



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In cooperation with:



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Executive summary

The present report reflects the outcomes of the Focus on Automatic Institutional Recognition (FAIR) project, which was implemented between January 2015 and June 2017 in the framework of the Erasmus+ Key Action 3 Policy Experimentation call.

One of the goals of the Bologna Process (initiated in 1999) is to work towards smooth recognition of foreign qualifications. This message was reaffirmed by the European Ministers of Higher Education in the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué, in which automatic academic recognition of comparable qualifications was specifically mentioned. The FAIR project aimed to contribute to this ambition by examining and improving the process of recognition at the level where most decisions concerning recognition are made, namely at higher education institutions. Twenty-two higher education institutions in six European countries participated in the project and agreed to test new methods, instruments and procedures relating to recognition. To measure the impact of these interventions, an independent evaluation body conducted before-and-after comparisons.

The hypothesis underlying the experiment was:

"The recommendations of the Bologna Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition and the implementation of good practice from the European Area of Recognition manuals [will] lead to improved institutional recognition practices"

Project results and recommendations

By measuring and comparing day-to-day recognition practice at higher education institutions in Europe, the FAIR project has revealed how diverse and complex this matter is. Other studies, like the Bologna Stocktaking Reports and LRC monitoring report,¹⁾ already indicated there is scope for improvement, providing an overview of the status quo on the basis of information provided by national authorities and ENIC/NARIC centres. The FAIR report goes beyond these general descriptions of national recognition procedures by specifically looking at the practices and perspectives at higher education institutions.

Structuring recognition

An important initial finding of the project is the large variation between, and sometimes within, higher education institutions in the way their procedures are organised and their administrations are kept. There are also considerable differences in the way recognition is structured in the six participating countries, involving a variety of bodies. Binary education systems and regionalism further complicate the European landscape. Whereas recognition patterns within binary systems may be coherent, there is scope for ambiguity, uncertainty and exclusion at the interface between binary and unitary systems. In addition, countries differ in the extent to which they grant their regions legal competence for higher education. Flanders, Germany and Spain are examples of Bologna signatories which have a binary system and are regionalised. Recognition and admission practices may differ as a result.

1) Paris, 2016, Monitoring the Implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention

Based on the findings in the FAIR project, the following recommendations have been formulated to improve recognition of foreign qualifications:

- 1) Clarify the national recognition infrastructure and ensure transparency about the roles and responsibilities of the different bodies involved.
- 2) Make institutional recognition procedures more consistent and transparent, including a clear division of roles between the central admissions office and the faculties.
- 3) Improve the turnaround time of recognition decisions by including elements of automatic recognition.
- 4) Develop special procedures for:
 - a. recognition and admission of persons with insufficient or no supporting documentation;
 - b. recognition of prior learning;
 - c. appeals.
- 5) Improve the provision of information to applicants, through personal communication as well as online.
- 6) Ensure internal and external quality assurance of the recognition process, in conformity with the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance (ESG 1.4).

Towards automatic recognition

To a large extent, the findings of the FAIR project support the recommendations of the Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition and the good practice of the EAR-HEI manual. The higher education institutions that participated in the FAIR project have shown that sometimes relatively simple adjustments can make a significant contribution to smooth and transparent recognition of foreign qualifications. Much can be gained by improving and, where possible, automating administrative procedures and by standardising steps in the recognition procedure. Making this common practice within many more higher education institutions in Europe will be a major step towards realising the Bologna objective of automatic recognition.

Eventually, higher education institutions with transparent, fair and fast recognition procedures will be able to distinguish themselves in a context of increasing international student mobility and an internationally competitive market. The report contains many concrete examples of good practice to help both the institutions and their governments.

Acknowledgements

This report is the result of a collaborative effort of the 36 partners joined in the FAIR project. These partners represent higher education institutions and associations, ENIC/NARIC centres and Ministries of Education in Belgium (Flemish Community), Croatia, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain.

The participating higher education institutions in particular, which have been willing to open their doors and to test new methods, instruments and procedures for recognition, cannot be thanked enough. With their support and contributions, the FAIR project has succeeded in creating valuable new insights into the day-to-day practice of recognition of foreign qualifications in Europe.

Special thanks are also extended to Allan Bruun Pedersen for sharing his broad expertise on recognition and to Mark Frederiks for his viewpoints on quality assurance. Their kind but critical feedback on the preliminary findings of the FAIR project and on the draft reports was indispensable. Furthermore, I would like to express my appreciation to the European University Association, which has played a pivotal role in ensuring the scientific rigour of the project by organising and supervising the field trials.

I wish to acknowledge the commitment of the ENIC/NARICs and Ministries to carrying out this project and taking its recommendations on board to improve the situation in their respective countries. In addition, I express my appreciation to the European Commission for their financial support and for the trust that they have given the FAIR partners in rolling out this innovative project.

Lastly, I wish to thank Nuffic for the day-to-day management of the FAIR project and for the administrative support.

Hans Schutte

Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science / FAIR project coordinator

Introduction

In Europe, international student mobility has grown steadily over the past decades. International students are aware of their options and tend to 'shop around', seeking admission to several universities before making a final choice. In turn, European universities increasingly have to stand out and differentiate themselves in an internationally competitive market. Recruitment and selection of prospective students is part of that process.

When selecting international students, recognition of foreign qualifications plays an important role. Not only the quality of decision-making, but also factors such as the speed and transparency of the recognition procedure can help a university attract those students who fit well with its educational profile.

The Focus on Automatic Institutional Recognition (FAIR) project aimed to improve recognition of foreign qualifications, by measuring the impact of introducing both good practice and elements of automatic recognition (standardising steps) within institutional recognition procedures. It was expected that this could reduce deviations in such procedures and lead to smoother and fairer recognition decisions across Europe.

The experiences of higher education institutions participating in the FAIR project indeed resulted in recommendations to improve institutional recognition practice. First and foremost, this report therefore intends to share their experiences with fellow institutions in Europe. In addition, the FAIR project yielded valuable insights on the impact of national recognition structures on the way universities and their admissions offices operate. Therefore, the findings and recommendations are also highly relevant for policymakers involved in advancing the agreements of the Bologna process and in furthering the integration of the European Higher Education Area.

The underlying report consists of three parts. Part I informs the reader about the background of the FAIR project, its methodology and the main results. Based on the findings in the FAIR project, Part II provides general recommendations to further improve recognition in Europe. The third and last part contains a brief summary of the specific recommendations for the six participating FAIR countries: Belgium (Flemish Community), Croatia, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain.

Part I – About FAIR

The Focus on Automatic Institutional Recognition (FAIR) project aimed to improve institutional recognition by implementing elements of automatic recognition in institutional recognition procedures. Part I aims to inform the reader about the background, methodology and main results of the project.

1. Background

Since the 1980s, various initiatives have led to an improvement of recognition practices in the European Area. One of the goals of the Bologna Process (initiated in 1999) was to work towards smooth recognition of qualifications. This message was reaffirmed by the European Ministers of Higher Education in the Bucharest Communiqué (2012), in which automatic academic recognition of comparable qualifications was specifically mentioned. A pathfinder group was founded to explore the possibilities of automatic recognition and the FAIR project takes these recommendations further, using the European Area of Recognition manuals as a source of good practice.

Milestones in the last decades

Prompted by increasing student mobility in recent decades, various actions were launched to improve the recognition of qualifications in the European region. Three developments specifically worked as a catalyst to advance recognition:

1. **ENIC/NARIC centres.** A first step to a consistent recognition approach has been the creation of the national recognition information networks by the European Commission in 1984 (National Academic Recognition and Information Centres, NARICs) and by the Council of Europe and UNESCO CEPES in 1994 (European National Information Centres, ENICs). The ENIC/NARIC networks allow for discussions on recognition issues and sharing of information between members on a daily basis. The networks offer a platform for workshops, projects and conferences on recognition. Moreover, they play a vital role in the practical implementation of the most important legal document regarding recognition: the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC).
2. **Legal Framework.** The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) is a major international treaty on recognition, providing a clear framework for the criteria to be used when evaluating foreign qualifications. Two major accomplishments of the LRC are the principle of the reversed burden of proof and the concept of substantial differences.
The LRC was signed in 1997 and entered into force in 1999. The treaty is binding for the states that ratified the treaty (nearly all EHEA countries plus a few non-European countries). As a consequence, it is also binding for all recognition authorities in these countries. Over the years subsidiary texts have been added, such as the Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications, which reflect the changes in the landscape of recognition in close interaction with other relevant policy developments.
3. **Political Framework.** The most important political development for recognition is the Bologna Process, which started in 1999 and culminated in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2010. Fair and smooth recognition of qualifications has always been considered to be an operational objective as well as an essential element for the success of the EHEA. Within the

Bologna framework important recognition instruments were adopted and developed, such as the Diploma Supplement, ECTS, and qualification frameworks. The implementation of the three-cycle system (bachelor, master, PhD) was also intended to contribute to transparency and facilitate easy recognition.

Despite the progress made over the last decades, obstacles to fair recognition continue to exist. Examples of major obstacles are:

- incomplete or incorrect implementation of the LRC in national legal frameworks;
- differences in recognition practices of ENIC/NARICs (e.g. what is considered to be a substantial difference?) as well as between and within higher education institutions;
- lengthy recognition processes that hinder a student's timely study choice, in some cases preventing students from starting their studies in time. The duration varies from institution to institution, but may exceed the four months recommended in the LRC.

These are all structural problems that are serious obstacles to fair and smooth recognition, and as such for learner mobility in the EU and the EHEA.

Automatic recognition

One of the latest solutions introduced for fast and fair recognition in the European region is 'automatic recognition'. Automatic recognition is a system-level-based recognition ('a bachelor is a bachelor', 'a master is a master') of quality-assured comparable degrees, both for the purpose of continuing education and for access to the labour market (non-regulated professions), and without intervention of a credential evaluator. The concept is not entirely new – it also plays a role in the European Directive for professional recognition – but has been given greater importance in the EHEA Bucharest (2012) and Yerevan (2015) communiqués and has since been given new meaning.

An automatic recognition procedure standardises steps in the recognition procedure. It typically accepts the level, quality and workload (three of the five elements) of a qualification. The foreign degree is recognised on the same level and gives the same academic rights (access to further studies and access to the labour market) in the country where recognition is sought as in the home country. The evaluation of the other two elements of a qualification (profile and learning outcomes) is considered to be evaluation at programme level, and may still require further evaluation.

By standardising steps of the recognition procedure, automatic recognition is expected to reduce deviations in those procedures and lead to smoother and fairer recognition decisions across the EU and EHEA.

European Area of Recognition manuals

An initiative stemming from the ENIC/NARIC networks has been the development of the European Area of Recognition (EAR) manual in 2011. The EAR manual was published to streamline recognition practice and assist credential evaluators from the ENIC/NARIC networks in their daily work. The practical guidelines in the EAR manual offer clarity on how to implement the principles of the LRC in order to diminish the variety of interpretations across countries, as well as between and within institutions. The manual contains recommendations on all aspects of the recognition of foreign qualifications and is illustrated with examples from the daily practice of recognition. The manual was endorsed by the Ministers of Education in the Bucharest Communiqué of 2012. In the same year, the EAR-HEI manual was published, specifically aimed at admissions officers at higher education institutions.

The EAR and the EAR-HEI manuals can help to improve recognition practice in the EHEA and to introduce (elements of) automatic recognition.

Pathfinder Group & the policy of smaller steps

Next, automatic recognition was called for in the Bologna Bucharest Communiqué 2012 and was further explored by a special working group: the Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition. The main recommendation of the Pathfinder Group to the EHEA ministers is “to ensure that qualifications from other EHEA countries are recognised on an equal level with domestic qualifications, for example through enacting specific legislation to achieve this objective.” In addition, the Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition recommended a policy of smaller steps to arrive at automatic recognition, such as to:

- modify national legislation in case it contradicts the principles of the LRC;
- advise credential evaluators in higher education institutions on properly implementing the LRC and on increasing the use of qualitative criteria in recognition processes;
- endorse the recently published EAR-HEI Manual as a reference framework to guide recognition processes;
- support the role of quality assurance in assessing recognition processes in higher education institutions, since the internal and/or external quality assurance verifying recognition processes is essential for improving recognition standards;
- explore possible improvements to recognition processes through the use of modern technologies and through making use of the expertise within the extensive network of ENIC/NARICs.

The objective of the FAIR project was to take the recommendations of the Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition and the good practice of the European Area of Recognition manuals further by focussing on where most recognition decisions in the European area are made: at higher education institutions.

2. Experimentation Method

The FAIR project is designed to test the effect of the implementation of elements of automatic recognition in the institutional recognition procedures. This has been done in the framework of the Erasmus+ Key Action 3 ‘Policy Experimentation’ call; a new type of project that requires a specific methodology to upscale results on the national and European levels.

Policy Experimentation Erasmus+ Key Action 3

The FAIR project was part of the first cohort of projects that received a grant under the ‘Policy Experimentation’ call of the Erasmus+ programme funded by the European Commission. This new type of call aims to support transnational cooperation with a view to implementing innovative policies under the leadership of high-level public authorities. Key features of the programme are to:

- test and improve policy implementation systems, structures and processes with a potentially significant impact;
- facilitate the collection and analysis of substantive evidence allowing the public authorities responsible to assess and monitor the implementation of innovative policies;
- identify key criteria and conditions for effective policy implementation and monitoring;
- facilitate transferability and scalability.

These key features also came with requirements for the project design. For example, a central element of the methodology had to be a research experiment guided by an independent partner based on a hypothesis that could be falsified. In addition, the partnership had to include high-level public authorities to ensure the change envisaged would be supported, and include the key

stakeholders of the subject matter. Another example is that the results needed to be scalable to the national and European levels, and that there should be a transnational evaluation of the project results.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis of the FAIR project was: "The recommendations of the Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition and the implementation of good practice from the European Area of Recognition manuals [will] lead to improved institutional recognition practices."

Before-and-after comparison

To test this hypothesis, a straightforward methodology of 'before-and-after comparison' was chosen. The same population and a similar sample was used both as control group to provide a baseline assessment of recognition practices in these higher education institutions, and next as a 'treatment' group to test the impact of improvements made on the recognition practices.

Population

The focus of the project was on institutional recognition practices and therefore the target group of the experimentation were the admissions offices of higher education institutions. The initial 'population' included in the experiment consisted of admissions offices from twenty-three higher education institutions from six European countries. These admissions offices were a carefully balanced mix reflecting the different models of recognition in European higher education institutions, different orientations in education (applied and research) as well as a geographical spread (different regions from six different countries).

Samples

The samples for the experimentation were the recognition procedures of these offices. The two samples (before and after implementation) were taken during peak admissions time, which is in spring/summer. The project only looked at vertical mobility and included both bachelor's and master's admissions.

Overview of the structure of the FAIR partnership (for a detailed list see Annex A)

- Six countries: Belgium (Flanders), Croatia, Germany, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands
- Levels of public authorities and stakeholders involved for each country:
 - Ministry of Education or representative
 - ENIC/NARICs or representative
 - 22 higher education institutions (4 x 4 and 2 x 3)
- External Evaluator or Evaluation Body (EUA)
- European Consortium of Accreditation (ECA)
- Peer review by critical friend (vice president of the LRC bureau/ENIC/NARIC Denmark)

3. Implementation of the trials

Overview of the experimentation as foreseen at the start of the project

The experimentation consisted of the following elements:

I Planning the experiment

- a. Development scorecard and protocol for undertaking the trials;
 - December 2014 / January 2015
- b. Legal arrangements to enable second trial
 - July/August 2015
- c. One-day kick-off meeting to prepare trials
 - January 2015

II Implementation of the two trials

- d. Field trial 1: Baseline assessment of recognition procedures
 - February/September 2015
- e. Analysis of baseline assessment
 - October/December 2015
- f. One-day project team meeting to discuss outcomes and prepare for second trial
 - January 2016
- g. Implementation of improved recognition procedures in HEIs
 - February/May 2016
- h. Field trial 2: Impact analysis of improved procedures
 - May/September 2016

III Evaluation

- i. Analysis of field trials and recommendations (WP 6 and 7)
 - October 2016 – February 2017

Planning the experiment

Scorecard and protocol

To perform the trials both an assessment protocol (see Annex B) based on a set of indicators and a scorecard (see Annex C) to monitor recognition decisions were developed. Using the same set of indicators would allow a comparison between the original procedure and the changed procedure.

A draft of the set of indicators, the scorecard and protocol were discussed at the kick-off meeting of the project in Amsterdam on 20 January 2015. At the meeting the first insights into recognition procedures of higher education institutions became visible, such as:

- The institutional recognition procedures varied greatly between the participating higher education institutions and the baseline assessment form needed to be adaptable to all sorts of recognition procedures.
- The recognition and admission procedures were in some cases one and the same procedure and seem difficult to disentangle from each other. Therefore, case-by-case solutions were to be discussed by the Evaluation Body in their preparatory Skype sessions with the institutions in order to separate the recognition decision from the admissions process as much as possible.
- The amount of foreign applications per institution varied greatly. Some institutions received thousands of applications, others only a few. Therefore, the decision was made to collect a representative sample of the applications. EUA as external evaluator would also look into the possibility of using the institution's internal databases to provide the required data.

- The peak times and deadlines for the admissions procedure differed between institutions. EUA would map these deadlines in order to establish the experimentation period. In cases where first a conditional recognition decision was made and the full decision was only made in autumn, the conditional recognition could be used in the analysis of EUA.

Legal arrangements

At the time of designing the project, legal obstacles were generally considered to be one of the major obstacles for fair recognition. Therefore, the purpose of the legal arrangement plans was to lift any obstacles for implementing the good practice in trial 2 and thus allow for 'free' testing of the good practice. However, already at the very start of the project it became clear that it would be impossible for the participating Ministries of Education to suspend the existing legal arrangements in the given timeframe of the project (between the outcomes of trial 1 in autumn 2015 and the implementation next winter/spring). Instead, all Ministries of Education completed an inventory form on the national legislation on academic recognition and admissions procedures, resulting in an overview of the legal structure and possible obstacles in each country (July/August 2015).

Interestingly, the outcomes of the legal inventory and field trial 1 showed that the difficulties encountered by higher education institutions were not legal in nature to the extent that was expected beforehand. Only in Croatia legal reforms were initiated during the FAIR project. Most obstacles in the participating countries, however, related to the national recognition structure and institutional practices. This is explained further in the report.

Field trial 1

The higher education institutions completed the baseline assessment of recognition procedures using the baseline assessment form (identifying the recognition procedure) and scorecard (Excel sheet with recognition decisions) from February till September 2015. Upon completion, the Evaluation Body (EUA) held Skype meetings with all partners to collect feedback on the trial and for clarification where needed in August/September. Out of the 23 higher education institutions that started the baseline assessment, 22 higher education institutions completed the exercise.

After the first trial, 22 baseline assessment reports and 6 country reports were drafted by the Evaluation Body in September/October 2015 and shared with the higher education institutions, the ENIC/NARICs, the responsible Ministry of Education and the external evaluators (Danish Agency for Higher Education and ECA) for approval and feedback.

Initial findings and change in methodology

An important initial finding in the project was the differences between higher education institutions in the way their procedures were organised and their administrations kept. In addition, the first trial showed large differences in the way recognition was structured in the six participating countries and a variety of bodies involved. Binary education systems and regionalism further complicate the European landscape. Whereas recognition patterns within binary systems may be coherent, there is scope for ambiguity, uncertainty and exclusion at the interface between binary and unitary systems. In addition, countries differ in the extent to which they grant their regions legal competence for higher education. Flanders, Germany and Spain are examples of Bologna signatories which have a binary system and are regionalised. Recognition and admission practices may vary as a result.

Due to these differences, the scorecards containing the actual application data had been filled out so inconsistently that no generic trends and evidence for improvement would be apparent

from a second (identical) trial. Interestingly, when designing the trials and providing training to the participating institutions via Skype meetings, there were no signs that completing the Excel sheets might be difficult. This only came to light due to the use of quantitative methodology and can be considered to be a valuable outcome of the project in itself.

