Thematic Peer Group B on Lisbon Recognition Convention (TPG B on LRC)

5th Meeting, Tirana
27th April 2023
9:00 – 18:00 Central European Summer Time (CEST)

<u>Minutes</u>

List of Participants

Country/Organization	First Name	Last Name
Albania (Co-Chair)	Linda	Pustina
Armenia	Gayane	Harutyunyan
Bulgaria	Kostadin	Tonev
Council of Europe	Catherine	Dolgova Dreyer
Croatia	Vlatka	Blažević
Denmark	Allan Bruun	Pedersen
EQAR	Colin	Tück
EQAR	Aleksandra	Zhivkovikj
Estonia	Gunnar	Vaht
ESU	Horia	Onita
EUA	Maria	Kelo
EURASHE	Marta	Rodrigues
France (Co-Chair)	Hélène	Bekker
France	Martin	Beyer
Georgia	Salome	Abramishvili
Germany	David	Akrami Flores
Greece	Vasiliki	Athanasopoulou
Greece	Vasileios	Charalampopoulos
Hungary	Gabor	Mészáros
Hungary	Julia	Juhasz
Ireland	Andrina	Wafer
Italy (Co-Chair)	Chiara	Finocchietti

Italy	Angela	Ziccardi
Italy	Luca	Lantero
Italy	Elisa	Petrucci
Latvia	Baiba	Ramina
Latvia	Solvita	Silina
Lithuania	Aurelija	Valeikienė
The Netherlands	Jenneke	Lokhoff
Norway	Helen Sophie	Haugen
Poland	Hanna	Reczulska
Romania	Adrian	Iordache
Romania (online)	Cristina	Ghiţulică
San Marino	Monica	Cavalli
Sweden	Ulrika	Axell
United Kingdom	Cloud	Baiyun
UNESCO	Andreas	Snildal
BFUG Secretariat	Jora	Vaso
BFUG Secretariat	Oliana	Sula

Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium Flemish Community, Cyprus, Czech Republic, EI-ETUCE, ENQA, European Commission, Kazakhstan, Malta, Moldova, North Macedonia, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Spain, Switzerland and Ukraine did not attend the meeting. The Holy See sent their regrets for not attending.

1. Welcome addresses by Albanian host

Chiara Finocchietti (Co-Chair) opened the TPG B on Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) meeting by welcoming all participants. Linda Pustina (Co-Chair) emphasized the meeting's participatory nature and its specific focus on the specific thematic indications for TPG B "**establishing the legal framework to allow the implementation of the LRC**". She further mentioned that there would be a comprehensive overview of the current status of LRC implementation, beginning with the Monitoring the implementation of the Lisbon recognition Convention: monitoring report, Paris/Strasbourg 2022.

Endrit Hoxha (Deputy Minister of Education, Sports and Youth of Albania) welcomed the participants of the meeting on behalf of the Minister of Education, Sports and Youth of Albania, Dr. Evis Kushi. He expressed gratitude for the efforts of the TBG B in supporting the European Area of Higher Education (EHEA), as stated in the Rome Ministerial Communiqué. The Deputy Minister highlighted that the meeting provided an opportunity to discuss monitoring the LRC's progress and the subsequent steps for its implementation, emphasizing the importance of adopting a system-level approach. He also welcomed the topic of the Public Seminar on Automatic Recognition and confirmed Albania's commitment to ensuring automatic recognition of qualifications and study periods within the EHEA. Additionally, he mentioned the completion of

the Albanian National Qualification Framework in 2022 as a significant milestone and affirmed that the country is actively working towards digital recognition.

2. Introduction

Chiara Finocchietti (Co-Chair) informed the participants of the meeting's central theme, which revolved around the core activities of the TPG B on LRC and the recently published LRC monitoring report. She proceeded to present the meeting's agenda, which outlined that the morning sessions would primarily focus on presenting significant evidence and outcomes derived from the LRC monitoring report, followed by a matchmaking activity on the 6 specific thematic indication for TPG B, which is also intended to be functional for setting up the staff mobility. The afternoon sessions would be dedicated to a peer-support activity on the specific thematic indication for TPG B "distribution of work and responsibilities among the competent authorities that carry out recognition procedures". The agenda was approved without any changes.

