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

Sixth Meeting, Online
1 February 2024
9:30 – 12:30 (CEST)

<u>Minutes of meeting</u>

List of Participants

Country/Organization	First Name	Last Name
Albania (Co-Chair)	Linda	Pustina
Armenia	Gayane	Harutyunyan
Armenia	Lusine	Hambardzumyan
Austria	Karin	Giese
Austria	Agnes	Witzani
Belgium/Flemish Community	Erwin	Malfroy
Bosnia & Herzegovina	Mirta	Mandić Martinović
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Dženan	Omanović
Bulgaria	Vanya	Grashkina
Bulgaria	Kostadin	Tonev
Croatia	Vlatka	Blažević
Croatia	Leonardo	Marušić
Cyprus	Popi	Economidou Appios
Denmark	Allan Bruun	Pedersen
ENQA	Anna	Gover
EQAR	Magalie	Soenen
EQAR	Aleksandra	Zhivkovikj
EQAR	Annelies	Trass
Estonia	Aleksandra	Dolgopolova
EUA	Helene	Peterbauer
EURASHE	Jakub	Grodecki
European Commission	Julie	Anderson
European Commission	Yann-Maël	Bideau
France	Jingchao	Shi
France (Co-Chair)	Martin	Beyer
Georgia	Salome	Abramishvili
Germany	David	Akrami Flores
Giorgia	Lela	Lomadze
Greece	Vasiliki	Athanasopoulou
Greece	Vasileaios	Charalampopoulos
Holy See	Melanie	Rosenbaum
Holy See	Laura	Ponsetti
Hungary	Julia	Juhasz
Hungary	Gábor	Mészáros
Ireland	Andrina	Wafer
Ireland	Jennefer	Osborne
Italy	Elisa	Petrucci
Italy (Co-Chair)	Chiara	Finocchietti
Italy CIMEA	Giacinta	Ratto Vaquer
Italy CIMEA	Andreina	Ghirlanda
Italy CIMEA	Federica	Sancillo
Kazakhstan	Zhanar	Yergaliyeva
Kazakhstan	Zhaslan	Zhaisanov

Kazakhstan	Yerzhan	Irgebayev
Latvia	Baiba	Ramina
Latvia	Inara	Dunska
Lithuania	Aurelija	Valeikienė
Montenegro	Dunja	Bulajic
Montenegro	Dajana	Pavicevic
Norway	Helén Sophie	Haugen
Norway	Andreas	Snildal
Poland	Hanna	Reczulska
Romania	Adrian	Iordache
San Marino	Monica	Cavalli
San Marino	Remo	Massari
Slovak Republic	Lucia	Hustavova
Sweden	Ulrika	Axell
The Netherlands	Bas	Wegewijs
The Netherlands	Jenneke	Lokhoff
UNESCO	Vanja	Gutovic
BFUG Secretariat	Blerina	Caslli

Azerbaijan, Council of Europe, Czech Republic, EI – ETUCE, ESU - European Students' Union, Malta, Moldova, North Macedonia, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine and United Kingdom did not attend the meeting.

1. Welcome remarks and approval of the agenda

Martin Buyer (Co-Chair, France) and Director of ENIC-NARIC France, opened the 6th meeting of the TPG B on LRC by extending a warm welcome to all participants. Linda Pustina (Co-Chair, Albania) outlined the meeting's agenda, which included discussions on key topics related to recognition, updates on the group's work, and activities under the TPG B on LRC umbrella project. The meeting would be structured into three sessions: the first session on important recognition agenda topics such as the Joint European Degree and the Global Recognition Convention, the second session on national and international initiatives supporting the implementation of Bologna Key Commitments, and the third session would review activities carried out within the TPG B on LRC project, including publications and staff mobility efforts. Ms. Pustina noted that the upcoming EHEA Ministerial Conference would be held in Tirana on May 29 and 30, 2024, and invited all delegations to attend. The agenda was then approved without changes.

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

2. State of play of TPG B and next steps

Chiara Finocchietti (Co-Chair, Italy) welcomed everyone and provided a quick overview of the state of play of the TPG B work. TPG B has circulated two questionnaires to define the group's needs and prioritize topics and will also submit a third survey before the Conference to evaluate its work. The next steps include four publications, two of which will be presented in the second part of the meeting. The publications will be on recognition procedures focusing on higher education institutions (HEIs), digital technology for recognition, on macro-credential recognition with focus on HEIs and on European Joint Degrees. The last TPG B meeting will be on the 23rd of April 2024 in Rome, followed by the public seminar on digitalization on the 24th of April. All these activities are supported by the co-founding of the Erasmus Plus project TPG-LRC constructing Recognition in the EHEA. It was pointed out that all materials and presentations are available on the EHEA website.