After discussing this situation first with the Evaluation Body and later within the project team, it was decided that it would be better to go for a tailor-made impact assessment. This tailor-made approach allowed the experts of the Evaluation Body to have a close look at actual institutional recognition practices. Whereas the envisaged scorecard results might have revealed inconsistencies in the recognition of certain types of qualifications or the occurrence of overly long processing times of applications, it now became apparent that the involvement of external organisations, complicated internal division of work, poor communication between departments and the absence of reliable administrative tools prevented accurate data collection for the fine-tuning of the recognition procedures.

In the view of the public authorities involved in FAIR, these findings are much more relevant than expected at the start of the project, since they differ from the generalised information usually reported on the state of recognition in the EHEA, such as the Bologna Stocktaking and Trend Reports. When shaping future initiatives to improve recognition within Europe, better understanding of day-to-day recognition practice is key.

Implementation of improved recognition procedures in higher education institutions

With the initial findings in mind, the higher education institutions drafted roadmaps. These roadmaps envisaged implementing good practice and elements of automatic recognition in the institutional recognition procedures. The results of the changes were to be measured in the second trial (May–September 2016).

To draft the roadmaps, feedback was first collected from the ENIC/NARICs and higher education institutions on the findings in the baseline assessment and the country reports drafted by the Evaluation Body. Next, recommendations for improvements were made by the ENIC/NARICs, in close collaboration with the higher education institutions. During this process, the second project meeting was held in Rome on 19 January 2016.

While drafting the roadmaps, it also became clear that not all improvements could be implemented before the start of trial 2. The two main reasons for this were the nature of the recommendations and the institutional decision-making processes.

Field trial 2: Impact analysis of improved procedures

As part of trial 2, face-to-face Skype meetings with higher education institutions were held twice, a survey was conducted and an assessment form completed.

Face-to-face Skype meetings were held between the Evaluation Body and all 22 higher education institutions at the start of trial 2 to provide instructions (May/June 2016). Next, a mid-term survey was conducted inquiring about:

1. any significant changes or developments (in legislation, in national or institutional policy, or in internal resource allocation to the recognition/admissions office etc.) that may affect, or have affected recognition procedures in the institution – excluding the changes implemented within the FAIR project;

2. the progress higher education institutions made in each of the actions listed in the FAIR roadmap of their institution, explaining in detail what they have done, and what internal and/or external obstacles they encountered;
3. whether the roadmap addressed all the recommendations included in the report drafted by the Evaluation Body in the previous trial and if not, why.

The latter question was asked because in some cases, the recommended improvements to the procedure took more time than was available.

At the end of trial 2, all higher education institutions completed the assessment protocol used during trial 1 to allow for a quantifiable before-and-after comparison, using the same indicators decided on at the start of the project. Further Skype meetings were held between the Evaluation Body and all participating higher education institutions to collect more information about the impact of the changes in the recognition procedures.

Analysis and outcomes of field trial 2

Based on results of the 2nd field trial the EUA drafted an individual report for each of the 22 participating higher education institution on the impact of the reforms on institutional recognition practice. In addition the overall results of the FAIR project were reflected in a final report². As indicated earlier, the main findings of the FAIR project relate to institutional structures and procedures that are a precondition for fast and fair recognition of foreign qualifications and – eventually – for implementing automatic recognition.

The final report shows that:

- The Evaluation Body believes that the impact of the FAIR project on institutional recognition practices has been considerable but variable, depending amongst others on financial considerations and broader institutional support for reforms proposed by the admissions offices. Time considerations should also be taken into account: whereas some reforms could be fully implemented during the timeframe of the FAIR project, others are still ongoing or are being prepared. Finally, certain recommendations go beyond the mandate of the individual institutions and require action at regional or national level.
- After the second trial, staff involved in the day-to-day business of recognition and admission arguably have a better understanding of the policy and administrative contexts in which they work and have greater awareness of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.
- In particular, they are more sensitive to the needs of applicants with insufficient documentation, such as refugees (whereas the influx of refugees in 2015 in all European countries put the topic high on the agenda of many higher education institutions, it is reasonable to assume that FAIR reinforced the motivations already at work).
- Participating higher education institutions are more conscious of the importance of quality assurance, both for improving the reliability of their own procedures and as a source of information supporting their assessments of applicants' qualifications.
- The quality of communications with applicants has been greatly enhanced.

The Evaluation Body's findings are the starting point for the recommendations at European and national level in Part II and Part III of this report. These recommendations are formulated by the national FAIR coordinators (in most cases representatives of the national ENIC/NARIC centre or the Ministry of Education) in consultation with the participating higher education institutions.

2) EUA, October 2016; FAIR – FINAL REPORT on the IMPACT of the project on PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

A transnational project meeting was organised on 3 November 2016 in Amsterdam, where all national FAIR coordinators had the opportunity to jointly reflect on the findings. During the FAIR National Exploitation Meetings that were held in all six participating countries in February/March 2017, the draft recommendations were further discussed with a wider group of stakeholders at the national level, including Higher education institutions, national quality assurance agencies, student organisations and other bodies involved in recognition.

Part II – European Recommendations

Towards FAIR recognition in the EU – next steps

Part II provides general recommendations to further improve recognition of foreign qualifications in Europe. Separate sets of recommendations have been formulated for the different stakeholders involved in the FAIR project: Ministries of Education, ENIC/NARIC centres and higher education institutions. In addition, section 7 contains recommendations for other bodies that may be involved in recognition.

Based on the Evaluation Body's final report on the impact assessment of the FAIR project, on the individual Evaluation Body reports for the participating higher education institutions, and on the national recommendations of the six countries taking part in FAIR, the following points for improvement are recommended at the European level (following the structure of the topics listed in the final report of the Evaluation Body):

- 1) National recognition infrastructure
- 2) Institutional infrastructure
- 3) Turnaround time
- 4) Special procedures
 - a) Persons with insufficient or no supporting documentation
 - b) Recognition of prior learning
 - c) Appeals procedure
- 5) Information available to applicants
- 6) Quality assurance

1. National recognition infrastructure

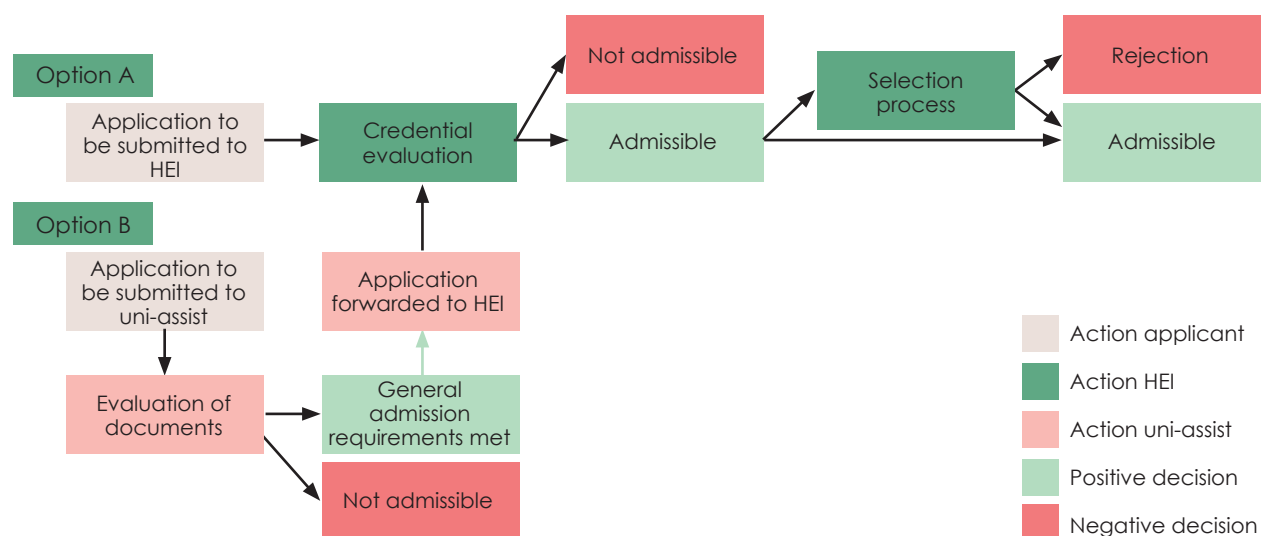
Recommendation to the Ministry of Education

The results of the FAIR project have shown that the way the recognition of qualifications is organised differs from country to country. Sometimes, as in the Netherlands, Flanders and in Italy, it is the exclusive responsibility of the higher education institution, with the ENIC/NARIC centre playing an advisory role. In other countries, such as Spain and Croatia, national or regional government bodies are involved. Certain tasks may also be devolved to third parties, like Uni-Assist in Germany. The roles and responsibilities of the different bodies involved are sometimes difficult to understand and are not always clear to an outsider.

Recommendation:

- Each country should identify all organisations involved in the academic recognition process and produce a clear chart of procedures, roles and responsibilities.
- This chart should be easily available for all relevant stakeholders, and preferably be published on the websites of all organisations involved.

Example A: Chart of procedures from Germany



The results of the FAIR project have shown that the national infrastructure has a major impact on the day-to-day practice of recognition.

Recommendation:

- The current national recognition infrastructure (including all organisations involved) should be reviewed in terms of transparency, efficiency, consistency and ability to apply the LRC to the recognition of foreign qualifications. It should be considered whether the infrastructure could be streamlined by adopting good practice as described in the underlying FAIR report and/or European Area of Recognition manuals.

Example B: Streamlining the recognition infrastructure in Italy

During the FAIR project, it became clear that a document called "Dichiarazione di Valore in loco", issued by Italian embassies, plays a role in the recognition process when foreign students apply at an Italian HEI. Although this declaration is not mandatory by law and is issued as an instrument of transparency, the universities often request it in a compulsory way. The Italian ENIC/NARIC centre has invited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss the issue at the FAIR National Dissemination Meeting and to together clarify the roles and responsibilities of the different bodies involved.

Example C: Adapting the legal framework in Croatia

The Croatian Act on Recognition of Foreign Education Qualifications stipulates that HEIs should have separate procedures for recognition of foreign qualifications and admission. Whereas recognition is the responsibility of the central admissions office, admission is done at the faculties. As administrative procedures are not integrated, this results in overly long turnaround times and decision-making lacking in transparency and consistency. During the lifetime of the FAIR project, the Ministry of Education drafted an amendment to the Act on Recognition of Foreign Education Qualifications. The amended act introduces the possibility to merge the recognition and admission procedure. Adoption of the amended act is expected by the end of 2017.

To support implementation of this recommendation, the following is advisable:

- to take the national context into account when trying to improve recognition practice: a central approach (through legal measures) or a decentral approach (through strengthening institutional autonomy and cooperation);
- to engage in a dialogue on the national level with all stakeholders involved in the recognition infrastructure, to agree on strategies and measures to facilitate streamlining efforts;
- to pay special attention to the role of the national ENIC/NARIC centre. Do the legal setting, responsibilities assigned and funding make it possible for the ENIC/NARIC centre to effectively assist the higher education institutions in their recognition procedures?
- if an 'external organisation' (other than ENIC/NARIC, the Ministry of Education or higher education institution) plays a role in the evaluation or recognition procedure, to make sure that the quality of the contribution is assured and that the organisation works in line with the LRC;
- to explore how institutional recognition procedures can be monitored.

2. Institutional infrastructure

The institutional infrastructure refers to the division of tasks and responsibilities within the higher education institution, as well as the structure that is in place to support day-to-day recognition of qualifications at the institutional level.

The results of the FAIR project show that recognition practices can differ widely between institutions, even within one country. Differences include the autonomy of the faculties vis-à-vis the central admissions office, formal roles played by other university bodies like the office of the rector, or the kind of staff that is involved in recognition decisions (academic staff, employees from the admissions office or a combination of both). In light of these differences, and the resulting multitude of institutions, institutional bodies and individuals concerned, the recommendations below are advised.

Recommendation to the ENIC/NARIC centres

- Create a webpage for higher education institutions with main tools and information needed in order to set up a clear, transparent and accurate recognition procedure following the good practice available.
- Explore how ENIC/NARIC centres can better assist higher education institutions within their mandate and remit.

Recommendation to the Ministry of Education

The trials of the FAIR project show that at the institutional level familiarity with the LRC is low. Interestingly, the comparative analysis of the baseline assessment reports indicates that fewer respondents were certain that the procedures at their institution are fully aligned with the LRC after the second trial.³ These respondents were more aware of the LRC and its principles as a result of the information that was shared during the FAIR project meetings and exchanges. Participation in the FAIR project has thus allowed them to recognise existing opportunities for improvement.

In general, it can be said that knowledge of the international agreements as defined in the LRC, and the best practices that ensue, is of great importance to streamline the recognition of qualifications within the EHEA and to promote fast and fair procedures.

2) EUA comparative analysis of the FAIR baseline assessment forms, p. 6

Recommendation:

- Continuous efforts should be made to implement and sustain the LRC: present the principles, criteria and spirit of the LRC on an appropriate national website and encourage higher education institutions to train their admissions staff in good practice of recognition (through periodically recurring training, seminars and programmes at different levels, both national, regional and institutional). This can be thought of as building a national 'recognition culture'. Regular activities are needed to keep this culture alive because of the staff turnover in higher education institutions.
- Higher education institutions should be informed that if their country has ratified the LRC, it is a legal obligation to adhere to its principles, which overrules institutional autonomy.

Example D: National training sessions in Flanders

Flemish FAIR stakeholders agreed that Flanders Knowledge Area, together with the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, will organise regular training sessions for all Flemish Higher education institutions on the principles of the LRC and related legislation in Flanders.

Example E: Sustaining the outcomes of FAIR in Croatia

In Croatia the FAIR network will remain intact after the lifetime of the project. Future activities of the network will include a round table on the implementation of the amended Act on Recognition of Foreign Education Qualifications and developing procedures related to the recognition of prior learning, notably in reference to refugees.

Recommendation to higher education institutions

- Admissions offices should establish direct contact with relevant staff members of the faculties and programmes for which they work, and should ensure that all staff involved in recognition is aware of their role and responsibility in the process (including keeping to time limits).

Example F: Sharing good practice at the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos

At the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, the directors of master's programmes play a part in the admission of students. The master's programme directors have diverse backgrounds, as some are academic university staff whereas others may be professionals from outside the university (in case of professional-oriented master's programmes). Within the context of the FAIR project the URJC developed a standard information sheet to instruct the master's programme directors about the admissions procedure and their responsibilities.

Example G : Academic committees in Croatia

At Croatian higher education institutions the recognition decision for access to second-cycle programmes is taken by the Academic Committee. This Committee consists of members of different faculties and is supported by the central admissions office.

- Admissions staff should be trained in the good practice of recognition.

Example H: Staff training at the University of Bologna

The University of Bologna has a staff development programme for academics, including information on their role and responsibility in recognition of foreign qualifications.

Example I: Flipping the procedure at the University of Bielefeld

Based on the principle that recognition, in line with the LRC, should refer to the recognition of competences rather than formal certificates, the University of Bielefeld (not a FAIR partner) has changed the order of assessments: now the review of content and competences is done before the checking of formal criteria.

- Encourage admissions officers to form a national platform of experts, in order to share expertise, experiences and good practice among the admissions offices of all national higher education institutions.

Example J: National admissions meeting in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands admissions officers from all public universities periodically meet to exchange best practices and discuss the latest developments relating to academic recognition. Separate meetings are organised for universities of applied sciences and research universities. The meetings are presided by one of the participating universities on a rotating basis.

- Associations of higher education institutions may also take an active role in helping their members to implement good practice, with the advantage that this approach might lead to more commitment from higher education institutions and to realistic and practical results.

Example K: The Hochschulrektorenkonferenz in Germany

The Hochschulrektorenkonferenz (or German Rectors' Conference, HRK) addresses all manners of issues related to the work of universities, including implementing Bologna structures and principles. It offers its member universities guidance and support on international student mobility and diploma recognition, amongst others through research, topical meetings and participation in EU-funded projects. Thanks to its extensive network among German universities, the Hochschulrektorenkonferenz is a major player in the German higher education sector.

3. Turnaround time

The results of the FAIR project indicate that the turnaround time is often related to the selection procedure and, ultimately, the internationalisation policy of an institution. Some institutions use a model in which all applications are processed at one moment in time. Thus, regardless if a student registers in February or in June, information about the recognition and admissions decision is provided just before the start of the new academic year. Other institutions prefer to handle applications according to the order of entry.

Overall, the FAIR trials show large differences in the turnaround time of applications. Turnaround times can also vary widely within institutions.

The LRC underscores the importance of fast and fair recognition of qualifications and stipulates that decisions on recognition shall be made within a reasonable time limit.

Recommendation:

- Speed up the case processing time, i.e. by ensuring the implementation of the LRC principles and a proper recognition infrastructure (databases, efficient communication channels). Both allow for a structured and smoother organisation of the workflow.

Example L: Reducing case processing times at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia

Each faculty of the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia used to have its own school calendar. Thus, the beginning and the end of the academic year was not the same for all students, with up to one month's difference between the faculties. The unification of the response time for applicants in all faculties has led to a unification of the corresponding school calendars. This improvement, realised as a result of the participation in the FAIR project, contributes to the coherence of the whole recognition and admission procedure at the university.

- Only evaluate a qualification based on its five main elements (level, quality, workload, profile and learning outcomes), and where possible (i.e. qualifications from within the EHEA) standardise decisions on level and quality. This way, a flexible form of 'automatic recognition' may be introduced into the evaluation of foreign qualifications. The good practice in the EAR-HEI manual should be used to quickly go through the various steps of the evaluation process.
- Information on the turnaround time should be publicly available, so students know how to submit their request in a timely manner.

4. Special procedures

a) Persons with insufficient or no supporting documentation

The results of the FAIR project have shown that few institutions have a procedure for admission of refugees with insufficient or no supporting documentation. Although many institutions participating in the FAIR project indicated that they intended to develop these procedures, no quick results were measured. At the time of the second trial only one institution posted a flowchart on its website with clear guidance on the relevant procedure⁴.

This outcome can be explained by an absence of national guidance. In 2015 an inventory of the LRC Committee already showed that only a few countries have implemented Article 7 of the LRC, which deals with the recognition of qualifications of refugees and people in a refugee-like situation.

Recommendation:

- At the national level, recommendations should be provided on how to apply the LRC article on refugees without documentation.
- At the institutional level, a flexible and efficient procedure should be developed, preferably as a cooperative effort of national higher education institutions.
- Both recommendations can be complemented and aligned with general streamlining activities such as mentioned as part of the recommendations under section 2 above.

Example M: Flexible recognition procedures

Pursuant to the recognition legislation of Flanders, NARIC-Flanders has to offer an adaptable flexible recognition procedure for refugees. NARIC-Flanders may also invite experts to have an interview with the refugees. The higher education institutions are now improving the recognition procedures for applicants (refugees) without documentation in cooperation with NARIC-Flanders, the Department of Education and Training, the Flemish University College Council and the Flemish Interuniversity Council.

4) EUA Final report on the impact of the project on participating institutions, p. 5

Example N: German initiatives to support refugees in higher education

In Germany several initiatives have been set up to make higher education accessible for refugees without documents. The University of Oldenburg helps refugee students to develop a portfolio. This portfolio is then used in the admissions process. www.uni-oldenburg.de/en/award-of-credit-project/portfolios-for-refugees/

In September 2016 a handbook was published by the HRK (among others), providing concise information on the rights and duties of refugees who want to continue their studies in German higher education, including a chapter on admission. www.daad.de/medien/der-daad/handreichung-hochschulzugang-gef%C3%Bchtete.pdf

Example O: Toolkit for admission of refugees without documents

In the Netherlands a consortium of four higher education institutions together with the Dutch ENIC/NARIC centre developed a toolkit for admission of refugees without documents. The toolkit aims to assist higher education institutions in the Netherlands in developing a procedure that is in line with the LRC and Dutch law. In addition to information about the legal framework, the toolkit contains a flow chart describing the roles and responsibilities within higher education institutions, interview formats and links to other useful sources of information.

b) Recognition of prior learning

The results of the FAIR project show that the way recognition of prior learning (RPL) is structured depends on the national context. Whereas some institutions include RPL in the admissions procedure, others offer RPL on a post-enrolment basis (thus exempting students from parts of the study programme). Some institutions do not have clear procedures for RPL at all.