For more information, please see: *Agenda of the meeting*

3. Monitoring the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention

Luca Lantero (President of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee Bureau-LRCCB) thanked everyone for their work on the 2022 LRC monitoring report. He informed the participants that, after an extraordinary session of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee held in Paris in February 2023, the participation of the Russian Federation and Belarus in the LRC was restricted.

Mr. Lantero clarified that the focus of the first monitoring report in 2016 was on the 10 main provisions of the LRC. He highlighted the findings of the second monitoring report in 2022, on three fundamental principles of the LRC: the right to appeal, information provision, and transnational education (TNE). Also, two supplementary topics included in the second monitoring exercise were automatic recognition and digital solutions, which are not explicitly mentioned in the LRC but addressed in various subsidiary texts. On methodology, Mr. Lantero elaborated that the information gathered from the questionnaire was organized into two sections: one focused on the main principles of the LRC and the other on the two additional topics. Each section included comments, a comparative analysis, and conclusions and recommendations.

On the issue of the right to appeal, it was acknowledged that the report put forth recommendations aimed at improving the accessibility and transparency of useful information. On information provision, issues were discussed like the importance of a central information point provided in a widely-spoken language, the development of the financial capacity and strengthening the role of National Information Centers in order to provide clear, accessible and transparent information, the full implementation of "Guidelines for national online information systems", adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee in 2019, the focused information on procedures for recognition of refugees' qualifications, the cooperation between LRCC Bureau and EB/NAB. On TNE, it was recommended to update the "Revised Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education," and to focus on the QA of programs of TNE institutions.

The four modes of implementation of automatic recognition reported were legal bilateral and multilateral agreements, a legally binding unilateral list of degrees, non-legal binding bilateral and multilateral agreements, and *de facto* automatic recognition. Open access and interconnectedness of digital solutions was called for as well as a focus on digital solution on information provision and recognition procedures. It was mentioned that the Council of Europe's *ad hoc* groups on automatic recognition and digital solutions are helpful in tackling these topics. Regarding digital solutions it was recommended to encourage different ways of implementing online digital solutions for recognition and use of appropriate resources.

In conclusion, it was explained that the LRC work plan in the coming year will focus on the update of the "Revised Code of Good Practice in the provision of Transnational Education, the new subsidiary text of the LRC on digital solutions, automatic recognition and combating fraud. This will be possible thanks to the work done by the Council of Europe (CoE) and by the working group created by the LRCC Bureau. Mr. Lantero concluded that Turkmenistan and Monaco have recently joined the LRC.

For more information, please see: *Monitoring the implementation of the Lisbon recognition Convention: monitoring report, Paris/Strasbourg 2022*

4. Open discussion on the 2022 monitoring report on the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention

The participants were organized into groups for focused discussions on each of the five topics covered in the LRC 2022 monitoring report. The aim was to explore the priorities outlined in the report for each topic and determine the initial steps necessary to ensure the complete implementation of the relevant aspects of the LRC. To facilitate these discussions, Luca Lantero, President of the LRCC Bureau, Allan Bruun Pedersen, First Vice-President of the LRCC Bureau, and Baiba Ramiņa, Second Vice-President of the LRCC Bureau, served as discussants for the group sessions.

Jenneke Lokhoff (The Netherlands) led the discussion on the right to appeal (Group 1) which focused on providing information on the right to appeal. Ms. Lokhoff emphasized the importance of recognizing the diversity of HEIs and their unique processes for recognition and admissions. The discussants from the LRCC Bureau emphasized the need for greater transparency in procedures. They highlighted the significance of providing clear explanations for recognition decisions and granting applicants the right to appeal. It was underscored that refusals of recognition must be adequately justified. The issue of information provision was also raised, noting that language barriers pose challenges as information is predominantly available in national languages.

Horia Onita (ESU) presented the outcomes of the discussion on information provision (Group 2), highlighting several challenges related to hidden or unreliable information. The participants recommended the provision of user-friendly information, with a clear distinction between information targeted at professionals and general users. It was suggested that more dynamic and responsive online channels and digital tools should be utilized for information dissemination Further, a standardized procedure for information provision to refugee and migrant students is needed. Addressing security concerns in information provision at various levels and fostering synergy between projects on information provision were seen as vital. It was mentioned that 11 ENIC-NARIC centers do not have websites.