3. European Strategy for Universities, towards a Joint European degree

Yann-Maël Bideau (European Commission) presented the Commission's work program towards the Joint European degree. It was highlighted that the EC is preparing a new higher education package to be launched on the spring of 2024. The package consists of three main components: a communication on a joint European degree; two proposals for Council recommendations, one on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education, and another on European quality assurance and recognition systems.

The challenges faced by universities in developing robust joint programs and avoiding joint degrees include complex and sometimes conflicting rules at national or regional levels, leading to high administrative burdens. Additionally, there is a lack of a common European framework for designing and delivering joint degrees, as well as a lack of

trust in QA and automatic recognition of qualifications. Furthermore, there's a deficit in incentives and recognition for academic staff engaged in transnational education cooperation.

To address these issues, six pilot projects are currently underway involving various institutions, QA agencies, accreditation agencies, and ministries. These projects aim to explore the concept of the European degree, mapping out over 1000 joint programs and conducting various events, workshops, surveys, and interviews. Expected to conclude in April, these projects will provide recommendations to the EC and the wider community.

The current regulatory situation regarding joint programs or degrees needs to be improved to better support them in the long term. There is a trend towards developing joint programs with partners outside Europe, requiring strong cooperation to create synergies with the Bologna process. The aim is to establish a common set of criteria for joint transnational degree programs, piloted by projects and agreed upon by different states and higher education institutions to ensure a common agreement. These joint degrees will be awarded by institutions according to national legislation and qualification frameworks, based on common characteristics based on international and EU polices. They are not intended to replace national programs but to operate on a voluntary basis for institutions and countries.

The projects have identified more than 53 obstacles, legal or administrative, to be tackled by improving cooperation between institutions. A joint European Degree embedded in national legislation would significantly remove regulatory barriers. It's suggested that national and regional legislators can improve the delivery of joint degree programs by reforming educational systems and creating dedicated tracks for joint degree programs based on common criteria.

Preliminary outcomes from the pilot project, expected to run until the end of April, indicate positive feedback from national legislators and institutions regarding the European Degree. It is seen as a means to remove national barriers and serve as a reference framework for creating more joint programs, especially for smaller and medium-sized institutions. Proposed criteria will be refined based on feedback, with a call for evidence open until February 6th to solicit contributions for document improvement.

4. Towards the implementation of the Global Recognition Convention

Vanja Gutovic (UNESCO) gave a brief update on the Global Recognition Convention, alongside five regional conventions including the Lisbon Convention, and the latest for Arab states adopted in 2022, as well as the Tokyo, Addis, and Buenos Aires Conventions. These conventions aim to promote mobility through international cooperation while respecting domestic policies and institutional autonomy. The global convention, adopted by UNESCO's general conference in November 2019, aims to establish universal principles for recognizing studies and enhancing academic mobility. It came into force in March 2023, with its first intergovernmental conference held in July 2023 to oversee implementation and discuss a work program running until June 2025. This program focuses on operational guidelines, subsidiary texts, and research agendas related to quality assurance (QA) and transnational education (TNE), also addressing the qualifications of refugees and displaced individuals. So far, 27 countries, mostly from Europe, have joined the Convention, establishing National Information Centers. UNESCO supports countries in their ratification process and promotes global cooperation.

5. Updates from the TPG A and the TPG C

Baiba Ramina (TPG A Co-Chair, Latvia) presented the latest developments in the work of TPG A, focusing on thematic priorities such as self-certification, short cycles, and micro-credentials. TPG A has conducted six meetings and plans for four Peer Learning Activities, with the final one scheduled for April 2024, concentrating on micro-credentials, learning outcomes, and self-certification. Among the three working groups within TPG A, the micro-credentials group has garnered significant attention, particularly in Europe. This group conducted surveys on micro-credentials across TPG countries and developed a recommendation comprising 10 implementation steps. There is notable synergy and collaboration among all TPGs on this topic due to shared research efforts and a joint document that will be published within the TPG-LRC CoRE written in cooperation by the 3 TPGs. Another working group is dedicated to reviewing and enhancing the self-certification mechanism, providing recommendations for process improvement. The third working group is focused on short cycles in higher education, with recommendations currently under development.

The Co-Chairs of TPG C sent apologies for not being able to attend the meeting.

6. Bologna Key Commitments: relevant input to complement the work of the TPG B

6.1. TPG A working group on short cycle, main results

Baiba Ramina (TPG A Co-Chair, Latvia) presented the work of the working group on short cycle qualification in Higher Education, discussing on its purpose, features, and recognition of short cycles, particularly in the context of Paris

Communique. Short cycles are educational systems built upon general secondary education, providing occupational knowledge and understanding, typically spanning 90 to 120 ECTS credits.