In line with the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning, the following is recommended:

- At the national level there should be legislation allowing higher education institutions to admit applicants on the basis of RPL and/or provide exemptions of parts of the programme on the basis of knowledge, understanding and skills acquired outside the formal education system.
- Higher education institutions should develop their own policy in implementing RPL procedures for foreign applicants and make it available in the recognition procedure.

Example P: Alternative recognition

When an applicant cannot be admitted directly on the basis of his/her qualification, Dutch Higher education institutions sometimes offer flexible forms of alternative recognition. Optional courses within a study programme can be used to fill the knowledge gaps. It may also be possible to enrol students in a preparatory year/foundation programme, or use sub-certificates to overcome deficiencies. In the latter case, institutions refer prospective students to (external) providers of sub-certificates.

c) Appeals procedure

Article III.5 of the LRC states that if recognition is withheld, or if no decision is taken, the applicant shall be able to make an appeal within a reasonable time limit. The results of the FAIR project show that not all higher education institutions offer the possibility to appeal. Therefore it is recommended that:

- All higher education institutions should have an appeals procedure which is specifically aimed at the recognition of qualifications, and all applicants with foreign qualifications should be informed about the existence of such a procedure.

Example Q: Explaining negative admission decisions in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands appeals procedures at higher education institutions are mandatory by law. Information about the formal appeals procedure is given to the applicant in the letter conveying the admission decision. In addition, some higher education institutions have a special telephone number. Applicants can contact this number for additional information and explanations in case of a negative admission decision. This often prevents lengthy and burdensome appeals procedures.

- At the national level, it should be considered whether an independent external appeal procedure might be feasible in order to guarantee a fair appeal.

Example R: Flanders' Council for Disputes

In Flanders the Council for Disputes regarding Decisions of Study Progress ("Raad voor Betwistingen inzake Studievoortgangbeslissingen", onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/studenten/klachten-en-problemen/beroep-aantekenen-bij-de-raad) is the external independent appeals body for recognition decisions taken by NARIC-Flanders. During the national FAIR meeting, a discussion was held about the need to authorise the same Council as competent appeals body for admission decisions taken by the Flemish higher education institutions as well.

5. Information available to applicants

The results of the FAIR project show that quick wins can be made regarding the information provision to applicants. At the start of the project, accurate and timely information about the admissions procedure was not always available. At the time of the second trial, substantial improvements were made both regarding the availability of online information and the direct communication to applicants by email and formal letters. In order to ensure the recognition procedure is transparent and fair (i.e. provides applicants the opportunity to present an argued case in the event of an appeal) the following is recommended:

- Public (online) information should be provided about all aspects of the recognition procedure, including the turnaround time mentioned above, procedures for refugees with no or insufficient supporting documentation, recognition of prior learning and the appeals procedure.

Example S: Information provision by the University of Ghent

The 'behind the scenes' webpage of the University of Ghent in Flanders gives concise information for applicants on the university's qualifications recognition procedure. See www.ugent.be/en/education/degree/practical/requirement

- Information provision on institutional recognition procedures should be consistent throughout all webpages of the higher education institution, and should also be available in a second widely spoken language. This is in itself also a push for institutions with a decentralised recognition system to ensure the institution has a unified practice and avoids differences between departments and faculties.
- Communication to individual applicants should be standardised (i.e. it is advised letters should have a single format and the same terminology should be used).
- Essential characteristics of the national education system which are relevant for admission of foreign applicants into higher education programmes should be explained and made available at the national level.

6. Quality assurance

The results of the FAIR project show that the quality assurance of the recognition process, both internally and externally, is in most cases not very developed. However, with the inclusion of Standard 1.4 in the revised *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2015)*, it will become increasingly important for higher education institutions to be able to show the quality of their recognition and admissions policy. ESG Standard 1.4 explicitly refers to the recognition of foreign qualifications.

In the context of the FAIR project, discussions were started on the conditions that allow for quality assurance of the recognition process and on the performance indicators that could be used to assess the quality of the recognition practice. Based on these discussions, the following is recommended:

Recommendation to the Ministry of Education and the ENIC/NARIC centres

- Familiarise higher education institutions with ESG 1.4 and support a national discussion about the implementation of internal and external mechanisms for quality control of recognition and admission procedures.

Example T: Revising the quality assurance system in Germany

The quality assurance system in Germany is currently being revised. While the details of the new system are under negotiation, it is clear that the responsibility of higher education institutions for building up an institutional quality culture will increase. An elaboration of existing procedures to ensure high quality, also in the recognition and admission process, is deemed likely.

Recommendation to the higher education institutions

- An information management system (for recognition decisions and processing times) is a prerequisite for improving quality assurance procedures.
- The higher education institution should define key performance indicators to benchmark and assess the quality of their admissions and recognition procedure, which may be used in the internal and external QA procedures. These performance indicators should be in line with the revised ESG standard 1.4.

Example U: Defining key performance indicators

During the national FAIR meeting in the Netherlands, participating higher education institutions reflected on key performance indicators to benchmark and measure the quality of recognition procedures. Several KPIs were mentioned:

- Turnaround time of applications
- Consistency of decision-making
- Communication of substantial differences
- Transparency of the recognition process
- Public information provision
- Cooperation with other national partners and ENIC/NARIC

It was agreed that higher education institutions should proactively start setting internal standards for QA of recognition procedures.

- Feedback from the faculties and programme directors on their recognition decisions and on the performance of foreign students should be provided in a systematic way to the admissions office, in order to fine-tune the requirements for students with foreign qualifications.

Example V: Feedback loop at Utrecht University

At Utrecht University information about drop-outs is shared with the admissions office. Whereas the project is still in the pilot phase, it is expected that this feedback loop can provide useful information on the chances of success of prospective students. This kind of information may inform future admissions policy at the university.

- This information may also be published on the admissions webpages, so that prospective students will be able to find clear information on the admission criteria.

7. Other bodies involved in recognition

In a number of the participating FAIR countries external bodies, besides the ENIC/NARIC centre, the Ministry of Education and higher education institutions, play a part in the recognition of foreign qualifications. In Germany recognition services are delivered by Uni-Assist, in Italy the embassies issue the *Dichiarazione di Valore in loco*, in Spain both national and regional authorities and the *Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED)* are involved and in Croatia recognition for access to the first-level cycle is the responsibility of the Educational and Teacher Training Agency.

After the first trial in the FAIR project, the Evaluation Body already noted that there is no predictable pattern for the role of these 'other bodies' in recognition and admission activities. Their role may depend on the level of the foreign qualification admission is sought for, whether the programme is open-access or selective, the provenance of the applicant, etc.

As the focus of FAIR was on the recognition practices of higher education institutions, it falls beyond the scope of the project to formulate tailored recommendations for the other stakeholders. What did become clear is that good coordination between all parties involved in recognition is of great importance for fast and fair recognition and for the introduction of elements of automatic recognition. Connecting these external bodies to the national recognition network is therefore an important first step in improving the national recognition structure.

In addition, the general recommendations as formulated for the higher education institutions are to a certain extent also applicable to other parties involved in day-to-day recognition of foreign qualifications. More specifically, these are:

- continuous training and capacity development of staff – in line with good practice as described in the EAR-HEI manual (see also recommendations under section 2 above);
- transparency about the organisations' role in the recognition process and about internal procedures, including criteria for recognition, turnaround times and appeals procedures (if applicable);
- attention to quality assurance of the recognition procedure.

Table 1: Roles and responsibilities per stakeholder group

	Ministry	ENIC/NARIC centre	HEI	Other bodies involved in recognition (if applicable)
1. National infrastructure	- Streamline national recognition infrastructure - Develop chart of procedures - Publish chart of procedures - Coordinate national recognition network/meetings including all stakeholders involved in recognition	Participate in national recognition network/meetings	HEI association/umbrella organisation to participate in national recognition network/meetings	Participate in national recognition network/meetings
2. Institutional infrastructure HEIs	- Inform HEIs and any other bodies involved in recognition that the LRC is a legal obligation - Promote 'recognition culture' through constant information provision about the principles of the LRC	- Explore how to better assist HEIs and any other bodies involved in recognition - Provide web page with tools to develop recognition procedure and to improve recognition practice	- Work in line with the LRC - Train all staff involved in recognition - Formulate a clear role division between central admissions office and faculties - Form a national platform of admissions officers	- Work in line with the LRC - Train all staff involved in recognition - Ensure alignment of procedures and transparent information provision to HEIs
3. Turnaround time	Inform HEIs and any other bodies involved in recognition about the importance of fast recognition procedures, as stipulated in the LRC	Advise on good practice as described in the EAR-HEI manual to speed up processing times	- Adopt good practice as described in the EAR-HEI manual - Speed up turnaround time - Publicise information about the turnaround time	- Adopt good practice as described in the EAR-HEI manual - Speed up turnaround time - Publicise information about the turnaround time
4. Undocumented students	Develop national recommendations on the implementation of Article VII in the LRC	Advise on good practice as described in the EAR-HEI manual on flexible procedures for undocumented students	Take (joint) efforts to develop flexible and efficient admissions procedures	Not applicable
5. RPL	Develop legislation allowing HEIs to admit applicants on the basis of RPL	Advise on good practice as described in the EAR-HEI manual on RPL	- Develop policy for RPL - Publicise RPL policy as part of recognition procedure	Not applicable
6. Appeals procedure	Consider the feasibility of an independent external appeals procedure	Advise on good practice as described in the EAR-HEI manual on appeals procedures	- Install internal appeals procedure - Publicise the appeals procedure	- Install internal appeals procedure - Publicise the appeals procedure

	Ministry	ENIC/NARIC centre	HEI	Other bodies involved in recognition (if applicable)
7. Information provision	■ Provide public (online) information about the national education system and the national recognition structure	■ Provide public (online) information about the national education system and the national recognition structure	■ Provide public (online) information about all aspects of the institutional recognition procedure ■ Make sure information provision is consistent and available in English ■ Standardise letters/emails to individual applicants	■ Provide public (online) information about your role in the recognition process ■ Make sure information provision is consistent and available in English
8. Quality assurance	■ Familiarise HEIs with ESG 1.4 ■ Support national discussion on implementation of ESG 1.4	■ Support national discussion on implementation of ESG 1.4	■ Implement information management system ■ Define key performance indicators ■ Ensure proper quality assurance mechanism ■ Gather systematic feedback from faculties and programme directors	■ Implement information management system ■ Define key performance indicators ■ Ensure proper quality assurance mechanism ■ Gather systematic feedback from faculties and programme directors

Part III – National Recommendations

This chapter summarises the national recommendations for each of the six countries participating in the FAIR project: Belgium (Flemish Community), Croatia, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain.

The national recommendations are formulated by the national FAIR coordinator (in most cases representatives of the national ENIC/NARIC centre or the Ministry of Education) in consultation with the country's participating higher education institutions.

During the FAIR National Exploitation Meetings that were held in all six participating countries between February and March 2017, the draft recommendations were further discussed with a wider group of stakeholders at the national level, including higher education institutions, national quality assurance agencies, student organisations and other bodies involved in recognition. The outcomes of those discussions are also reflected below.

1. Belgium (Flemish Community)

Mini executive summary

Four Flemish higher education institutions participated in the FAIR project: the University of Antwerp, Ghent University, KU Leuven and UC Leuven-Limburg. The Flemish Ministry of Education and Training acted as the national FAIR coordinator.

In Flanders, formal recognition of foreign qualifications is the responsibility of NARIC-Flanders. NARIC-Flanders' recognition decisions are legally binding, meaning that they offer an applicant the same rights to employment and/or further study as holders of qualifications from Flanders. However, higher education institutions can also take autonomous recognition decisions for the purpose of admission to their study programmes. If full recognition is not granted by NARIC-Flanders, the higher education institutions may grant partial recognition instead and offer supplementary courses.

The main challenges to recognition in Flanders are as follows:

- Faculties are highly autonomous in their recognition and admissions policy, resulting in little consistency and transparency at the central institutional level and high turnaround times.
- There is a need for information provision and training on the principles of the LRC and related Flemish legislation to all actors involved in recognition.
- There is a need to monitor the recognition procedures and develop internal quality assurance mechanisms.
- There is a need for clear and transparent appeals procedures.

During the FAIR project, improvements have been made to ensure consistent recognition procedures and better turnaround times for applicants, e.g. by updating the Education and Examination Code and enhancing institutional databases. Staff development programmes have been implemented as well. At some participating institutions action is underway to develop internal quality assurance mechanisms regarding the recognition procedure.

During the national FAIR meeting in Brussels, participants expressed the need for better cooperation between NARIC-Flanders and the higher education institutions, for instance by developing a shared database with recognition decisions. This would greatly add to the harmonisation of recognition decisions between and within Flemish higher education institutions. The need for the reintroduction of an external appeals body for recognition decisions taken by higher education institutions was also discussed. Lastly, it was agreed that Flanders Knowledge Area, together with the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, will organise regular national training sessions on the principles of the LRC and related legislation in Flanders.

For more details on the FAIR project in Flanders, see Annex D – *Country Reports*.

2. Croatia

Mini executive summary

Four Croatian higher education institutions participated in the FAIR project: the University of Zagreb, University of Split, University of Rijeka and Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek. The Croatian authorities were represented by the Ministry of Education. ENIC/NARIC Croatia acted as the national FAIR coordinator.

Croatian higher education institutions operate within national legislation which regulates the allocation and division of recognition and admission activities. Government agencies handle admission to the first-cycle programmes. The higher education institutions are responsible for recognition and admission to second-cycle programmes. As a result of this divide the findings and recommendations of the FAIR project in Croatia focus primarily on the latter (access to second-cycle programmes).

The main challenges to recognition in Croatia relate to:

1. the procedural separation of recognition and admission as stipulated by the Act on Recognition of Foreign Education Qualifications currently in force;
2. the existence of 'dual procedures' at Croatian higher education institutions. In line with the Act on Recognition of Foreign Education Qualifications, recognition is dealt with at central level, while admission is devolved to the faculties. In practice this role division is administratively complex and time-consuming, which sometimes causes applicants to fail the deadline for admission;
3. a lack of English-language information provision on relevant legal texts and institutional admission requirements and procedures;
4. recognition of prior learning and admission of refugees without documentation.

The FAIR project in Croatia provided an opportunity for the Ministry of Education, ENIC/NARIC Croatia and the higher education institutions to jointly identify (legal) bottlenecks in relation to recognition. During the FAIR project, the Ministry of Education drafted an amendment to the Act on Recognition of Foreign Education Qualifications. The amended act introduces the possibility to merge the recognition of foreign qualifications at higher education institutions with their admissions procedure. Adoption is expected by the end of 2017.

During the national FAIR meeting in Zagreb it was agreed to maintain the Croatian FAIR network after the lifetime of the project. Future activities of the network will include a round table on the implementation of the amended act and developing procedures related to the recognition of prior learning, notably in reference to refugees.

For more details on the FAIR project in Croatia, see Annex D – *Country Reports*.

3. Italy

Mini executive summary

Four Italian universities participated in the FAIR project: the University of Bologna, University of Palermo, University of Rome La Sapienza and University of Trento. The Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI) was delegated by the Ministry of Education to join. CIMEA-NARIC Italia acted as the national FAIR coordinator.

In Italy, academic recognition is done by the higher education institutions. CIMEA-NARIC Italia offers free advice to the admissions officers of higher education institutions via email. In addition, higher education institutions can ask applicants to request a comparability statement from CIMEA-NARIC Italia, which attests to the level and academic rights of a qualification. Formally other organisations do not play a role in the procedures for academic recognition in Italy. In practice, however, the *Dichiarazione di Valore in loco*, which is issued by Italian Embassies, is part of the recognition process. Although this declaration is not mandatory by law and is issued as an instrument of transparency, the universities often request it in a compulsory way when foreign students apply.

The main challenges to recognition in Italy relate to:

1. confusion at the higher education institutions about the status of the *Dichiarazione di Valore in loco* (mandatory or not);
2. the need for standardisation of recognition procedures within higher education institutions' decentralised structures and the use of central databases;
3. the need for capacity development of admissions officers and others involved in the recognition of foreign qualifications, in line with the principles of the LRC;
4. clear and transparent information provision to applicants (also in English).

During the FAIR project, important steps were made to draft institutional guidelines on recognition of foreign qualifications and to create and/or update central databases at the Italian higher education institutions. English-language websites with standardised online application forms were developed. In addition, training courses for admissions officers were organised. Although the Evaluation Body did not explicitly mention this as an area of improvement, the Italian higher education institutions also put in place procedures to admit refugees with insufficient documentation. The *Direzione generale per lo studente, lo sviluppo e l'internazionalizzazione della formazione superiore* for the year 2017/2018 (Government directorate for student affairs, development and the internationalisation of higher education) was translated for the first time into English in order to give clear and transparent information also to non-Italian-speaking applicants.

At the National Exploitation meeting of the FAIR project in Rome, organised under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research, the new government directorate was presented and the non-mandatory character of the *Dichiarazione di Valore in loco* was explained. Participants expressed the need for continued coordination among higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to smoothen the visa procedures and the admission of foreign students.

For more details on the FAIR project in Italy, see Annex D – Country Reports.

4. Germany

Mini executive summary

Three German higher education institutions participated in the FAIR project: the Universität Bremen, Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg and Hochschule Harz in Wernigerode. The authorities were represented by the Ministry of Education of Saxony-Anhalt. The Hochschulrektorenkonferenz acted as the German country coordinator.

In Germany, decisions on recognition are taken by the higher education institutions. The German NARIC (ZAB) has an advisory role and provides information on foreign education systems. The ZAB database with foreign qualifications (ANABIN) is mostly used by admissions officers at higher education institutions as a source of reference. Alternatively, higher education institutions can also decide to outsource the assessment of foreign qualifications to Uni-Assist, an organisation that provides tailor-made credential evaluations. Especially smaller institutions often opt for Uni-Assist to save resources in terms of personnel and money. The services of Uni-Assist are free of charge for the higher education institutions. Applicants pay a fee.

In Germany, problems with recognition may arise from difficulties at the institutional level rather than the legislative or national level. The main challenges at the institutional level relate to:

1. transparent and structured processes and responsibilities;
2. integration of recognition processes into institutional quality development;
3. evaluation of qualifications based on competences rather than on formal criteria;
4. transparent information for applicants and communication.

During the FAIR project the three participating institutions have taken steps to improve their recognition procedures and to make them more coherent and transparent. Information for foreign applicants on the institutional websites has been critically reviewed and adapted. Special attention was given to the recognition of refugees' qualifications.

With the German accreditation system currently under review, timely discussions were held on the need to integrate recognition procedures in the quality assurance system of higher education institutions during the national FAIR meeting in Berlin. Here it was also agreed that recognition should be conceived as an integral part of access and admission to the institution, instead of a formal entrance check. During the meeting, examples of good practice were shared.

For more details on the FAIR project in Germany, see Annex D – *Country Reports*.

5. The Netherlands

Mini executive summary

Four Dutch higher education institutions participated in the FAIR project: NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences, Utrecht University and Rotterdam School of Management (Erasmus University). The Dutch authorities were represented by the Ministry of Education. Nuffic (the Dutch ENIC/NARIC) acted as the national FAIR coordinator.

In the Netherlands, recognition decisions are taken by the higher education institutions. The Dutch ENIC/NARIC has an advisory role and provides online information on foreign education systems and recognition of foreign qualifications. Admissions officers working at higher education institutions can also request a tailor-made evaluation by the Dutch ENIC/NARIC, free of charge. No other

organisations play a role in the procedures for academic recognition in the Netherlands.

The main challenges to recognition in the Netherlands are:

1. clear information provision on the binary education system and access requirements to research universities/universities of applied sciences;
2. transparent and coherent institutional recognition procedures;
3. the need for a special procedure to admit refugees without documents;
4. the need for internal quality assurance mechanisms to monitor institutional recognition practice.