Marta Rodrigues (EURASHE) reported on the transnational education (Group 3) discussion underlining the importance of QA and the significance of the formal status of HEIs within national systems. Transparent information sharing was identified as a priority. The importance of understanding the diverse elements offered by different countries in relation to TNE Institutions was discussed. Although international organizations have established some international HEIs, there are still recognition restrictions. It was also mentioned that countries should examine their regulatory frameworks which may impose restrictions on TNE. The possibility of countries adopting a single accreditation system through a registered QAA at EQAR was also raised.

Two groups discussed automatic recognition. Andrina Wafer (Ireland) presented the results of Group 4's discussion, where there was concern on the synergy between the LRC and the work of the CoE. It was suggested that Benelux arrangements and regional agreements could facilitate connections and consolidation of efforts. The discussion emphasized the need to make a

distinction between access and admission and that digitization can support transformative changes. The lack of progress in 11 countries regarding the establishment of an ERIC-NARIC website was cited, and it was emphasized that barriers preventing progress must be identified and understood. It was recommended that these 11 countries should implement some form of automatic recognition. It was further emphasized that ENIC-NARICs should play a supportive role in addressing concerns on distrust from both smaller and larger institutions.

Aurelija Valeikienė (Lithuania) provided an overview of Group 5's discussions, with a focus on European instruments that support the implementation of automatic recognition and promote transparency. It was emphasized that a robust educational system should include a three-cycle structure, a National Qualifications Framework aligned with the European Qualifications Framework, and both internal and external quality assurance mechanisms. Recognition was highlighted as an integral part of the admission process. A quality-assured procedure capable of evaluating the authenticity of qualifications was deemed crucial. It was underlined that automatic recognition involves recognizing qualifications at a system level between countries, streamlining regulatory procedures, and establishing strong and accessible data repositories.

Colin Tück (EQAR) discussed the perspectives of various countries regarding digital solutions (Group 6) and their impact on admission decisions. Challenges, such as the absence of structured data, limited accessibility to data which often comes at a cost from universities, difficulties in verifying the authenticity of input, and the overall challenge of increasing digitization were cited. Despite the existence of a potential solution like the European Digital Credentials for Learning, it is seldom utilized. In the discussion, the importance of the link between information provision and digital solutions was highlighted, suggesting that governments should play a role in providing funding and resources to digitalize ENIC-NARIC centers. The use of QR codes on exams and diplomas was proposed as a uniform and useful method for transmitting exam results from HEIs. It was emphasized that digital infrastructure faces limitations due to the existing data available. As such, there is a need for an interoperable and connected framework and an agreement on a set of metadata that can be inserted. Lastly, the evaluation of the assessment process was identified as an area that requires focused attention.

5. Matchmaking activity on the staff mobility - Focus on the 6 specific thematic indication for TPG

5.1 Presentation of the Staff Mobility within the TPG B- LRC- CoRE project

The Staff Mobility within the TPG-LRC-CoRE project, aimed at supporting the implementation of the LRC, was presented. The participants would focus on the six specific indications identified for the TPG B: establishing the legal framework to allow the implementation of the LRC, establishing the distribution of work and responsibilities among the competent institutions that have the right knowledge and capacity to carry out recognition procedures, achieving automatic recognition, recognition of alternative pathways, qualifications held by refugees, optimising the potential of digital technology for the recognition agenda and the Diploma Supplement. Funding is available for a maximum of 20 participants for a 5-day period, with the option to extend at personal expense. Following the mobility, participants were expected to submit a short report. The application process considered geographical balance and thematic interests, with an application template available for expressing specific interests and existing contacts with other countries. Details on the final report, reimbursement for travel and subsistence costs were also outlined. The application deadline is May 31st, participant selection occurs on June 16th, and results are announced on June 19th. The mobility period would run from July 2023 to the end of January 2024.

Ms. Finocchietti provided an explanation of the exercise's objective, which aimed to identify specific topics for offering or receiving support by stakeholders. Two sets of cards were placed on the tables: blue cards representing what a country can share and white cards representing what a country can offer. Participants were given 10 minutes for individual work to write their contributions on the cards. After the 10 minutes, participants moved around to view what other countries had written and find possible matches. It was clarified that topics could be merged if one country could offer support in multiple areas. Regarding consultative member mobilities, it was stated that consultative members can only host as they are not countries implementing the LRC.

