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Information is key to academic recognition

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The Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee adopted new **guidelines for national online information systems** this June. The recommendations, based on experience and existing good practice, are a timely reminder that relevant and reliable information from competent sources is crucial for the recognition of qualifications.

Effective schemes for the fair, transparent and non-discriminatory recognition of foreign education qualifications are paramount if we are to embrace a future of growing cross-border mobility.

Students, universities, employers, national recognition authorities, professional organisations and other stakeholders need trustworthy information to assess the value of a foreign qualification. National information centres, a core mechanism in **regional recognition conventions**, play a key role in providing such information.

Relevant and reliable information

National information centres on academic recognition were first set up under the auspices of the European Union, UNESCO and the Council of Europe in the 1980s and 1990s and their role was strengthened by the adoption of the **Lisbon Recognition Convention** or LRC in 1997.
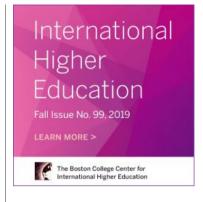
A key function is to provide relevant and reliable information on national recognition schemes, education systems and quality assurance procedures in higher education. Two networks of national information centres, the **ENIC and NARIC networks**, were set up to ease the flow of information between countries.

Since their formation, the LRC Committee Bureau, the ENIC-NARIC networks and the supporting secretariats of UNESCO, the Council of Europe and the European Commission have launched several cross-national information initiatives.

ELCORE, the Working Party on Electronic Communication for Recognition, is a forum with responsibility for overseeing the information systems in the ENIC-NARIC world. ELCORE provides communal services like mailing lists and the **ENIC-NARIC.net** website. These services provide a low-threshold forum for exchanging information and experience between credential evaluators.

Other new initiatives outside the ENIC-NARIC networks are also important, particularly the development of databases and registries that enable digital transfer of student data. Some important actors here are:

• **The Groningen Declaration Network**. Since 2012, the GDN has brought together organisations around the globe that subscribe to the aim of full 'Digital Student Data Portability'. The network works through task forces and through showcasing and promoting best

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practice to further the goal of the declaration.

• **EMREX**, an electronic data exchange solution which ensures safe portability of educational credentials to students, institutions and employers. EMREX allows learners to access their credentials and share them in a safe way. Eight countries currently fully cooperate with EMREX. EMREX uses a standardised format for structuring data on a student's educational attainment to allow data flow between different systems (for instance, diploma registries and job application portals).

• **Digitary**, an online platform for certifying, sharing and verifying academic credentials. Educational institutions issue academic records in a digitally safe way to individual learners. Like EMREX, the learner is free to share the credentials with whomever they want. Institutions in more than 125 countries use Digitary, most notably Australia, Ireland, New Zealand and the UK.

• **The International Association of Universities' World Higher Education Database**. WHED provides information on higher education systems, credentials and institutions around the world. The IAU WHED Portal provides information in 196 countries and territories on higher education systems, credentials and higher education institutions.

• **Erasmus Without Paper** is an Erasmus+ financed project aimed at making student and staff mobility less of an administrative burden by creating a digital workflow instead of today's paper-based processes. The project aims to use existing technology rather than inventing its own. The consortium consists of 14 partner institutions from eight European countries.

• **DEQAR**, a database on higher education institutions and programmes that have been externally reviewed against the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. DEQAR intends to serve as a trusted source of information and support different types of decisions, including the recognition of qualifications.

The role of technology

Common to all these initiatives is the use of new technological solutions for sharing information and student data across borders. Technological advancement is likely to change academic recognition completely in the years to come. Not only in the provision of information and data, but even more so in helping stakeholders to ensure that information is relevant and reliable.

Digitalisation facilitates the effective and secure sharing of data and this again paves the way for a brave new world of greatly simplified and much faster recognition processes.

Individual applications for recognition will not have to be processed manually. Students can share their credentials digitally with whomever they want. With self-service solutions replacing individual inquiries for information and verification, credential evaluators will no longer need to contact the university that issued a student's diploma to verify its authenticity.

In order to create an effective digital ecosystem, we have to pull together and cross-border cooperation is a necessity. The **Erasmus+ project DigiRec**, led by NUFFIC, the Dutch ENIC-NARIC, is a good example of this.

Comprising six ENIC-NARIC offices, the ENIC Bureau, the LRC Committee, EMREX and the Groningen Declaration Network, the project is exploring the connection between digitisation of student

data and the fair and smooth recognition of foreign qualifications. In Nordic countries, a working group appointed by the **Nordic Council of Ministers** is examining similar elements.

The experiences and inspiration that can be drawn from the new guidelines and the various joint efforts undertaken in Europe can also be of value as other regions set up structures to ensure better information provision, for example, under the new Tokyo Recognition Convention for the Asia-Pacific region.

They will also be valuable for the successful implementation of UNESCO's **Global Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications**, adopted this week.

If we are to succeed in meeting the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal for education (SDG4), securing fair, transparent and non-discriminatory recognition of qualifications is crucial to promote academic mobility. In order to achieve this effectively, mechanisms for sharing information on foreign qualifications is the key.

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