During the FAIR project, Nuffic developed a webpage with information on recognition of foreign qualifications and a short video explaining the Dutch education system. Higher education institutions can refer prospective students to this information. The higher education institutions further streamlined their recognition and admission procedures by reviewing the task division between the faculties and the central admissions office and making agreements about turnaround times. Online information provision for foreign students was also improved.

During the national FAIR meeting, three main themes were discussed: evaluation methodology, institutional infrastructure and QA of recognition procedures. With the introduction of ESG 1.4 in 2015 (the QA standard referring to recognition of foreign qualifications), the need for internal quality assurance mechanisms increased. Several performance indicators that could be used to benchmark the quality of recognition and to measure improvements were identified. Participants also discussed the importance of a good admission procedure for refugees without documents. However, instead of publishing the procedure online, it was preferred to appoint a contact person to inform refugees about the possibilities and the procedures at hand.

For more details on the FAIR project in the Netherlands, see Annex D – *Country Reports*.

6. Spain

Mini executive summary

Three Spanish higher education institutions participated in the FAIR project: the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Universidad Politécnica de Valencia and Universidad de Sevilla. During the preparations for the baseline assessment a fourth FAIR partner, the University of Girona, decided to leave the project. The reason for withdrawal was the limited scope for changes to standing recognition and admission procedures.

The Spanish authorities were represented by the Ministry of Education. Naric Spain acted as the national FAIR coordinator.

In Spain different recognition and admission procedures are applied, depending on the kind of qualification recognition is sought for (general secondary, TVET, artistic education or higher education), the level of the study programme (bachelor's or master's), the kind of educational institution (public or private) and the district where the institution is located. Depending on the relevant procedure, higher education institutions either take a recognition decision themselves or other stakeholders may be involved.

The main challenges to recognition in Spain are:

1. the many stakeholders involved in the recognition and admission process, making it difficult for an outsider to understand the system. The Spanish stakeholders don't perceive this as a problem;
2. the need for transparent and structured institutional processes and responsibilities;

3. the need for capacity development of admissions officers and others involved in the recognition of foreign qualifications, in line with the principles of the LRC;
4. the need for clear and transparent information provision to applicants (in English).

During the FAIR project the Spanish higher education institutions increased the coordination between faculties and the administrative centre, amongst others by unifying the admission deadlines and by developing recognition guidelines for master's programme directors. English-language information provision has been improved. Finally, the coordination between the Spanish Ministry of Education and the Spanish universities to establish some common guidelines for the recognition of applicants in a refugee-like situation is envisaged.

No national FAIR meeting was organised, as the Spanish partners agreed that the general outcomes of the FAIR project did not provide sufficient room for additional improvements.

For more details on the FAIR project in Spain, see Annex D – *Country Reports*.

Annex A

List of FAIR partners

Annex A List of FAIR partners

Organisation	City	Country
Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (Project coordinator)	The Hague	The Netherlands
European University Association (EUA)	Brussels	Belgium
Danish Agency for Higher Education	Copenhagen	Denmark
European Consortium for Accreditation	The Hague	The Netherlands
Ministry of Science, Education and Sports	Zagreb	Croatia
Agency for Science and Higher Education	Zagreb	Croatia
University of Zagreb	Zagreb	Croatia
University of Split	Split	Croatia
University of Osijek	Osijek	Croatia
University of Rijeka	Rijeka	Croatia
Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte	Madrid	Spain
NARIC Spain	Madrid	Spain
Universidad Rey Juan Carlos	Mostoles - Madrid	Spain
Universidad de Sevilla	Sevilla	Spain
Universitat Politècnica de València	València	Spain
Fondazione CRUI	Rome	Italy
Associazione CIMEA	Rome	Italy
Università di Bologna	Bologna	Italy
Università degli studi di Trento	Trento	Italy
Università degli studi Palermo	Palermo	Italy
Università degli Studi di Roma 'La Sapienza'	Rome	Italy
Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming	Brussel	Belgium
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven	Leuven	Belgium
Universiteit Antwerpen	Antwerpen	Belgium
Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven	Leuven	Belgium
Universiteit Gent	Ghent	Belgium
Hochschulrektorenkonferenz	Bonn	Germany
Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Economics Saxony-Anhalt	Magdeburg	Germany
Universität Bremen	Bremen	Germany
Hochschule Harz	Wernigerode	Germany
Carl von Ossietzky Universität (UOL)	Oldenburg	Germany
Nuffic (Dutch ENIC/NARIC)	The Hague	The Netherlands
Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam	Rotterdam	The Netherlands
Universiteit Utrecht	Utrecht	The Netherlands
NHTV	Breda	The Netherlands
Hogeschool Zuyd	Heerlen/Sittard/Maastricht	The Netherlands

Annex B

FAIR assessment protocol

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	Full recognition: the credentials submitted by the applicant have been fully recognised by your institution. 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. Denial of recognition: the credentials submitted by the applicant were not recognised.
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

Annex C

FAIR scorecard

Baseline assessment form FAIR

1. Background Information on the respondent

1. Name of your institution				
2. Name of your office				
3. Contact person and email				
4. Is your office involved in:	☐ only recognition of qualifications	☐ only admissions (please answer question 5 to 9 from the perspective of your institution)	☐ both recognition of qualifications and admissions	
5. Your credential evaluations are made for	☐ a specific programme	☐ a specific Faculty or School	☐ the entire institution	☐ a particular category of applicants (e.g. part-time students, open/distance learners, etc.)
6. Your office is located at	☐ Central level	☐ Faculty level	☐ Department level	☐ other Please specify
7. You make credential evaluations for entry to	☐ Associate degree level	☐ Bachelor level	☐ Master level	☐ Doctorate level
	☐ Other programmes			
8. You handle applications from	☐ worldwide	☐ a specific global region Please specify:	☐ a particular country Please specify:	☐ a particular category of institutions Please specify:
9. Indicate how many credential evaluations you have made last year at	Associate degree level: [nr]	Bachelor level: [nr]	Master level: [nr]	Doctorate level: [nr]
10. Does your office make the final recognition decision?	☐ Yes	☐ No Please specify who makes the final decision:		
11. Does your office make the final admission decision?	☐ Yes	☐ No Please specify who makes the final decision:		

Recognition process description

NB: If you have different recognition procedures for admissions to different programme levels (e.g. Bachelor and Master), please copy this section and complete it for all procedures

1. General Recognition Procedure

1. Does your office have a recognition procedure in place?	☐ Yes	☐ No			
2. If your office has a recognition procedure in place, is it formal and consistent within the institution?	☐ Yes	☐ No			
3. If your office has a recognition procedure in place, is this procedure separately formulated from the admissions procedure?	☐ Yes	☐ No	☐ Depends on discipline	☐ Depends on country of origin	☐ N/A
4. If your office has a recognition procedure in place, is this procedure aligned with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention ¹ ?	☐ Yes	☐ Partly	☐ No	☐ Don't know	☐ N/A
5. Do you have a special procedure in place for qualifications based on joint degrees?	☐ Yes Please specify:	☐ No			
6. Do you have a special procedure in place for qualifications based on a flexible learning path and recognition of prior learning (RPL)?	☐ Yes Please specify:	☐ No			
7. Do you have a special procedure in place for qualification based on transnational education or open/distance learning?	☐ Yes Please specify:	☐ No			
8. Do you have a special procedure in place for qualification holders without documentation (e.g. refugees)?	☐ Yes Please specify:	☐ No			
9. Is your recognition procedure quality assured? ²	☐ No	☐ Yes. Please specify:	☐ Don't know		
10. Are your recognition decisions documented (e.g. for future reference)	☐ Yes	☐ No			
11. If applicable, how are your recognition decisions documented?	Please specify (e.g. electronic database, filing system, etc.)				

¹ Section IV – Recognition of qualifications giving access to higher education of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region Lisbon, 11.IV.1997 of the Council Of Europe and UNESCO

² E.g. Examined as part of internal and/or external quality assurance procedures

2. Transparency

1. Information on the recognition procedure is publicly available for applicants, stakeholders and the general public	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always
I. including the time normally required to process the applications	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always
II. If your procedure is publicly available, please provide the source (e.g. web link):				
2. Information on the recognition criteria is publicly available for applicants, stakeholders and the general public	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always
I. If your criteria are publicly available, please provide the source (e.g. web link):	Provide the source (e.g. web link)....			
3. Clear information on the status of their application is provided to applicants.	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always
I. If applicable, how is information on status provided to applicants?	Please specify: on request / only if things go wrong / online available / automatic messages sent? / via agent / personalized messages sent			

3. Evaluation

Principles

1. Foreign qualifications are recognized unless there is a substantial difference.	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always
2. Applicants are offered the possibility to appeal internally against the recognition decision	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always
3. Applicants are offered the possibility to appeal externally against the recognition decision	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always

Procedure

4. Quality assurance and accreditation systems are sufficient evidence of compliance with quality standards.	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always
5. The status of the programme and institution(s) through which the programme was awarded is verified.	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always

6. In case of reasonable doubt, the authenticity of the documents is checked, using internal and if necessary, external verification methods.	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always
7. Qualifications based on a flexible learning path, recognition of prior learning (RPL) or open/distance learning are evaluated in the same way as a traditional qualification.	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always
8. Qualifications based on transnational education are evaluated in the same way as a traditional qualification.	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always
9. Qualifications based on joint degrees are evaluated in the same way as a traditional qualification.	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always
10. Is this service free of charge or is a fee requested?	☐ No fee	☐ Fee		
11. In what format do the documents need to be submitted?	☐ Paper	☐ Paper and Electronic	☐ Electronic	
12. Do you ask for certified or legalised translations?	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always
13. Do you accept documents in a widely spoken language?	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always
I. Please indicate which language(s)	...			
14. What documents are required to submit the application? Please specify, and add rows where necessary:	...			
.....				
.....				
.....				

Tools and sources

15. If available, the NQF is used to understand the level, learning outcomes, and workload of qualifications.	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always
16. Credits are accepted as an indication of the load of study completed.	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always
17. The distribution of grades in a particular education system is taken into account in those procedures where grades are an element in the evaluation.	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always
18. Sources on education systems are actively collected, updated and maintained.	☐ Never	☐ Sometimes	☐ Often	☐ Always
19. Please list the tools and sources you use for your evaluations, add rows if necessary:				
.....				
.....				
.....				

Scorecard³

Nr	Country of origin	Level of qualification	Specific type of qualification	Level applied to	Application received (date)	Form of recognition (FR PR DR)	Decision taken (date)	Reason	Applicant informed (date)	Reason communicated to applicant	Specify any delay	Admission offered

³ For a detailed explanation of all scorecard entries please refer to the Annex of the Experimentation Protocol

Table 1

Please describe the recognition process from the moment the qualification is submitted by the applicant until the decision. Should the process differ according to the cycle (i.e. bachelor or master studies), please provide two separate tables, one for application to the first cycle, another for applications to the second cycle.

	Office	Central or devolved level in institution?	Role/Action taken in recognition process	Average time
1				
2				
3				
Etc..				

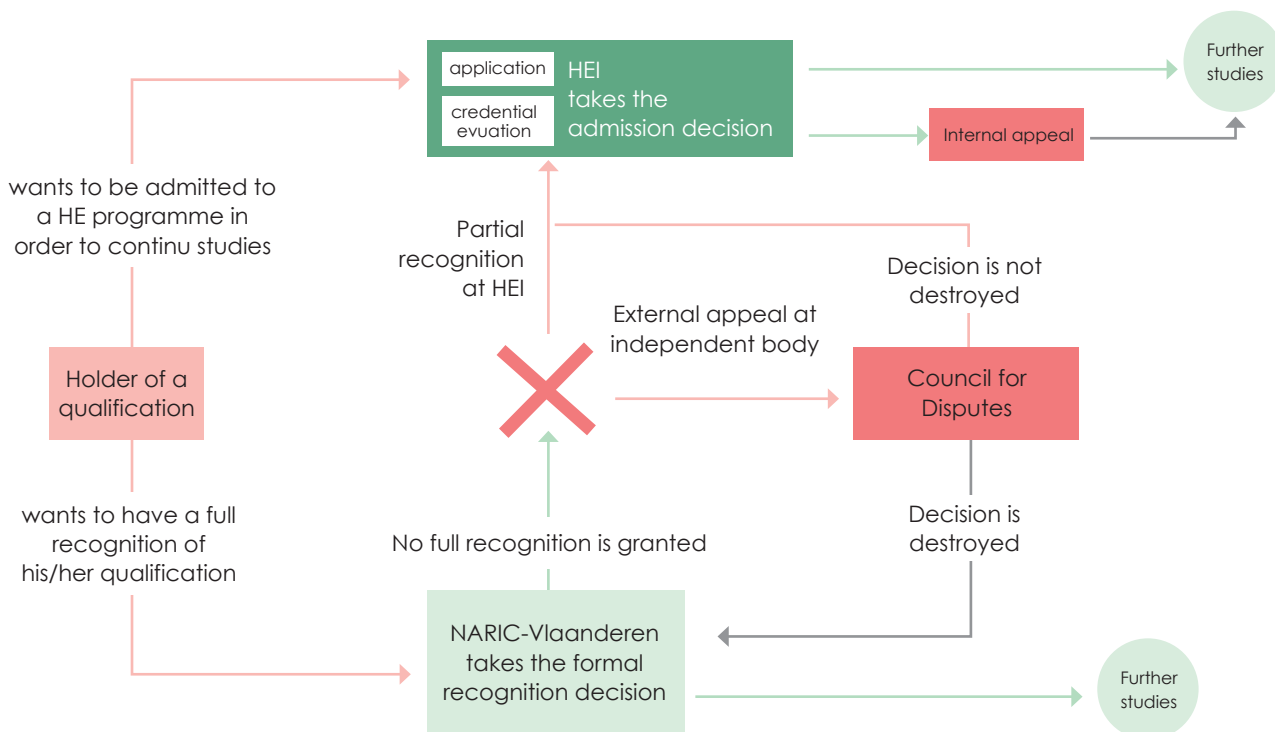
Add rows if necessary

Annex D

Country reports

1. Belgium – Flemish Community

Overview of academic recognition structure (including flowchart)



- Decisions on full recognition are taken by NARIC-Flanders. These decisions are formal decisions and legally binding.
- Decisions on partial recognition and on admission to the higher education programmes are taken by the individual higher education institutions.
- Taking into account RPL (Recognition on Prior Learning) and relevant professional experience it may happen that the higher education institutions fully recognise a foreign HE degree with their own higher education degree.
- The higher education institutions may also facilitate the access to a particular bachelor's programme on the basis of deviating admission requirements, either based on humanitarian grounds, on medical, psychological or social grounds or on the overall level of the candidate, which is assessed by the board of the higher education institution. The regulations on the deviating admission requirements may be obtained from the institution and have to be stipulated in their Education and Examination Regulation.
- There is no 'numerus clausus' in Flanders; however, every student who wishes to register for Dentistry and Medicine must pass an entrance exam organised by the Ministry of Education and Training.
- Students who are keen to follow higher artistic education must first pass a skills test (artistic entrance exam) organised by the higher education institutions if they wish to enter a programme in the fields of study 'Audiovisual and Visual Arts', 'Music' and 'Performing Arts'.
- An assessment of the knowledge of the teaching language may also be required.

Who deals with recognition and admission cases in Flanders?

Admission to bachelor's programmes	Higher education institutions
Admission to master's programmes	Higher education institutions
Admission to PhDs	Higher education institutions
Full recognition of secondary school leaving certificates	NARIC-Flanders, part of Ministry
Full recognition of bachelor's degrees	NARIC-Flanders, part of Ministry
Full recognition of master's degrees	NARIC-Flanders, part of Ministry
Full recognition of PhDs	NARIC-Flanders, part of Ministry

Outcomes of the field trials

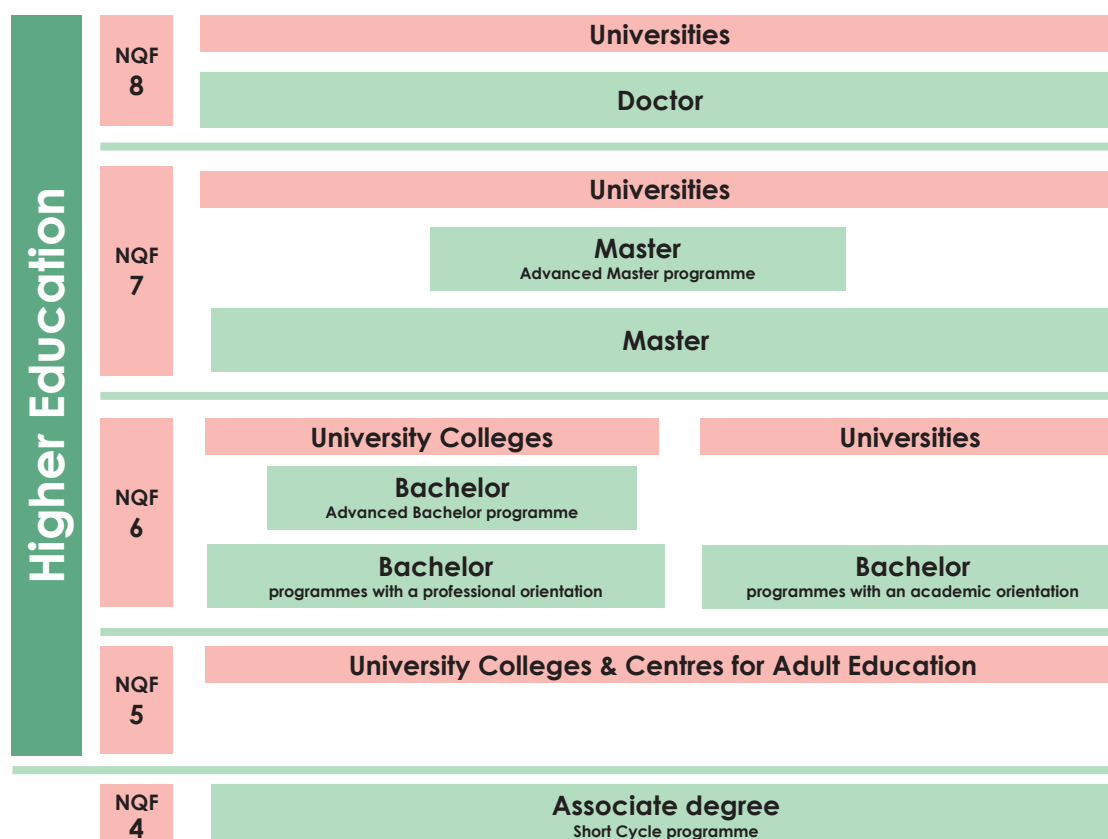
Trial 1: the baseline assessment at institutional and national level (EUA reports)

The following four higher education institutions from Flanders participated in the field trials of the FAIR project:

- University of Antwerp (UA)
- Ghent University (UG)
- KU Leuven (KUL)
- UC Leuven-Limburg (UCLL)

UA, UG and KUL are research universities and UCLL is a university of applied science.

Flanders has the following binary HE system and recent legislation has taken the bachelor's degree programmes with an academic orientation and the master's degree programmes previously provided by the University Colleges and relocated them, legally if not physically, in the universities:



Non-EEA applicants

International applicants from non-LRC countries remain very much a separate category. They do not benefit from the statutory automatic recognition which links Flanders to the French Community and German-speaking Community in Belgium, to Luxembourg and the Netherlands ('Benelux'). As a result, they do not benefit from the correlated open, as opposed to selective, access. Nor do they benefit from what is effectively a weaker mode of automatic recognition.

One expression of this separate status is their formal exclusion from opportunities for the recognition of prior learning. Two factors may play a role in this: the absence of a developing participation agenda; and the fact that the four higher education institutions have no problems recruiting and do not adopt obviously competitive postures in respect of each other. Even so, non-EEA students should not be excluded from what elsewhere has become an accepted mode of academic and educational progression.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL)

Another factor bearing on the question of RPL is that the Flemish higher education institutions (except UG) delay its consideration and implementation until students are already enrolled and have obtained certification of English-language competence. The reason they do this is that RPL is a labour- and time-intensive process.