Collin Tück (EQAR) presented the conclusions of the matchmaking activity. There were many cards focused on digitalization. For instance, Lithuania offered support on digitalization and Romania needed support in this area. Other matches were related to automatic recognition, recognition of refugees' qualifications, and qualifications from third countries.

6. Update on the work of TPG A on Qualification Framework and TPG C on Quality Assurance

Linda Pustina (Co-Chair, Albania) opened the session emphasizing that the session would be entirely devoted to the peer-support activity on the specific thematic indication for TPG B "distribution of work and responsibilities among the competent authorities that carry out recognition procedures". This indication was previously discussed during the last TPG B meeting in January, where the main objective was to identify priorities. National experiences would be shared based on the distribution of work and responsibilities division within the participating institutions. After the presentations, participants was asked to share experiences and perspective to identify concrete steps towards the implementation of the thematic indication. Before the peer support activity, the Co-Chairs of the TPG A and TPG C provided an overview of the work done so far within the two Peer Groups.

6.1 Update on the work of TPG A

Baiba Ramina (TPG A Co-Chair, Latvia) conveyed greetings from the other TPG A Co-Chairs, and provided an overview of the TPG A meetings, which included two face-to-face meetings and three online meetings. The schedule for the PLA (Peer Learning Activities) meetings was also presented. An update was given on the progress of the TPG A Working Groups (WGs). The WG on Micro Credentials has already had four meetings and is focusing on conducting a SWOT analysis and drafting recommendations. The WG on Self-certification is primarily concerned with finding the best approach to managing self-certification, and they have held seven consultations with countries on this topic. The WG on Short Cycle shares best practices related to short cycle programs and discussed the possibility of reducing the duration of short cycles. Linda Pustina (TPG B Co-chair, Albania) expressed gratitude to Ms. Ramina and added that in Albania, short cycles typically last one or two years and are considered study programs. Partial recognition can be granted for these programs during the bachelor's program if the learning outcomes are compatible. Micro-credentials are not classified as short programs but rather as short courses.

6.2 Update on the work of TPG C

Cristina Ghițulică (TPG C Co-Chair, Romania) provided an overview of the state-of-play of the TPG C on QA, and its composition. She informed that the umbrella project for the TPG C is IMINQA. New thematics were introduced, including the European Approach for QA of Joint Programs, cross-border QA, QA of micro-credentials, QA of European Universities, and digital-

ization of QA processes. The group has conducted two PLA meetings, with the next one scheduled in Belgium in September. Staff mobility was discussed, with funding provided by the project. The application deadline has passed, and most applicants are from QA agencies, while the host countries already have well-established QA systems.

The work of the various TPG C working groups (WGs) was presented. The WG on QA of micro-credentials is based on the MICROBOL project, focusing on developing practical tools for QA of micro-credentials through desk research, surveys and interviews. The final report is to be presented in Astana. The WG on QA of European Universities builds on the EUNIQ project, investigating successful implementation of external QA for European Universities by analyzing legal and regulatory obstacles. A feasibility study was conducted in five countries. The WG on Digitalization of QA processes aims to map the digitalization status of QA procedures and internal functioning of QA agencies in EHEA countries. A survey and interviews with QA agencies will be conducted, and the findings will be included in the report.

7. Peer Support Activities

Chiara Finocchietti (Co-Chair) introduced the session on the presentations of cases in Italy, Norway and Sweden based on the division of roles and responsibilities among stakeholders.

7.1 The role of HEIs, CIMEA (Italy)

Chiara Finocchietti (Co-Chair, Italy) presented CIMEA's collaborative efforts with HEIs, Ministries, ENIC-NARIC Centres and with the Conference of Italian University Rectors. It was also mentioned the establishment of APICE, the first Italian association of credential evaluators. CIMEA developed its cooperation with the different actors of the education sector in different ways. First, training courses for Credential Evaluators and on evaluation on refugees' qualifications in partnership with the European University of Rome and APICE. Second, responsiveness during crises like Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine, producing webinars, papers, and supporting the EU Commission. Third, organization of webinars and meetings on recognition topics (e.g., on automatic recognition). Forth, fostering the creation of communities of practice (e.g., a national network of HEIs dealing with refugees' qualifications, APICE).