The turnaround time

It is notable that all four institutions have difficulties specifying and/or meeting a target turnaround time, mainly as a result of the amount of faculties and study programmes and their deferring entry requirements. The central admissions offices are conscious of the problems this poses. The reality is that until faculty staff become aware of the need to align their practice with the LRC, the universities will be unable to state publicly what their recognition and admission procedures are and which bodies are responsible for them.

UG's 'behind the scenes' web page is a laudable step in the right direction.

LRC

Implementing and/or publicising an appeals procedure as envisaged by the LRC is another point of attention for all four institutions.

Overview of type of changes proposed by institutions (roadmaps)

The following objectives were formulated in the roadmaps of the four Flemish higher education institutions participating in the FAIR project:

- organising update sessions on LRC;
- really implementing the LRC principles in the admission and assessment procedures;
- follow-up admissions procedure for refugees without documentation (organised on the level of VLIR, the Flemish Inter-University Council);
- participation in update sessions on credential evaluation, like participating in EAIE Training Sessions;
- improving monitoring to ensure speedier delivery of application results;
- providing applicants with more transparency on the application process and increasing the publicly available information on recognition;
- developing internal QA for the admission decisions;
- informing, clarifying and developing the appeals procedure;
- digitalisation of the application procedure and providing electronic application with a central database for foreign applicants;

- providing more information and details regarding the admission procedures for each degree programme;
- creating a mechanism for assuring the quality and fairness of the decisions taken at faculty level, for example by creating a database of previous cases and really indicating the substantial difference in case of negative recommendations.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Education and Training recommended the following:

- applying the same recognition principles described in the LRC as NARIC-Flanders does for every higher education qualification awarded in every country, also for the non-member states of the Council of Europe and UNESCO/Cepes;
- appointing an external appeals body for recognition and admission decisions taken by the Flemish higher education institutions.

Trial 2: overview of the impact assessment (EUA reports)

The seven main outcomes of trial 2 for Flanders are as follows:

- 1) The higher education institutions in Flanders have to apply the principles of the LRC from 1 September 2009 onwards, but there is still work to do regarding the application of the LRC, the information provided on recognition (in English), the turnaround time for applications and the recognition of qualifications issued in third countries.
- 2) The recognition decisions taken at faculty level and the recognition practice at the central level of higher education institutions sometimes differs too much.
- 3) The recognition procedures for applicants with no documentation, such as refugees, should be improved.
- 4) Equal treatment of first-cycle level applicants and second-cycle level applicants is not ensured, because the admission requirements for bachelor's programmes are more general (e.g. a secondary school leaving certificate) than the admission requirements for master's programmes (e.g. not all bachelor's degrees give direct access and admission to a master's degree programme in Law).
- 5) A competent appeals body for access and admission decisions taken by the Flemish higher education institutions is lacking.
- 6) The binary structure at bachelor's programme level sometimes causes difficulties in recognising foreign bachelor's degrees obtained after unitary bachelor's programmes (and vice versa).
- 7) RPL is only available when students are enrolled, and not as an instrument for access to a programme for prospective students.

Recommendations on how institutional procedures could be further improved

Based on the Evaluation Body's final report on the impact assessment of the FAIR project and on the individual reports for the four participating Flemish higher education institutions, the following points for improvement are recommended:

Institutional infrastructure

- In order to increase the awareness of the LRC among staff working at higher education institutions, the Department of Education and Training and/or the higher education institutions will organise (more) information sessions regarding the LRC, the Benelux Decision and the project 'Automatic recognition of degrees in higher education', which concerns the automatic recognition of higher education degrees from Portugal, Denmark and Poland in Flanders. The higher education institutions' admissions web pages should clearly link to the LRC and these automatic recognition decisions.

- The higher education institutions should apply the LRC principles to non-member states of the Council of Europe and UNESCO/Cepes, just as NARIC-Flanders is also legally obliged to do for every higher education qualification awarded in every country. The Department of Education and Training is willing to adapt legislation to reflect this.
- First-cycle-level applicants and second-cycle-level applicants should be treated equally.
- Admissions offices should establish direct contact with relevant staff members of the faculties and programmes for which they work, and they should ensure that all staff involved in recognition is aware of their role and responsibility in the process, including keeping to time limits (taking actions in order to shorten the turnaround time for handling applications).
- Staff working with application files of foreign applicants should be trained in the good practice of recognition, available via manuals and training platforms of the ENIC/NARIC networks and/or offered by NARIC-Flanders or the Department of Education and Training.
- RPL should be available for all students, not only for EEA students or enrolled students.

Information available to applicants

- The higher education institutions in Flanders are advised to be more clear and transparent regarding admission/recognition decisions taken at all faculty levels and the admission/recognition practice at the central level of higher education institutions.
- Non-recognition or non-admission decisions should include sufficient information regarding the substantial difference (in the email) to the non-admitted applicant.
- An upgrade of information tools is needed, such as adjusting the websites regarding the recognition procedures (in English).
- A simple flowchart of the admissions and recognition procedure should be developed by the Department of Education and Training in cooperation with the four higher education institutions, to be used by all the higher education institutions, explaining the various steps in the process and explaining the roles of the higher education institutions and NARIC-Flanders regarding access, admission and the recognition of foreign qualifications. This flowchart should be published on the admissions pages of the higher education institutions, which also provides further information on the principles of the LRC.
- The binary system of higher education in Flanders should also be clearly explained on the admissions pages of the higher education institutions. The fact that a bachelor's was obtained in a unitary HE system should not be considered automatically as a substantial difference for having access and admission to master's programmes in Flanders.
- There should be more transparency on the internal appeals procedure.
- An external appeals body (e.g. the Raad voor Betwistingen inzake Studievoortgangbeslissingen) should be authorised (again) as being the competent appeals body for access and admission decisions taken by the Flemish higher education institutions.

Persons with insufficient or no supporting documentation

- Since under the current legislation NARIC-Flanders has to offer an adaptable flexible recognition procedure for refugees and may also ask experts to conduct an interview with refugees, it is recommendable that the higher education institutions, in cooperation with NARIC-Flanders, the Department of Education and Training, the Flemish University College Council and the Flemish Interuniversity Council, also improve the recognition procedures for applicants with no documentation, as is mostly the case for refugees.

Turnaround time

- The higher education institutions in Flanders should take actions to shorten the turnaround time for handling applications.
- By only evaluating the four main elements of a qualification (level, quality, workload and learning outcomes), like NARIC-Flanders does, the higher education institutions can shorten the turnaround time for handling applications.
- Thanks to the automatic recognition of the International Baccalaureate Diploma and the European Baccalaureate Diploma, the holders have direct access to higher education in Flanders.
- Automatic recognition in Flanders of higher education degrees from within the Benelux and soon also the automatic recognition of higher education degrees from Portugal, Denmark and Poland means the time to evaluate the credentials to grant holders of these degrees access and admission to study programmes in Flanders will be substantially reduced.

Quality assurance

- The Flemish Ministry of Education and Training should, besides international meetings, also organise information sessions at the higher education institutions or at its office in Brussels. The topic of these sessions is to be the legal recognition tools, like the LRC, and the implementation of the LRC principles in Flemish legislation.
- All higher education institutions should use the flowchart of the admissions and recognition procedure, explaining the various steps in the process and explaining the roles of the higher education institutions and NARIC-Flanders regarding access, admission and the recognition of foreign qualifications. Feedback from the faculties should be provided in order to optimise the information on access requirements for students with foreign qualifications.
- The higher education institutions should define performance indicators to assess the quality of their admissions and recognition procedure, which should be used in the institutional QA system.

Outcomes of the national exploitation meeting

The answers, remarks and suggestions of the audience and the speakers regarding the following three questions are as follows:

(1) The more automatic recognition, the fairer and more flexible recognition procedures will be.

- The more automatic recognition, the fairer and more flexible recognition procedures for NARIC-Flanders will be. However, such automatic recognition concerns only the level and this is not sufficient for granting automatic admission to specific higher education programmes; certainly not for particular master's programmes.
- What is the definition of 'recognition' and 'admission'? Does an admission to further studies include a (formal) recognition of the foreign qualification? A non-formal status is comfortable for the higher education institutions to deal with refugee applications.
- Since the Flemish and foreign (higher) education programmes change frequently, it remains necessary to check the programmes leading to the foreign qualifications regularly. The information available regarding the foreign degree programmes should be systematically updated.
- The quality of the recognition procedure is part of the internal and external quality check of the higher education institution.
- NARIC-Flanders is focusing their recognition decisions too much on the needs of the labour market. More cooperation with the Flemish higher education institutions is needed.
- A shared database of all the recognition decisions taken by the 'big' higher education institutions will be very helpful for the 'small' higher education institutions.

- Despite being automatic, automatic recognition procedures take a lot of time and effort.
- A very useful source of information regarding foreign HE systems is the Nuffic database: www.nuffic.nl/#tab-buitenlandse-onderwijssystemen. Will Flanders use this database as a model or create a Flemish version of it?

Conclusions (contradictive reactions)

- The higher education institutions in Flanders should no longer be autonomous regarding this matter, because they are too selective and do not guarantee a FAIR access/admission.
- Granting access and admission to HE programmes is and should stay an exclusive part of the autonomy of the Flemish higher education institutions.

(2) Will harmonising the recognition procedures at the individual higher education institutions and the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training be an improvement of the recognition procedure?

- There are so many different educational systems worldwide and so many different learning paths to higher education programmes worldwide. Using previous cases and creating a database accessible to all higher education institutions and NARIC-Flanders will improve the recognition procedure and the consistency of all the recognition decisions taken by the higher education institutions and NARIC-Flanders. This will also prevent a holder of a foreign qualification from not being admitted to HE programme "A" at higher education institution "X" in Flanders while being admitted to that HE programme "A" at higher education institution "Y" in Flanders.
- Getting adequate access to information regarding non-EU qualifications giving access to HE is not easy. Shall we use the DHO (Database Higher education)?
- May the higher education institutions use the study results (grades) as a criterion for granting access? In the LRC, the Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures and Flemish legislation, this is not mentioned as a criterion.

Conclusion

- Organising information and training sessions regarding the LRC and other legal frameworks regarding the recognition of foreign HE qualifications is recommended.
- Flanders Knowledge Area volunteers to organise information sessions with real case studies in cooperation with the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training on a regular basis.

(3) Should the Raad voor Betwistingen inzake studievoortgangbeslissingen (again) be the formal appeals body for recognition decisions taken by the individual higher education institutions?

- In many higher education institutions in Flanders there is no appeals procedure and if there is one, the appeals procedure is internal and informal.
- Having no appeals body for recognition decisions is in contradiction with the LRC.
- The disadvantage of the Raad voor Betwistingen inzake studievoortgangbeslissingen being the appeals body was that the decisions were only destroyed and that the higher education institutions had to take new decisions within a short period of time.

Conclusion

- Only denying access to the HE programme in the decision taken is indeed not appropriate. The reasons should be described properly.
- The autonomy of the higher education institutions in Flanders regarding this issue should be maintained. There is (and this should remain so) a difference between the recognition of HE degrees as such and granting access and admission to HE programmes at higher education institutions.

Conclusions of the conference

- The difference between academic recognition, which is the recognition of foreign (higher) education degrees, and professional recognition, which is the recognition of regulated professions in the European Economic Area, should be regularly explained in detail by organising information sessions. The Department of Education and Training will do so.
- Officially and in accordance with the legal framework Flanders has an open access to HE, but in practice this is not easy to realise.
- Appropriate and updated information regarding the foreign educational systems at non-HE level is needed.
- In accordance with the LRC there should be an appeals body, but this should not necessarily be the Raad voor betwistingen inzake studievoortgangsbepalingen in Flanders. The appeals body should also be competent to take new decisions, and not only destroy the recognition decisions of the HEIs.
- The Department of Education and Training fully supports Flanders Knowledge Area in organising information sessions with real case studies on a regular basis.
- Sharing databases of all the recognition decisions taken by higher education institutions and creating a common one available for all the higher education institutions will be very helpful improving the consistency of all the access decisions taken in Flanders.

2. Croatia

Overview of the academic recognition structure (including flowchart)

Admission to first-cycle programmes

Prospective applicants to undergraduate study programmes in Croatia who hold foreign secondary school diplomas from general, gymnasium and art secondary schools submit requests for recognition of their educational qualifications to the Educational and Teacher Training Agency, and those who hold foreign secondary school diploma from vocational secondary schools submit requests for recognition of their educational qualifications to the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education.

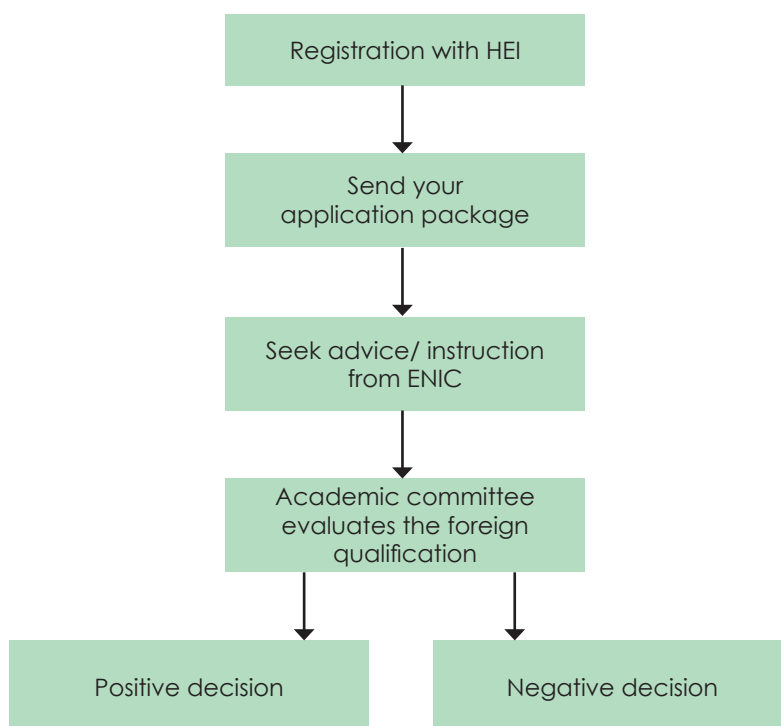
Prospective students who apply to undergraduate study programmes as degree-seeking students and who have completed the minimum of four years of secondary education outside Croatia can apply to higher education institutions in Croatia using the Central Application System. Only some higher education institutions require applicants to pass additional entrance classification exams.

Admission to second-cycle programmes (including flowchart)

- Decisions on recognition and access to second-cycle programmes are taken by higher education institutions.
- Evaluation of foreign qualifications may be done by the Academic Committee, with the assistance or recommendations of ENIC/NARIC Croatia, or a tailor-made evaluation by ENIC/NARIC Croatia may be requested.
- Other organisations do not play any role in the procedures for academic recognition in Croatia.

The steps in the academic recognition procedure are the following:

1. Registration with the higher education institution
2. Applicant must send application package to the Office for Academic Recognition



3. The Office for Academic Recognition seeks advice/instructions from ENIC/NARIC office
4. The Academic Committee evaluates the foreign qualification
5. The applicant obtains a legally binding decision on recognition

Outcomes of the field trials

Trial 1: the baseline assessment at institutional and national level (EUA reports)

The following four higher education institutions from Croatia participated in the field trials of the FAIR project: the University of Zagreb, University of Split, University of Rijeka and Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek.

Croatian higher education institutions operate within national legislation which regulates the allocation and division of recognition and admission activities. Government agencies handle all admissions to first-cycle programmes, hence all the dealings with the four universities concern access to the second cycle only.

Access to the second cycle is subject to national legislation, in a manner which departs from the Bologna Process principles. Access is more tightly controlled, in the sense that the bachelor-master sequence must amount to full-time-equivalent years.

As regards programme mobility, the availability of information in languages other than Croatian is patchy. Priority has been given to credit mobility.

None of the four universities have been able to mainstream the recognition of prior learning, as they await the national legislation promised for 2018. The procedural separation of recognition and admission is a striking characteristic of the Croatian higher education system. In all cases recognition is dealt with at the central level, while admission to second-cycle programmes is devolved to the faculties.

One consequence of the separation is the existence of independent databases, which are neither linked nor integrated. The separation of recognition and admission creates a further quality assurance issue, insofar as it offers no guarantee of consistency of treatment.

Overview of type of changes proposed by institutions (roadmaps)

The following objectives were formulated in the roadmaps of the four Croatian higher education institutions participating in the FAIR project:

- Make Diploma Recognition procedure and forms available in the English language.
- Make the substance of articles related to admissions and appeals of the Regulations on *Studies and Studying* available in the English language.
- Develop procedure for refugees and applicants with no documentation or insufficient documentation.
- Develop codified procedures for diploma recognition.
- Update the English-language web page.
- Include the Office for Academic Recognition in the internal quality assurance audit.
- Include the recognition and admission procedures in the quality assurance system.

Trial 2: overview of the impact assessment (EUA reports)

At the end of the first phase of the FAIR project, the Evaluation Body presented a set of recommendations to the four Croatian higher education institutions. These concerned:

- the accessibility of information on recognition and admission procedures in English;
- the detailed and legalistic nature of published information on admission and appeals procedures;
- the provisions for the recruitment of applicants with no documentation or insufficient documentation, such as refugees;
- inclusion of recognition and admission procedures into the institutional quality assurance mechanisms;
- archiving of documentation (implementing an electronic database);
- assuring the quality of the Office for Academic Recognition of Foreign Higher Education Qualifications and Study Periods;
- integration of the recognition and admission procedures and databases;
- quality assurance of the recognition and admission procedures;
- the formalisation of cooperation between the faculty-based Diploma Recognition Committees and the central university Diploma Recognition Office in the relevant regulations.

Recommendations on how institutional procedures could be further improved

Based on the Evaluation Body's baseline assessment and final reports, the following points for improvement are recommended:

Information available to applicants

Information (legal texts, more detailed descriptions of recognition procedures and especially of appeals procedures) should be available both in Croatian and in English on the universities' websites.

Persons with insufficient documentation or no supporting documentation

At the national level, recommendations should be provided on how to carry out the recognition procedures of applicants with no or insufficient documentation (refugees and persons in a refugee-like situation).

Procedural separation of recognition and admission

The baseline assessment report notes that procedural separation of recognition and admission is a striking characteristic of the Croatian higher education system. The procedures of recognition and admission should be merged to avoid double procedures. The administrative procedures should be more coherent, simpler and more efficient.

Outcomes of the national exploitation meeting

The Croatian National FAIR meeting took place on 27 February 2017 at the Ministry of Science and Education. There were 23 participants from 7 Croatian universities, the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ENIC/NARIC Office and Central Applications Office) and the Ministry of Science and Education.

The participants were welcomed by Ana Tecilazić Goršić, head of the Sector for Quality of Higher Education, International Cooperation and European Affairs from the Ministry of Science and Education. Ana Tecilazić Goršić gave a presentation on the principles of recognition policy in which she demonstrated European trends in the development of recognition policy and the activities at the national level. She also compared the existing procedures of academic recognition with the proposed amendments to the Draft Act on the Amendments to the Act on Recognition of Foreign Education Qualifications and explained what the proposed amendments would bring. This session was a starting point for very fruitful discussion on all the issues in the area of academic recognition.

In the second session, four higher education institutions that participated in the project presented their experience and the benefits that resulted from it. Višnja Sak Bosnar from the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek presented the procedure of academic recognition at the University of Osijek and the benefits of the FAIR project: a database with received applications and issued decisions on academic recognition has been established, the efficiency and transparency of recognition procedures have been improved, and the average duration of the procedure has been reduced by 60-70%.

Andrea Miočić from the University of Rijeka presented the procedure of academic recognition at the University of Rijeka and their experience related to the FAIR project. The FAIR project had the following impact on the recognition procedures at the University of Rijeka: raising awareness of the importance of academic recognition, amendments to the institutional ordinance on recognition procedures, review of the former recognition procedures, seeing the recognition process through the students' eyes and the identification of shortcomings.

Snježana Knezić from the University of Split presented the procedure of academic recognition at the University of Split and their experience with the FAIR project. The main characteristic of the University of Split is the nonexistence of a 'classical' office for academic recognition. Applicants first contact the faculty (legal entity of the university) which provides them with preliminary information on the possibility of continuing their studies. The procedure for receiving applications for registration and documentation is centralised and carried out by a central office at the university level, which formally checks the documentation and forwards the application packages to the respective faculty. Thanks to the FAIR project, the University of Split issued a new ordinance on a quality assurance system (December 2016).

Prof. Nikola Đaković, President of the Committee for Academic Recognition of the University of Zagreb, pointed out that each office for academic recognition has its own characteristics, but that they are facing similar challenges. He emphasised that the FAIR project brought benefits and that the Draft Act on the Amendments to the Act on Recognition of Foreign Education Qualifications as well as mutual cooperation can contribute to the whole education system.

Emita Blagdan, Assistant Director of the Agency for Science and Higher Education, explained all the phases of the FAIR project and the characteristics of the academic recognition process in Croatia. She pointed out the striking characteristic of the Croatian HE system: procedural separation of recognition and admission where recognition is dealt with at the central level, while admission to the second-cycle programmes is devolved to the faculties. Finally, the national recommendations from the FAIR project and suggestions for their implementation were presented.

The quality of the discussions at the meeting was very high. This meeting was an opportunity to discuss the improvements to the academic recognition procedures which are incorporated in the Draft Act on the Amendments to the Act on Recognition of Foreign Education Qualifications.

Outcomes of the meeting:

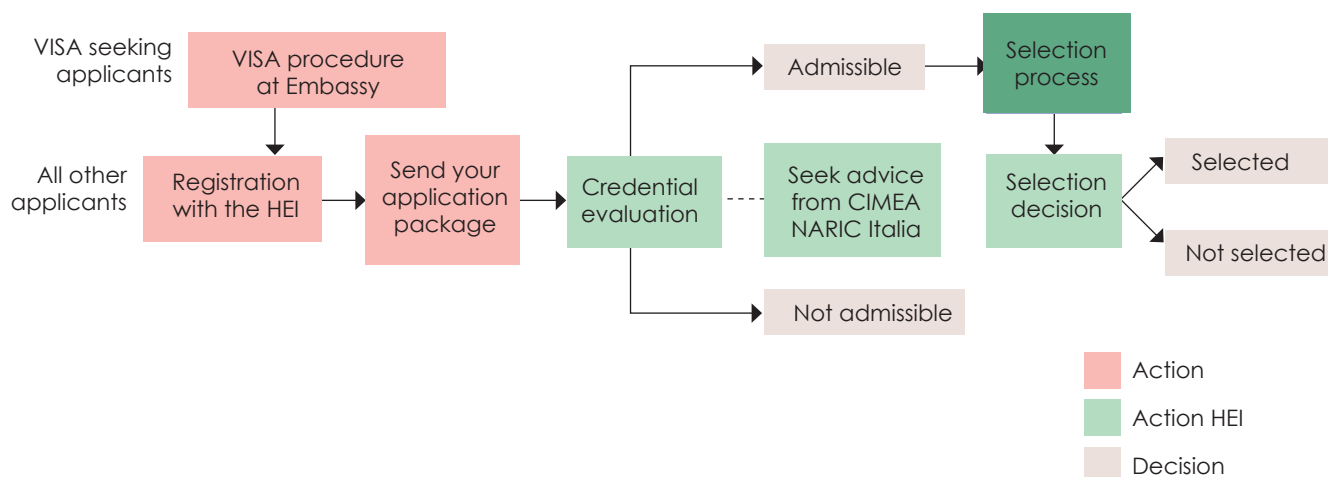
- The national recommendations from the project will be taken into account in the course of further activities on the Draft Act on the Amendments to the Act on Recognition of Foreign Education Qualifications, as well as other legal provisions and policy documents. One of the key improvements the Ministry would like to achieve by means of the Draft Act on the Amendments to the Act on Recognition of Foreign Education Qualifications is to merge the procedure of recognition of foreign education qualifications of the first cycle with the purpose of access to the second cycle with the admission procedure. FAIR assisted a) the Ministry in explaining to higher education institutions the benefits of the proposed policy option and b) higher education institutions in getting insights into examples of good practice at foreign higher education institutions.
- There is a need to develop procedures related to the recognition of prior learning and refugees.
- The national ENIC/NARIC office will continue to serve as the focal point for providing information to higher education institutions regarding their procedures for academic recognition of foreign qualifications.
- The project partners will take steps to support the sustainability of the project. The FAIR project presented an excellent opportunity for networking among all committees for academic recognition at HEIs in Croatia, the Ministry and the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ENIC/NARIC). This network will be continued. Future tasks of the network will include a round table on the implementation of the new Act (following its adoption expected by the end of 2017) and developing procedures related to the recognition of prior learning, notably in relation to refugees.

3. Italy

Overview of academic recognition structure (including flowchart)

- As the Italian higher education institutions are autonomous, academic recognition is done by the higher education institutions themselves.
- The evaluation of foreign qualifications is done by the admissions officers through consulting online sources like www.ENIC/NARIC.net, country modules, internal archives, etc.
- Admission officers can ask the CIMEA-NARIC Italia staff for advice and help via email free of charge. They can also ask applicants to request a comparability statement from CIMEA-NARIC Italia, which attests to the level and academic rights of a qualification.
- No other organisations play a formal role in the procedures for academic recognition in Italy, but it is a matter of fact that some documents issued by official bodies influence the decision of the Italian higher education institutions.

Academic diploma recognition in Italy – how does it work?



Outcomes of the field trials

Trial 1: the baseline assessment at institutional and national level (EUA reports)

The Evaluation Body assessed the recognition and admission practices of four Italian higher education institutions from northern, central and southern Italy, using survey responses and data provided by the institutions, backed up with face-to-face video-linked conversations. The four higher education institutions are:

- University of Bologna (UB)
- University of Palermo (UP)
- University of Rome La Sapienza (UR-Sap)
- University of Trento (UT)

In their institutional reports the Evaluation Body identified the following key findings:

- The standardisation of recognition procedures within a single university needs to be fostered. Institutional guidelines on the recognition process could help.
- The compliance with the LRC concerning the usage of admissions databases, the attitude towards refugees, quality assurance and the existence of an appeals procedure varies in the decentralised structures.
- Staff development sessions for academic staff taking place within the universities to standardise procedures and optimise fairness to applicants are an example of good practice.
- Central databases for recognition and admission decisions are essential for fair recognition and need to be established and updated.
- The mandatory or non-mandatory status of the *Dichiarazione di Valore in loco* needs to be clear to the applicants.
- There is a need to give clear and transparent information to applicants, and especially to holders of non-Italian qualifications (e.g. concerning the appeals procedure).
- Regarding quality assurance: in the first trial, the recognition process was subject to internal QA in only one case. In other cases there was either uncertainty or a negative answer. There is a need to put in place guidelines and procedures for quality assurance for the recognition process at institutional level.

Furthermore, an overview report on the national situation was produced by EUA identifying the main features of the academic recognition procedures in Italy:

- the role of CIMEA-NARIC Italia as facilitator to strengthen the 'recognition culture' in Italy is essential for fair recognition;

- standardisation of recognition procedures;
- the need for clear guidelines at the national level;
- the need to clarify the status (mandatory or not) of the *Dichiarazione di Valore* and supporting higher education institutions in the evaluation of qualifications with alternative instruments;
- the accuracy of information on recognition procedures.

Overview of type of changes proposed by institutions (roadmaps)

The following objectives were formulated in the roadmaps of the four Italian higher education institutions participating in the FAIR project:

- Standardise and make recognition practices more coherent among the decentralised admission boards.
- Develop procedure for refugees with limited documents.
- Overcome the need of the *Dichiarazione di Valore* for specific cases.
- Develop the online application for the collection of all evaluation requests (uploading all study documents).
- Update the English version of the web site with all the details (procedure, deadlines, etc.) of the recognition procedure.
- Develop guidelines on the procedure for the recognition of foreign qualifications.
- Increase the administrative and academic staff's awareness of the recognition procedure, the most common issues and how to deal with them through a presentation on the main aspects of the procedure to the interested offices of the universities.
- Increase transparency of recognition and admission procedures by publishing these as integral part of the enrolment procedure (also in English).
- Collaborate with competent offices to implement procedures dedicated to refugees.
- Ensure improved application data collection.

Furthermore, the observations from the national Evaluation Body baseline report were discussed among the Italian participants of the FAIR project (the four higher education institutions and the Italian NARIC), leading to the following action points at the national level:

- more and more specific trainings for university staff in order to enhance the knowledge on Italian legislation concerning recognition and terminology;
- clear guidance from the Ministry on the recognition procedure, the *Dichiarazione di Valore* and alternative procedures for refugees to increase fairness;
- a comprehensive manual on recognition processes and Italian law concerning recognition from the Ministry or the ENIC/NARIC;
- the need for cooperation between credential evaluators for information sharing.

Trial 2: overview of the impact assessment (EUA reports)

In the impact assessment reports of the four Italian higher education institutions, the following conclusions are drawn by the Evaluation Body:

- New and updated websites were put in place by the universities (also in English).
- The universities created and updated central databases with applications.
- Training courses for admission officers have taken place.
- Online application forms were standardised.
- Guidelines for recognition and admission officers were drafted.
- Refugees could enrol in single courses with the possibility to progress to full courses.
- Interviews with academic staff have been put in place for people with unverifiable documentation.
- At all Italian partner universities significant progress has been made.

Recommendations on how institutional procedures could be further improved

Based on the Evaluation Body's final report and on the individual reports for the four participating Italian higher education institutions, the following points for improvement are recommended by CIMEA-NARIC Italia:

National level

- Redefining the Ministerial instructions for higher education institutions in Italy regarding the recognition of foreign qualifications, adapting them to the current approach to the recognition culture (based on the LRC) and making them easier to use, i.e. short, homogeneous and transparent. The process for the revision of the Ministerial instructions started last year through a consultation conducted by CIMEA among higher education institutions, and the FAIR conference at the end of February / beginning of March 2017 will be an important occasion to move a step forward in this direction, collecting suggestions from higher education institutions and using them in the new version of the Ministerial instructions for the academic year 2017/2018. Another important issue is to clarify, in the Ministerial instructions for higher education institutions in Italy, the subsidiary role of the *Dichiarazione di Valore in loco*; for this reason the Ministry of Foreign affairs should also be invited to the FAIR conference in Italy.

Institutional level

- Fostering training and strengthening the competences in the field of recognition of admission officers, international relations officers, administrative officers and all the different staff involved at different stages in the recognition process. Furthermore, a central database for applications should be established at the institutional level.

Information available to applicants

- A short summary of the Ministerial instructions should be drafted in English and made available on the Ministry's website, indicating the general path that students with a foreign qualification should follow to study in Italy.
- At the institutional level, parts of the EAR-HEI manual could be translated into Italian in order to have clear guidelines on which information should be shown on the university website, in order to provide accurate, up-to-date, transparent and easy-to-access information to applicants.
- CIMEA-NARIC Italia will develop a webpage dedicated to higher education institutions with the main tools and information needed in order to set up clear, transparent and accurate recognition procedures.

Persons with insufficient or no supporting documentation

- In the Ministerial instructions for higher education institutions there is already a section dedicated to refugees, which can be further implemented according to national legislation.
- The *Coordinamento Nazionale sulla Valutazione delle Qualifiche dei Rifugiati* (CNVQR), a network of experts involved in recognition procedures in Italian higher education institutions coordinated by CIMEA, will circulate the main instruments available at the national level for the recognition of refugees among higher education institutions, and will translate, adapt and disseminate the best practices produced by the ENIC/NARIC networks in this field. CIMEA will also test some instruments already developed in other countries and recommended by the EAR manual in Italy (such as background papers, interviews for persons without any or with insufficient documentation, etc.).

Quality assurance

- Applicants can be asked for an evaluation of the recognition procedures at the institutional level, in order to get their feedback on the recognition procedure and improve internal recognition mechanisms.
- Minimum requirements for a quality assurance check of recognition procedures should be established at the institutional level.

Outcomes of the national exploitation meeting

Participants:

142 participants in total from 118 higher education institutions: 56 participants from 52 AFAM institutions, and 71 participants from 66 universities, plus representatives of the Conference of Italian University Rectors, Ministry of Education and CIMEA-NARIC Italia.

Report of the meeting:

During the meeting the new procedures for admission of international students to the Italian higher education institutions for the academic year 2017/2018 were presented in the Italian and English version (*Procedure per l'ingresso, il soggiorno e l'immatricolazione degli student stranieri/ internazionali ai corsi di formazione superiore in Italia anno accademico 2017-2018* / "Procedures for entry, residence and enrolment of foreign/international students for higher education courses in Italy during the 2017/2018 academic year").

The Ministerial instructions describe the procedures of the general path that students with a foreign qualification should follow to study in Italy. The procedures for admission of international students were redesigned according to the FAIR project recommendations.

The meeting was opened by Maria Antonietta Scalera from the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research; Luca Lantero from CIMEA-NARIC Italia presented the new procedures, and Federico Cinquepalmi from the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research drafted the conclusion at the end of the meeting. The same structure was repeated twice, once in the morning for universities and once in the afternoon for Higher Education Institutions of Fine Arts, Music and Dance (AFAM).

The meeting was divided in two sessions in order to meet the specific needs of universities and AFAM institutions. It was the first time that the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research invited the Italian higher education institutions to present and discuss the procedures for the admission of international students in Italy. This is one of the reasons for the high rate of participation of Italian higher education institutions.

The four higher education institutions that are partners of the FAIR project were present at the meeting.

There were several questions and comments after the presentation of the new procedures. The main points of discussion were:

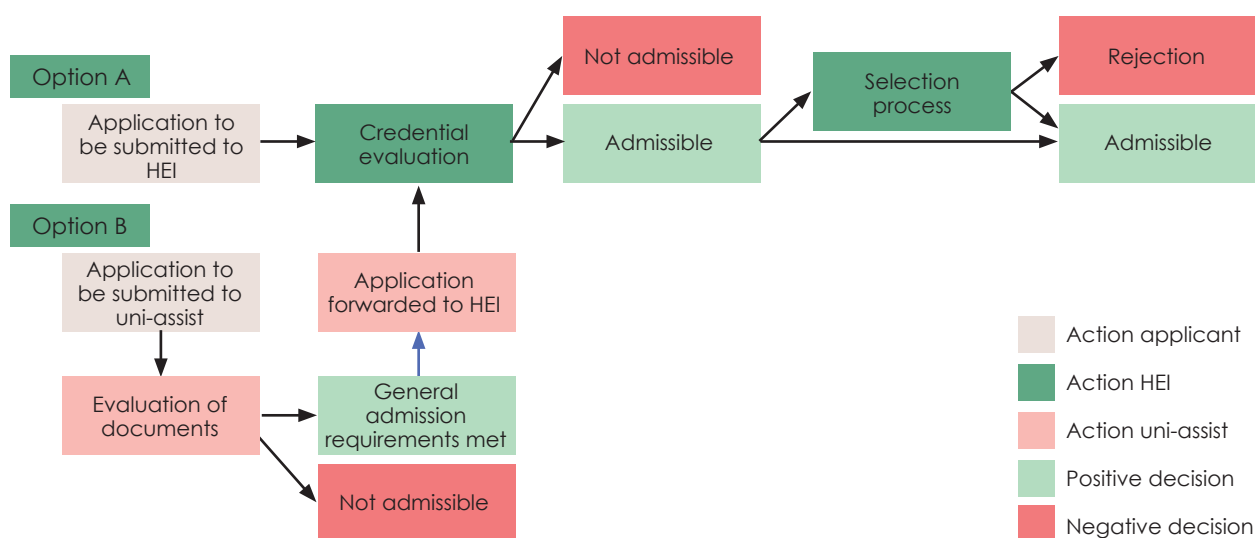
- The need for closer coordination among higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to make the visa procedures smoother and to bring the selection of foreign students forward to January (higher education institutions select students first, and send the list of candidates to the diplomatic representations for the visa procedures).

- The need to set a higher subsistence standard for foreign students. To stay in Italy a foreign student must have sufficient financial resources. At the moment the minimum standard required in Italy is low compared to other European countries. There is an ongoing discussion regarding the need to set a higher amount.
- The no longer compulsory role of the *Dichiarazione di Valore in loco* increases the responsibility and the need for training of admissions officers and staff working in the field of recognition of foreign qualifications.
- The need for tools, instruments and procedures for the recognition of refugees' qualifications. According to Italian legislation, higher education institutions have to recognise the qualifications held by refugees, also in the case of missing documentation. But there is a lack of expertise regarding procedures of assessment and verification of such qualifications. For this reason higher education institutions asked both for support in establishing procedures, and to provide training and tools in order to improve the evaluations.

4. Germany

Overview of academic recognition structure (including flowchart)

- Decisions on recognition are taken by the higher education institutions.
- Evaluations of foreign qualifications may be done by the admissions officers themselves, with the help of a database on foreign qualifications (ANABIN), provided by the German NARIC (ZAB), or they may request a tailor-made evaluation by Uni-Assist which serves as a basis for recognition within the institutions.
- No other organisations plays a direct role in the procedures for academic recognition in Germany. The Accreditation Council and accreditation agencies play an indirect role by assessing the quality of recognition procedures but are not active in the day-to-day-business of recognition.



Outcomes of the field trials

Trial 1: the baseline assessment at institutional and national level (EUA reports)

Three German higher education institutions are participating in the FAIR project:

- Universität Bremen (UB)
- Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg (UO)
- Hochschule Harz (HH) in Wernigerode

All three are public institutions. Two (UB and UO) are research universities, whereas HH is a *Fachhochschule* or university of applied sciences.

Two introductory remarks: firstly, it should be pointed out that academic recognition in German higher education institutions is generally considered to be part of the whole enrolment and admission process. This made it somewhat difficult to analyse the recognition procedure in an isolated manner, the way the original approach had envisaged it. And secondly, one should bear in mind that no tuition fees are charged at German higher education institutions. This fact has limiting consequences for the financial and human resources that the institutions can apply to the admission process.

As for the German NARIC (ZAB), it has only an advisory role in providing information on foreign qualifications. It would be too slow and time-consuming in a big higher education system like the German one to let the ZAB take care of the recognition processes. Instead, the ZAB provides a database based on their knowledge and experience to enable universities to decide on the admission of international applicants. Many universities in Germany outsource the evaluation process to the service portal Uni-Assist which evaluates the documents of applicants based on the information provided by the ZAB database and gives a recommendation on admission to the university in question. Uni-Assist is not a regulatory body; it provides guidance and recommendations. It is regarded by participating institutions as an indicator of quality assurance and lightens the administrative burden faced by institutions.

In its assessment, the Evaluation Body found the admission procedures in all three participating institutions consistent and appropriate. However, the Evaluation Body made recommendations concerning publicly available information in all three institutions. In general, how to apply for a place on a programme is clear, even if there sometimes is a discrepancy between the information available in German and that in English. The Evaluation Body requested more information regarding the trajectory followed by an application once it has reached the institution (either directly from the applicant or via Uni-Assist).

This information is particularly important in the event of an appeal; without it, an appeal on procedural grounds – in theory much more likely to succeed than an appeal on academic grounds – is virtually impossible. The Evaluation Body recommended that all three higher education institutions provide clear information in this issue.

The Evaluation Body also raised the issue of information available on application processing times. These seem to depend on a variety of factors: whether Uni-Assist is involved, how many internal departments participate in recognition and admission (in what order, with what powers), the volume of applications, the complexity and variation in admission requirements at programme level, whether the language of delivery is German or English, the issue of whether access is selective (decision given when no more places are available) or open (decision given on a deadline date), etc.

The Evaluation Body found no evidence that recognition and admission are systematically covered by internal or external quality assurance procedures in all participating higher education institutions. However, the German participants pointed out that recognition procedures are duly checked by accreditation agencies or through internal quality enhancement procedures. Even if this might not have become evident to the Evaluation Body, there are quality assurance measures in place regarding academic recognition and RPL.

The department dealing with admission and recognition at the UO runs a complaint management system which allows for feedback on the officers and team work. In addition, the number of international students and their distribution across countries of origin and study programmes are

part of the evaluation process of the university management. On the question of the recognition of prior learning, none of the institutions had policy in place directed specifically at international students.