7.2 Comparability statements from the labor market perspective (Norway and Sweden)

Helen Sophie Haugen (Norway) and Ulrika Axell (Sweden) presented two case studies on the impact of recognition statements on the labor market in their respective countries, via surveys and interviews (Norway) and a multi-step survey (Sweden). Norway's findings revealed that applicants for recognition statements often had previous work experience but faced challenges due to a mismatch between their higher education degrees and language skills, as well as prior experience in the labor market. The majority of applicants utilized the recognition document to apply for jobs and further studies. Private sector companies relied on commercial companies for verification, while the public sector relied on higher education institutions.

In Sweden, the findings indicated that employees perceived recognition by the Swedish Authority as secure, but language skills and uncertainties about foreign education posed obstacles. Employees placed more trust in Nordic and EU higher education institutions. A survey conducted last year focusing on individuals with upper secondary education or vocational education and training (VET) found that the recognition statement influenced hiring decisions. Applicants also found that the recognition statement aligned with their education. Two additional reports will be published by the end of the year, with the final report translated into English. Both case studies identified common challenges, including difficulties in measuring the impact of the recognition service and accessing reference materials and statistical data. Additionally, there were challenges in measuring the subjective notion of the human factor. Trust in foreign

qualifications posed another challenge, as Norway and Sweden tended to trust countries geographically close to them. Important to note was that the recognition statement itself does not guarantee access to the labor market. Participants were invited to discuss on the experience connecting the distribution of work and responsibilities among competent authorities that carry recognition processes and the main needs at national level to strengthen cooperation among the stakeholders.

8. Discussion among the participants

The second part of discussions focused on key takeaways and the way forward at both the national level and as part of TPG B. Participants were encouraged to share the progress to be achieved at national level by 2024 as included in the Action Plan for the group, as regard the thematic indication "distribution of work and responsibilities among the competent authorities that carry out recognition procedures".

Group 1, reported by Jenneke Lokhoff (the Netherlands) discussed experiences where certain areas of recognition are not adequately covered. The ENIC-NARIC centers need support to cover the necessary competencies to fully implement the LRC. The main steps identified by Group 1 include securing adequate resources based on political will, mapping national situations, identifying gaps using models from different projects, and implementing solutions that bring about changes in practices.

Group 2, reported by Aurelija Valeikienė (Lithuania), identified several needs that included training, networking, reviewing arrangements on a national level for themes like the European Universities initiative, implementation of the European approach to micro-credentials. It was also mentioned the need for raising awareness among ENIC-NARIC centers about services provided to the private sector and public institutions, improving external communication strategies, utilizing English language, securing resources with the commitment of public authorities, fostering cooperation between ENIC-NARIC officers, and organizing more live events. The group also emphasized the importance of learning and benchmarking, suggesting the use of a peer review approach to improve practices in line with the LRC. It was also suggested that public authorities should be informed about the LRC monitoring.

Group 3, reported by Andrina Wafer (Ireland), started their discussion by considering stakeholders and recognition authorities. They highlighted the need to assess their moderate strengths and challenges, including the involvement of professional bodies in finding best practices and benchmarking. Leveraging collaborations across different jurisdictions was seen as crucial for driving change. The group emphasized the importance of digital solutions and language and stressed that research and consultation should be part of the engagement process.

Horia Onita (ESU) emphasized the need for increased engagement from stakeholders. In terms of recognition, he highlighted the importance of focusing on ERIC-NARIC competencies, as this is included in the Council's conclusions on automatic recognition, which is expected to be approved in May. The support of ERIC-NARIC centers has uplifted the chapter on recognition. Maria Kelo (EUA) supported taking a system-level approach to automatic recognition, while always considering the distinction between access and admission. Colin Tück (EQAR) emphasized the importance of keeping in mind the distinction between admission and recognition, as well as other aspects such as automatic recognition and the relevance of digital tools.

9. Conclusions

Chiara Finocchietti (Co-Chair) concluded the meeting by encouraging the participants to apply for staff mobility opportunities. She also announced that Bosnia and Herzegovina has joined TPG B, welcoming the new member country. The TPG B Co-Chairs expressed gratitude to all the participants and extended thanks to the host for their support in organizing the meeting.