Finally, with regard to refugees, the Evaluation Body could find no web-based statements during the first trial which were in line with the LRC. HH reported that guidance was available, although there had been no take-up; UO stated that some of the documentary requirements could be waived when appropriate.

The Evaluation Body is aware that three higher education institutions represent a very small sample on which to base an 'overview' and that three different institutions might have led to very different observations and recommendations.

Overview of type of changes proposed by institutions (roadmaps)

The following objectives were formulated in the roadmaps of the three German higher education institutions participating in the FAIR project:

- Critically revise the institutional application procedures, ensure good cooperation between the different agents and clear distribution of responsibilities.
- Critically revise turnaround time for applications, provide 'behind the scene' information on admission procedures.
- Critically review and improve the information for foreign applicants provided on the institutional websites; check for accuracy and provision of appropriate information in German and English for different target groups.
- Monitor the procedures and results of applications/admissions.
- Check on procedures for RPL for foreign applicants.
- Check on the link between institutional quality assurance procedures and admission procedures.
- Verify information provided to applicants with refugee status.

Trial 2: overview of the impact assessment (EUA reports)

In the impact assessment reports of the three German higher education institutions, the following conclusions are drawn by the Evaluation Body:

- The impact assessment is generally positive. As a result of FAIR recommendations, the institutions have increased the transparency of their application procedures and, in particular, given a clear indication of the processing time between deadline and notification of decision. One institution is considering the construction of a recognition and admissions database.
- The proposed upgrading of English-language websites has happened or is happening, but has consequences – in terms of organisational structure, management information, and resources – that are still being addressed.
- Regarding the recognition of prior learning for foreign applicants, the matter has been referred to Ministers of Education at the Länder level because it transcends the competence of the individual institutions.
- On the question of refugees, numerous activities have been undertaken during the lifetime of FAIR and while this was not primarily a result of the FAIR project, it is reasonable to assume that FAIR nevertheless contributed to the motivations already at work.
- The Evaluation Body's doubts concerning turnaround time have been dispelled. On the matter of the appeals procedure, the higher education institutions considered existing procedures sufficient and opted for the status quo. Rejected applicants are informed, by letter, of the decision and of the opportunity to appeal as is also usual for German applicants and students.

Recommendations on how institutional procedures could be further improved

Based on the Evaluation Body's final report and on the individual reports for the three participating German higher education institutions, the following points for improvement are recommended:

Institutional infrastructure

- The three German higher education institutions agreed that FAIR had a positive effect on the way they handle foreign applications and on their web presentation. Even if not all the identified problems have been tackled yet, FAIR led at least to a heightened institutional sensibility to existing bottlenecks and other issues.
- In order to increase the awareness of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) among staff working at higher education institutions, the information available on the website of HRK Nexus should be brought to the attention of all German higher education institutions. The site contains a short summary of the principles of the LRC, links to the LRC itself and on how to work with it.
- Admissions offices should establish direct contact with relevant staff members of the faculties and programmes for which they work, and they should ensure that all staff involved in recognition is aware of their role and responsibility in the process (including keeping to time limits).
- Staff working with application files of foreign applicants should be trained in the good practice of recognition, available via manuals and training platforms of the ENIC/NARIC networks and/or offered by the national NARIC centre or the German Rectors' Conference.

Information available to applicants

- The participants realised that the explanations provided on their website could be confusing and misleading to foreign applicants and therefore improved their web presentation. FAIR highlighted particular problems with regard to the English version of the websites (different information needed for non-German applicants, including refugees). Reorganising the website and the application procedure, where it has taken place, has led to greater efficiency and time savings that can be invested into other tasks.

Refugees and applicants with insufficient or no supporting documentation

- Plenty of initiatives at the levels of the federal government, the Länder and the institutions have been launched since 2015 and the available offers often exceed the demand, for the time being. It is not easy to place specific information for refugees on the institutional websites in such a way that it is easily found, without making it too dominant. Also due to the language barrier, experience has shown that providing this information personally can be more effective than presenting a huge amount of information on the website, as the options for the individual applicant can vary very strongly by country and educational history.

Turnaround time

- Taking part in FAIR made participants realise that their application procedures could be unjustifiably long, and therefore steps were taken to reduce the duration to an acceptable length by reorganising the procedures. There is disagreement as to whether or not maximum durations should be indicated (due to fear of complaints or law suits).

Foreign applicants with vocational skills and qualifications

- 1) As this topic calls for national guidelines rather than isolated solutions at the institutional level, it was decided to refer the issue to the Kultusministerkonferenz.

Quality assurance

2) The quality assurance system in Germany (accreditation) is currently undergoing a thorough revision, as a result of a decision of the Constitutional Court that questioned the legal basis of the present system. While the details of the new system are still under negotiation, it is clear that the responsibility of higher education institutions for building up an institutional quality culture and to be accountable for their performance in that regard will increase. It is therefore likely that we will see a further development of the existing procedures to ensure high quality also in the admission process.

Outcomes of the national exploitation meeting

The German FAIR conference was intended to allow German higher education institutions to acquaint themselves with the outcomes of the FAIR project, exchange experiences and discuss controversial issues regarding academic recognition. The conference brought together around 50 participants from higher education institutions all over Germany. It focused on the recognition of academic qualifications for access and admission to German higher education, in particular at master's level. The participants came from international offices, admissions offices, quality development units and academic staff.

In Germany, problems with recognition arise from difficulties at the institutional level rather than the legislative or national level. The main challenges at the institutional level are related to these themes:

1. Transparent and structured processes and responsibilities
2. Integration of processes into institutional quality development
3. Evaluation of qualifications based on competences rather than on formal criteria
4. Transparent information for applicants and communication

One of the project partners, the University of Bremen, had identified two major elements to improve its institutional practice of recognition of foreign academic qualifications: firstly, it was important to focus on recognition in the context of admission. This fostered awareness of the process of recognition not only as a formal entrance check (e.g. regarding language skills) but rather as an integral part of access and admission to the university. This led to the insight that this process had to be included explicitly into institutional quality management and monitoring. Secondly, the project illustrated that there are huge differences in Europe regarding legislation, actors and processes. Against this backdrop, a review of the University of Bremen made the partner realise that its procedures were neither inherently fully logical nor transparent. This led to a restructuring and a revision of online information.

In terms of communication with applicants, the University of Oldenburg had a similar experience. They reorganised their communication modes and channels and reduced the number of queries thanks to clearer communication with international applicants.

The University of Applied Sciences Harz has rather low numbers of international applicants and therefore still deals with applications on a case-by-case basis. Nevertheless, their experiences resembled those of the other partners and they, too, reorganised their processes and structures accordingly.

Michaela Fuhrmann, managing director of the Centre of Quality Development of the University of Potsdam (not a partner in the FAIR project), illustrated how the centre's quality assurance monitors recognition processes. The Centre of Quality Development designs and implements quality

procedures within the scope of the university's strategic QA system for teaching and learning. The processes are divided into three fields: university studies, career services, and teaching and media. As one proven instrument of quality assurance the university conducts a meta-evaluation every three years with an external expert group. The evaluation reviews the quality development benchmarks which were previously set by each faculty. The university has also recently published guidelines for recognition which contain comprehensive information for students, teaching and administration staff. Michaela Fuhrmann emphasised that quality assurance not only requires well-organised structures and instruments but should also focus on a good and transparent communication culture between all stakeholders. In this context, she mentioned that the support of the university management plays a major role in implementing and realising quality assurance processes.

The University of Bielefeld (not a partner in the FAIR project) had been invited to show the legal scope of access and admission of international applicants. Bastian Simon, legal advisor of the university, showed that often responsibilities are mixed up during the assessment of access requirements. Sometimes formal requirements are overrated and higher education institutions may request certificates even if the next higher qualification has already been achieved, only to fulfil assumed legal obligations (e.g. asking for a higher education entrance qualification although the applicant has already obtained a bachelor's degree). Based on the principle that recognition, in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention, should refer to the recognition of competences rather than formal certificates, the University of Bielefeld has changed the order of assessments: now the review of content and competences, which takes place in the respective department, is done before the checking of formal criteria. Additionally, Mr Simon recommended checking whether a qualification would give access to a master's programme in the home country rather than to try to 'locate' it within the German system. However, this decision is often difficult to take since there is not much information on foreign higher education systems easily available. The database provided by Nuffic might serve as a starting point for the analysis.

The use of the services and tools of Uni-Assist and the cooperation between the organisation and the higher education institutions seems to be working very well. This was one of the results of a workshop with participants from various higher education institutions who gave almost exclusively positive feedback on Uni-Assist, including the student representative. Saving institutional resources in terms of personnel and money and using external competences is especially important for smaller institutions. The workshop also showed that processes within the institution as well as between Uni-Assist and the higher education institutions must be clearly structured: higher education institutions need to define their own criteria to be used by Uni-Assist and specify whether Uni-Assist should limit themselves to checking applications on behalf of the higher education institutions or if they already send rejections to applicants.

Andreas Dieckmann of the Ministry of Economy, Science and Digitalisation of Sachsen-Anhalt gave an overview of the legal framework and the recognition processes regarding recognition of vocational qualifications and other foreign non-academic qualifications. He pointed out that it is common practice in Germany to either fully recognise or reject foreign vocational qualifications, but that it would be desirable to have the possibility of partial recognition, giving the applicant the opportunity to compensate the substantial differences with what are called 'adaption measures'.

The recognition process of vocational qualifications in Germany includes two steps: firstly, the assessment of the competences conveyed by the vocational qualification and secondly, the permission to practise the profession (entitlement). In Germany, different information platforms have

been established to support recognition.⁵ Mr. Dieckmann also explained that there is a significant trend towards recognising/validating vocational qualifications towards higher education studies. Therefore, it is necessary to develop the existing recognition processes to meet future challenges in this field. All workshop members agreed that in the discussion of recognition of all types of qualifications (academic and vocational) one aspect is decisive: the trust in people and their qualifications is a precondition to establish a positive recognition culture in the institutions taking decisions on recognition.

The closing discussion showed that 'automatic recognition' is not really a term favoured either by German higher education institutions or by the German Federal Ministry of Education or the regional ministries of education. The term was considered unfortunate, in the sense of misleading, as it seems to imply a loss of control by obliging higher education institutions to recognise any foreign degree. For Germany it would seem more important to really apply the regulations contained in the LRC (substantial difference, reversal of burden of proof etc.) rather than to create new ones. Especially teaching staff in higher education are already confronted with many challenges (digitalisation, shift from teaching to learning, quality assurance and accreditation etc.). Therefore, higher education institutions must take care not to overburden them with additional requirements. On the other hand, participants agreed that the FAIR experiences were very useful and necessary because they allowed them to improve institutional procedures, thus making them more efficient and student-friendly.

5. The Netherlands

Overview of academic recognition structure (including flowchart)

- Decisions on recognition are taken by the higher education institutions.
- Evaluations of foreign qualifications may be done by the admissions officers themselves, with the help of country modules and an online evaluation wizard (database with previous assessments available for Dutch higher education institutions) provided by the Dutch ENIC/NARIC. The higher education institutions can also request a tailor-made evaluation by the Dutch ENIC/NARIC, free of charge.
- No other organisations play a role in the procedures for academic recognition in the Netherlands.

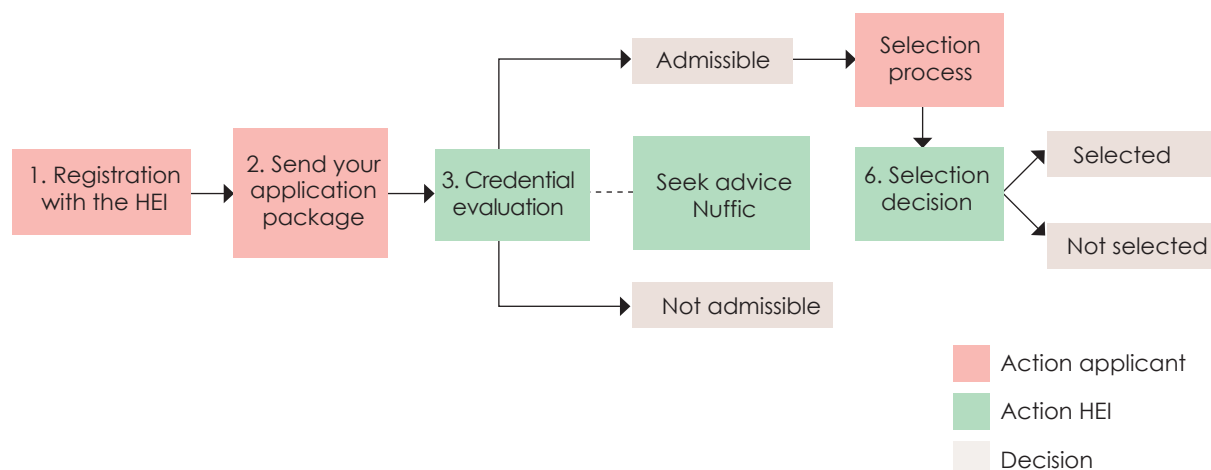
Outcomes of the field trials

Trial 1: the baseline assessment at institutional and national level (EUA reports)

The following four higher education institutions from the Netherlands participated in the field trials of the FAIR project: NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences, Utrecht University and Rotterdam School of Management (Erasmus University). Two of these are universities of applied sciences, while the other two are research universities, according to the binary system of higher education in the Netherlands.

5) E.g. Anabin (anabin.kmk.org/anabin.html), Uni-Assist (www.uni-assist.de), bq-portal (www.bq-portal.de/), Anerkennung in Deutschland (www.anerkennung-in-deutschland.de/html/de/)

Academic diploma recognition in the Netherlands - how does it work?



In the four institutional baseline assessment reports produced by EUA, it was recommended that:

- the Charter and course regulations of interest and relevance to applicants be linked to the headline programme web pages;
- the universities consider how the scope for misunderstanding by applicants might be eliminated;
- the universities identify and publicise ways of reassuring itself and applicants that recognition practices are consistent and fair;
- the universities investigate ways of making its criteria more explicit and, ultimately, in line with current European higher education policy of moving towards criteria based on learning outcomes;
- the universities provide explicit and public justification for the provision that applicants with qualifications of foreign universities of applied sciences are barred from pre-master's courses, which foreign applicants may regard as discriminatory;
- the universities seek a more applicant-friendly way of presenting the academic justification for the condition that there can be a limited capacity per nationality in their programmes, as well as the methodology used to select successful candidates;
- the universities incorporate the provision for the recruitment of applicants with no or insufficient documentation (such as refugees) into its policy and practice;
- the universities explore the extent to which reliable practice in the recognition of prior learning (RPL) might be developed within the boundaries of existing Dutch legislation;
- the universities give much more prominence to the role of Studielink in the notification of final decisions for international students;
- the universities put in place a clearly defined and publicised appeals procedure, in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention Article III.5 and its explanatory report.

Furthermore, an overview report at the national level was produced by the Evaluation Body, identifying the following system-level characteristics for the Netherlands:

- the availability of the Dutch ENIC/NARIC as the counsel of last resort;
- the existence of external programme accreditation;
- the role of *Studielink*;
- the binary structure with two sub-systems, academic and professional.

Although in general the academic recognition system seems to work in practice, the Evaluation Body states that the combined effect of the four points above means that key features of the Dutch system remain opaque to non-Dutch applicants.

Overview of type of changes proposed by institutions (roadmaps)

The following objectives were formulated in the roadmaps of the four Dutch higher education institutions participating in the FAIR project:

- Develop and publish an information sheet on how the university handles the applicant's recognition, including information about making an appeal.
- Make sure the Teaching and Examination Regulations (Students' charter) are more visible and available on the university website.
- Eliminate misunderstanding regarding the binary system and educational requirements for academic master's programmes.
- Digitise and optimise the entire application and admissions process.
- Expand the accessibility of pre-master's programmes for students with non-Dutch higher professional education degrees (universities of applied sciences).
- Clarify nationality capacity on websites.
- Add information regarding the admission of refugee students to websites.
- Expand the use of Osiris International Office (digitisation of procedures for international students).
- Provide for recognition of prior learning.
- Provide for recruitment of applicants with no or insufficient documentation.
- Be more transparent about the quality assurance system on websites.
- Provide more information on the prominent role of Studielink for international students.
- Publish a clearly defined appeals procedure.
- Adapt digital application process for graduate students.
- Ensure internal quality assurance.
- Develop a diploma database.

Furthermore, the observations from the national EUA baseline report were discussed among the Dutch participants of the FAIR project (the four higher education institutions and the Dutch NARIC), leading to the following action points at the national level:

- Improve the description of the procedures for academic recognition in the Netherlands, including the division of tasks and responsibilities.
- Propose key performance indicators for the quality of recognition procedures within the higher education institutions.
- Make the application via Studielink more user-friendly for international students.
- Provide a clear description of the binary system of higher education.
- Discuss the reintroduction of administrative costs for processing foreign applications with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

Trial 2: overview of the impact assessment (EUA reports)

In the impact assessment reports of the four Dutch higher education institutions, the following conclusions are drawn by the Evaluation Body:

- There was an immediate and direct impact of the upgrading of the online application system and of improvements to the contents of the institutions' websites.
- There was an initial impact of the procedures for refugee applicants.
- There is likely impact from the national dialogue between the higher education institutions and Nuffic on the implementation of Standard 1.4 of the European Standards and Guidelines, the user-friendliness of *Studielink* and the challenge of making the Dutch binary system navigable by foreign students from academic and professional backgrounds.
- There was a positive impact in respect of the issue of nationality caps.

Recommendations on how institutional procedures could be further improved

Based on the Evaluation Body's final report on the impact assessment of the FAIR project and on the individual EUA reports for the four participating Dutch higher education institutions, the following points for improvement are recommended (using the various categories as used in the EUA final report):

Institutional infrastructure

- In order to increase the awareness of the LRC among staff working at higher education institutions, a new web page on academic recognition should be created on the national NARIC website. This should contain a short summary of the principles of the LRC and links to the LRC itself. The web pages on admissions of the higher education institutions should clearly link to this central webpage, making the information easily accessible.
- Admissions offices should establish direct contact with relevant staff members of the faculties and programmes for which they work, and they should ensure that all staff involved in recognition is aware of their role and responsibility in the process (including keeping to time limits).
- Staff working with application files of foreign applicants should be trained in the good practice of recognition, available via manuals and training platforms of the ENIC/NARIC networks and/or offered by the national NARIC centre.

Information available to applicants

- The national Dutch system for applying to a higher education programme (*Studielink*) should be better adapted to the application of students with foreign qualifications.
- A simple flowchart of the admissions and recognition procedure should be developed at national level, to be used by all Dutch higher education institutions, explaining the various steps in the process and explaining the roles of the higher education institution and the NARIC in evaluation and recognition. This flowchart should be published on the admissions pages of the higher education institutions, linking to a central web page of the NARIC which provides further explanations on the principles of the LRC (see also above).
- The binary system of Dutch higher education should also be clearly explained on the central NARIC web page. It is recommended that a short animation of the various educational streams which was recently produced by the Dutch NARIC should be made available on the central web page. Applicants with foreign qualifications should be able to reach this information via the admissions pages of the higher education institutions.

Persons with insufficient or no supporting documentation

- At the national level, recommendations should be provided on how to apply the LRC article on refugees without documentation. It is recommended that a flexible and efficient procedure be developed, consisting of a quick check of the consistency of the information provided by the refugee (preferably by an admissions officer), which may be followed by an interview with an expert at faculty or programme level to establish the subject-specific knowledge and skills of the refugee.

Turnaround time

- By only evaluating the five main elements of a qualification (level, quality, workload, profile and learning outcomes) a flexible form of automatic recognition may be introduced into the evaluation of the foreign qualification. The good practice in the EAR-HEI manual should be used to quickly go through the various steps of the evaluation process.

- The higher education institutions should use the proper instruments and services offered by their national NARIC centre in an efficient way. They will preferably evaluate the standard applications themselves (with the help of standard evaluations available online) and request a tailor-made evaluation only in more difficult cases. This speeds up the process both at the higher education institutions and at the NARIC centre.

Quality assurance

- Feedback from the faculties and programme directors on their recognition decisions and on the performance of foreign students should be provided in a systematic way to the admissions office, in order to fine-tune the requirements for students with foreign qualifications. This information may also be published on the admissions webpages, so that prospective students find clear information on the admission criteria.
- The higher education institutions should define one or two key performance indicators to assess the quality of their admissions and recognition procedure, which may be used in the internal and external QA procedures (in line with the revised ESG Standard 1.4, which refers to recognition of foreign qualifications).

Outcomes of the national exploitation meeting

The national FAIR meeting was held in Utrecht on 14 February 2017. Thirty-one representatives of higher education institutions' admissions offices, the NVAO (accreditation organisation), the Dutch association of universities (VSNU), the Dutch Ministry of Education and Nuffic (the Dutch ENIC/NARIC) participated in the meeting.

During the meeting three thematic sessions were organised to present and discuss the main outcomes of the FAIR project.

Session 1: Evaluation methodology

Recommendation A: The evaluation of foreign qualifications should take into account the purpose of the recognition.

Most people present at the FAIR meeting work at the central admissions office of their institution. Whereas all agreed with the recommendation, some also indicated that at times it is difficult to convince the academic staff at the faculties that this is good practice, as they are not always familiar with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. One of the 'best practices' shared was to convince faculties and academic staff that it is to their advantage if the recognition of foreign qualifications is done in a more generic way and performed by the admissions office (without further interference by the experts). Ultimately, this methodology saves a lot of time.

Recommendation B: When assessing a foreign qualification the five main elements are taken into account: level, quality, workload, profile and learning outcomes. If there are no substantial differences, the qualification is recognised.

Participants agree with this recommendation. Again, the implementation of this method at institutional level is sometimes hampered, because others who are not familiar with the LRC may also play a role in the recognition and admission process.

Recommendation C: If there are substantial differences, these will be communicated to the student.

A participant noted that according to a lawyer of her university, under the Higher Education Act it is not allowed to report substantial differences to the student. This misunderstanding was corrected by other participants in this session, referring to the text of the Lisbon Recognition Convention where

transparent communication is a requirement. A discussion followed about ways to communicate substantial differences to applicants. Conclusion: students are often satisfied with a brief explanation of the substantial differences in the letter conveying the admission decision. Providing the opportunity to contact a special telephone number for further explanation can prevent lengthy formal appeals procedures. This is a good example of how transparent procedures can lead to more efficiency and time gains.

Recommendation D: In case of substantial differences, alternative recognition will be offered if possible.

After some initial uncertainty about the meaning of alternative recognition, the participants came up with a number of examples where this is being applied in a flexible way. Conditional admission is not always possible, but the optional courses within a study programme can sometimes be used to fill the gaps. Another suggestion was students' enrolment in a preparatory year or foundation programme. Sometimes sub-certificates are a way of overcoming deficiencies. Institutions then refer prospective students to external providers of sub-certificates.

Recommendation E: Automatic recognition is applied to as many EHEA countries as possible. Participants indicate that this is already being done in practice. It would be appreciated if clear information was given about the list of countries where automatic recognition can be applied.

Session 2: Institutional infrastructure

Recommendation A: All institutional websites should refer to the text on diploma recognition in the Netherlands on the Nuffic website (www.nuffic.nl/en/diploma-recognition/evaluation-of-foreign-diplomas).

Participants appreciate the fact that information on diploma recognition procedures is available at an external source (instead of information provided on the institution's website), because applicants then know that the same procedure is applied to everyone. The video with explanation about the Dutch binary education system is useful and could be given a follow-up, for example with information about the different employment opportunities after obtaining a qualification at the research university or a university of applied sciences respectively.

Recommendation B: The central admissions office must make better arrangements with faculties about tasks and responsibilities, turnaround time and communication with students.

Participants indicate that this happens in practice and is an iterative process. However, the discussion also shows that the internal organisation, especially the division of roles between the faculty and central admissions office, varies widely between institutions. When the admissions office merely has an administrative function and the admission decision is taken at the faculty level (sometimes by an individual teacher or professor), much can be gained in the predictability and uniformity of decision-making and in turnaround times. Digitisation of recognition procedures can help streamline and better monitor the process.

Recommendation C: Periodic training and information sessions should be organised for staff at all levels of the institution on good practice in diploma recognition and the principles of the LRC.

Although this is seen as desirable, it is not always easy for the admissions office to get access to all levels of the institution. However, various participants do have experience in this regard, for example by organising a meeting for the Examination Committee on the principles of the LRC and admission of foreign students.

As the LRC is the only international legislation in the field of higher education, it provides an important tool for shaping internationalisation policies at Dutch higher education institutions.

Recommendation D: All institutions should have a procedure for recognition and admission of refugees without documents, and provide online information on this.

Everyone agrees with the importance of a good admissions procedure. However, participants are disinclined to publish the procedure online. Instead, it would be good to appoint a contact person who can inform refugees about the possibilities and the procedures at hand. Having one contact person may also be useful for institutional staff, as information on such specific admissions procedures is not always well known internally. The contact details of the contact person can be published online.

Recommendation E: All institutions should have an RPL procedure, and provide online information on this.

This has not been discussed in detail. One participant indicates that the 21+ test is used for RPL. At Dutch higher education institutions the Examination Commission usually decides on the possibility to exempt a student from part of the study programme (after a student has been admitted). This is not done by the admissions offices.

Recommendation F: All institutions must have an appeals procedure, and provide online information on this.

All attendees indicate that there is an appeals procedure, in accordance with Dutch legislation. Information about this is often given in the letter conveying the admission decision. Some people fear that online publication leads to an overload of (unfounded) complaints. Others doubt the added value, as the complaint procedure is already being communicated in writing.

Session 3: Quality assurance of recognition procedures

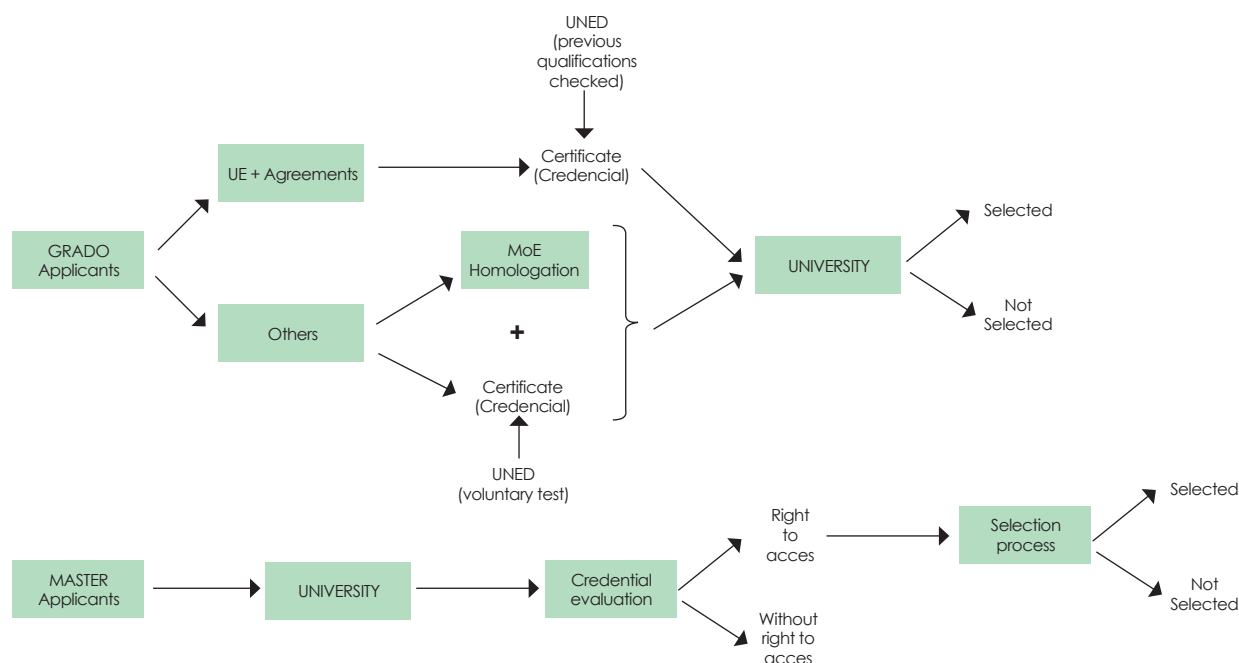
All attendees indicate that there is no formal quality assurance procedure for recognition at their institution. However, several participants indicate that sometimes informal structures are in place to ensure the quality of recognition, e.g. regular consultation and coordination meetings involving various actors within the institution.

Possible key performance indicators mentioned in the discussion are: the turnaround time of applications, consistency of decision-making, communication of substantial differences, drop-out rates or study success (although Mark Frederiks of the NVAO indicates that the recognition procedure alone cannot explain drop-out rates, as many other factors play a role). The transparency of the recognition process and public information provision was also mentioned as a useful indicator, as well as cooperation with other national partners and ENIC/NARIC (as mentioned in the ESG Standard 1.4 guidelines).

With the introduction of ESG 1.4, the importance of quality assurance of recognition procedures will increase. Institutions should therefore start thinking about how to monitor their recognition procedure (internally) and about potential opportunities for improvement. It is concluded that both internal and external quality assurance of recognition procedures can help institutions and their admissions offices to learn from experiences and to continue their professionalisation.

6. Spain

Overview of academic recognition structure (including flowchart)



Admission to Grado (bachelor's)

At Grado level, higher education institutions deal only with admissions and not with recognition.

The recognition of foreign applications is automatic both for EU students with specific diplomas equivalent to the Spanish Título de Bachiller (stipulated by law: www.boe.es/boe/dias/2014/03/10/pdfs/BOE-A-2014-2522.pdf) and for those from countries with recognition agreements. For other cases, the recognition procedure is decided by a sub-directorate of the Ministry of Education (Subdirección General de Ordenación Académica).

The Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) checks if the candidate has the diplomas equivalent to the Spanish Título de Bachiller, but is not responsible for recognition and admission.

At a regional level, the regional Department of Education together with the public universities in that region constitute the university districts, responsible for coordinating the admission procedures. Each university district fixes a calendar for applications and allocation of places within the periods specified by the government. They are therefore responsible for the collection, processing and in some cases for the distribution of applications, but not for recognition.

Universities are competent for the admission to their programmes. In case of Grado applicants, they can set an entrance grade requirement, an exam or other specific entry requirements, especially for the programmes most in demand.

EU + special agreements

(Resolución 3 de marzo de 2014 (BOE 10/03/14)): www.boe.es/boe/dias/2014/03/10/pdfs/BOE-A-2014-2522.pdf)

The UNED is in charge of checking the documents of applicants and issuing a certificate (*Credencial*). This *credencial* allows students to be admitted to a university, although it does not mean that their secondary school leaving certificate has been homologated to the Spanish *Título de Bachiller*.

Together with the credential, the student is assigned an average mark up to 10. Given the competitiveness of entering certain Grado studies at university and the fact that the mark is the first selection criterion for admittance, some students voluntarily opt to sit for the specific part of the *Prueba de Acceso a la Universidad* (PAU), which gives them the possibility to improve their mark to a maximum of 14 points.

Non-EU students from countries with no specific agreements

The applicants must in all cases request the homologation of their secondary school leaving certificate from the Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte (MECD). They can voluntarily sit for the PAU exam (for both parts, the general and the specific one). The score obtained in this exam can be used by the university as a criterion for admission. The UNED is also responsible for assigning these applicants an average mark before the homologation is resolved.

Applicants with professional training certificates

A specific report for the individual must be requested from the Sub-Directorate General responsible for Vocational Education and Training (*Subdirección General de Formación Profesional*), part of the Ministry of Education. If the prior studies are considered equivalent to the Spanish VET certificates which allow access to a university, admittance is guaranteed.

The Spanish universities (with the exception of UNED, which is the only national university) depend on the regional authorities (*Comunidades Autónomas*), which intervene to different extents in the student placement. In some cases, there is a unified district at a regional level which distributes the candidates among the different public universities. In this case, those students who intend to enter a public university must rank the institutions of their preference (in one or more regions) in their application for admission. Depending on the number of places available and based on the average mark criterion, the regional authorities distribute the students over the different institutions and programmes.

Students wishing to enter a private university must request admission directly at the university of their interest.

This means that both the verification of documents and the rights inherent to the certificates are checked by the UNED and not by each university. Passing this screening by the UNED is the requirement for a candidate to be admitted to a university.

Once applicants have successfully gone through the screening process, they can go to the admissions office at a university to submit all required documents, the UNED credential among them.

Admission to master's programmes

At master's level, the right to access this level of studies is determined by a national law (Royal Decree 1393/2007, modified by Royal Decree 861/2010). The university is competent for admission to its master's programmes. Therefore, the recognition procedures are dealt with at the universities, with the intervention of different agents: admissions officers, faculty committees, master's programme directors, etc.

Access to master's programmes in Spain is nationally regulated by law (*Real Decreto 1393/2007, modified by Real Decreto 861/2010*). Provided an applicant complies with the legal requirements to access master's studies, the university is competent for the admission. Admission to master's programmes can be obtained without the homologation of the previous qualifications. It is important to note, though, that the fact that a student obtains a certain master's diploma does not imply the official recognition (*homologación/equivalencia*) in Spain of the previous academic levels.

With regard to the admittance system, the admissions office at each university or faculty is responsible for the verification of previous university diplomas and candidates' documents, as well as for making sure the applicant has the right to access the master's studies.

After this first screening, the Faculty Board, following the criteria established by the Governing Council, assesses the previous qualifications of the applicant in terms of the specific competences required to follow a programme in a specific field of study and at a certain level. The director of the master's programme has the last word with regard to the admission.

As long as the institutions accomplish all these general rules, all universities have their own internal managing procedures for organising the administrative process, staff for admission offices, control and exploitation of database, etc.

Role of ANECA

The *Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación* (ANECA) is the body responsible for the national accreditation of university teachers, as well as for the accreditation of official university programmes and their periodic reviews. From 1 January 2016 onwards, ANECA also assesses the research activities at universities.

Role of the Ministry of Education

The Spanish Ministry of Education, through different departments, is in charge of official academic recognition (*homologation/equivalence*) of diplomas at all official academic levels except for doctorates, i.e. secondary, VET, Grado and master's. This official recognition grants all the rights in Spain for a diploma as if it were a Spanish diploma, with both professional and academic rights.

Grade conversion, which used to be done by ANECA, is the responsibility of the Spanish Ministry of Education from 1 January 2016. This service is free of charge. Grade conversion is often required for many different purposes (e.g. entering a certain postgraduate or VET programme or applying for a grant).

Outcomes of the field trials

Trial 1: the baseline assessment at institutional and national level (EUA reports);

Three higher education institutions from Spain participated in the field trials of the FAIR project: the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos (URJC), Universidad Politécnica de Valencia (UPV) and Universidad de Sevilla (US).

In the three institutional baseline assessment reports produced by the Evaluation Body, it was recommended that:

- The universities should investigate the discrepancies in the practice of the master's programme directors regarding the admission to master's programmes.
- The universities should investigate the acceptability of ANECA charging for the service of grade conversion, which might be discriminatory.

- The universities should consider the feasibility of an integrated database for all applicants.
- The universities should incorporate a specific procedure for applicants with no or insufficient documentation.
- The universities should assess the need for a comprehensive staff development programme, on which reliable internal assurance practices could be based.
- The universities should improve the provision of information in English on their web pages, particularly those which link to legal, regulatory and procedural texts in Spanish and which would be required as the basis for an appeal.

Furthermore, an overview report at the national level was produced by the Evaluation Body, where the following system-level characteristics were identified for Spain:

- Many external bodies take part in the recognition and admission procedures: UNED, the Ministry of Education, the universities (admission officers, faculties, master's programme directors, etc.).
- The existence of external programme and academic staff accreditation (ANECA, the national quality assurance and accreditation agency).
- The participation of both central and regional (autonomous communities) educational authorities.

It should be noted that the multiplicity of stakeholders involved in recognition in Spain makes it challenging for outsiders to understand its structure and division of roles. The complexity was such that, despite the information provided by different stakeholders involved, the Evaluation Body found it hard to establish precisely which processes were deployed for different degree cycles and different categories of applicants. As a result, the Evaluation Body struggled to formulate recommendations that could address the needs of all participating parties.

Overview of type of changes proposed by institutions (roadmaps)

The following objectives were formulated in the roadmaps of the three Spanish higher education institutions participating in the FAIR project:

- Develop a procedure for refugees without documentation.
- Make English-language information on admission procedures available online.
- Develop guidelines for master's programme directors.
- Disseminate the project.
- Develop an internal protocol for joint dates and admission procedures.

Furthermore, the observations from the national report were discussed among the Spanish participants of the FAIR project (the three higher education institutions and the Spanish NARIC), leading to the following action points at the national level:

- Implement a concrete and distinctive procedure for the admission of applicants with no or insufficient documentation.
- Increase the amount of information on the recognition and admission procedures available in English.

Trial 2: overview of the impact assessment (EUA reports)

In the impact assessment reports of the three Spanish higher education institutions, the following conclusions are drawn by the Evaluation Body:

- Guidelines have been developed in order to achieve consistency among the master's programme directors.
- The increase in the information available in English has been implemented or is still in progress.

- Although the universities are competent to deal with the admission of applicants with no or insufficient documentation, the higher education institutions expect that the Ministry of Education will develop some guidelines.
- The coordination between the faculties and the administrative centre has been improved with regard to a number of aspects, such as the unification of the admission deadlines for the different faculties.
- EUA points out that some of the recommendations have not been addressed. It is necessary to clarify, for instance, that the grade conversion service is not a competence of the university. Instead it is now a competence of the Ministry of Education and it is free of charge. With regard to setting up a central database, not all the universities see the added value of this measure. Finally, the coordination between the Spanish Ministry of Education and the Spanish universities to establish some common guidelines for the recognition of applicants in a refugee-like situation is envisaged.

Recommendations on how institutional procedures could be further improved

Based on the final report on the impact assessment of the FAIR project and on the individual reports for the three participating Spanish higher education institutions, the following points for improvement are recommended (using the various categories as used in the final report of the Evaluation Body):

Institutional infrastructure

- Staff working in admissions offices should be trained to improve recognition practices. For this purpose, the dissemination of the existing manuals as well as cooperation with NARIC should be promoted.
- NARIC Spain, as part of the ministerial sub-directorate in charge of homologation of foreign university diplomas, can share the information on the recognition of specific foreign qualifications contained in its database.
- In order to have a more coherent and systematic procedure at all faculties, the faculties should strive for better coordination.

Information available to applicants

- The information concerning the recognition and admission procedures at the national level should be improved in the Spanish NARIC section within the Spanish Ministry of Education website, including the provision of information in English.
- NARIC Spain should increase its participation in different forums (workshops, fairs, conferences, etc.) addressed to future university students with foreign qualifications, as well as its cooperation with foreign organisations through which foreign citizens will seek information.

Persons with insufficient or no supporting documentation

- A specific procedure should be defined both by the Ministry of Education and by the Spanish higher education institutions for the recognition of qualifications of applicants with no or insufficient documentations, in compliance with the LRC.

Turnaround time

- Turnaround time should be explicitly specified by the universities on their websites.

Recognition of prior learning

- RPL is, depending on the way the knowledge was acquired, regulated by law. Universities should, however, include information about it on their websites.

Quality assurance

- The higher education institutions should explain the QA procedures regarding the recognition and admission procedures they apply to foreign qualifications in a detailed way.

Outcomes of the national exploitation meeting

The Spanish partners agreed that the general outcomes of the FAIR project did not provide sufficient room for additional improvements. Therefore no national FAIR meeting was organised.

Colofon

Text

Part I, II and III:

Annex B and C

Annex D

Country report Belgium (Flanders community)

Country report Croatia

Country report Italy

Country report Germany

Country report The Netherlands

Country report Spain

Nuffic

European University Association & Nuffic

Flemish Ministry of Education and Training

Ministry of Science and Education Croatia

CIMEA – Naric Italy

Hochschulrektorenkonferenz

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