The discussion emphasized the importance of considering various aspects of short cycles within the framework of the Paris Communique, which stipulates the 90 to 120 ECTS credit range. Further research is needed to distinguish between short cycle qualifications and micro-credentials. Key considerations included consultation with general secondary education, framework modifications, and discerning the differences between short cycle qualifications and micro-credentials. International recognition of short cycle qualifications as deemed crucial, especially in countries with limited infrastructure. Survey findings indicated that some countries provide vague responses regarding the recognition of short cycle qualifications, suggesting the possibility of recognition even in the absence of a dedicated short cycle framework.

Overall, the discussion underscored the importance of clarifying the distinctions between short cycles and micro-credentials, alongside the imperative for improvement in this domain.

6.2. Reflecting on ESG implementation - Findings from the project Quality Assurance Fit for the Future (QA-FIT)

Anna Gover (ENQA) provided an update on the progress of the QA-FIT project, which is focused on the implementation of internal and external QA across European higher education area. The project is coordinated by key European stakeholders, partners and additional national level partners. Surveys conducted among key stakeholders showed that the importance of having a European quality assurance framework and the ESG is still important for supporting the development of learning and teaching, trusting qualifications, student ability, and quality culture. The common QA Framework plays a crucial role as a baseline for recognition.

Stakeholders have expressed their preference for more detailed coverage of internal QA topics. HEIs were less keen on an expression of the ESG to cover many different topics, possibly due to issues of institutional autonomy. While students in the National Student Unions were more enthusiastic about having more topics covered by the ESG. The ESG discussion will focus on determining what requires regulation at the EHEA level and what should be left to Nationals at an additional level.

Agencies are encountering challenges, particularly regarding the need for greater flexibility in external QA procedures. Adapting frameworks and criteria to meet evolving HE landscapes proves difficult. Maintaining a robust framework is essential for ensuring consistency among stakeholders when implementing QA practices. Analysis of external QA processes by agencies indicates a trend toward simplification, with a focus on enhancement and accountability. However, integrating international activities often necessitates adjustments to legal frameworks. Obstacles to advancing these activities primarily stem from legal constraints and resource limitations rather than from the ESG. The QA-Fit project aims to consolidate information and suggest future directions for the BFUG. It is hoped that the Ministerial Communique will endorse efforts to revise the ESG in the coming years.

7. National and international initiatives to implement Bologna tools

7.1. Disseminating information at national level: Bologna Hub Conference

David Akrami Flores (Germany) introduced the Bologna Hub project, aimed to bolster the internationalization efforts of European universities. The hub serves as a platform for developing and sharing innovative Bologna instruments and practices, offering resources on its website, publications, and organizing various events and seminars. Additionally, the Bologna Peer Support project, funded by Erasmus Plus, seeks to promote the implementation of Bologna commitments and tools across European HEIs, addressing disparities in their adoption. The project conducts studies and surveys on learning outcome recognition and the uptake of micro-credentials, with notable progress seen. Notably, it established the Fundamental Academic Values Award in 2022, with a new call for applications forthcoming. DAAD's involvement in Bologna-related activities includes participation in working groups and the implementation of both the Bologna Hub and Bologna Peer Support projects. The latter, coordinated by DAAD in collaboration with EUA, ESU, the Greek Ministry of Education of Religious Affairs, and the general federal Ministry, offers targeted peer counseling from international Bologna experts to over 30 HEIs across 13 Bologna countries.

7.2. Recognition of alternative pathways: European RPL Network

Agnes Witzani (Austria) provided a view on the European Recognition of Prior Learning Network (RPL-Network) which is an association of national networks at the European level working on the subject of RPL. Its main purpose is to enhance the use of RPL by supporting its members and establishing national, sustainable national networks. The network was formed as part of the work package of the Erasmus project, which builds on a previous project. The network consists of institutions from Germany, Ireland, Austria, Iceland, Sweden, Croatia, and representatives

from European institutions in EUA, EURASHE, and ENQA. Additionally, individual experts from HEIs contribute their expertise to specific topics. The main goal is to exchange experience on the implementation of RPL in the national higher education area and support each other in the establishment of national networks. The network structure involves permanent committees, divided into coordinating, policy, peer learning, and PR committees, and working groups on specific topics relevant to RPL. The network plans to host an online conference in November 2024 to raise awareness in RPL and address relevant topics with a wider audience. The network is ready to expand to further partner countries and associated partners and is interested in connecting with other countries that have passionate RPL networks established or are in the process of forming such networks.

7.3. Achieving automatic recognition: Second edition of the European Area of Recognition (EAR) manual to support fair and automatic recognition

Jenneke Lokhoff (Netherlands) provided an overview of the second edition of the EAR manual, launched in September 2023, that is a recognition manual for credential evaluators of the ENIC-NARIC Networks aiming to support fair recognition as well as automatic recognition. The first edition was published in 2012, with the aim to streamline the diversity of recognition practices and develop a manual to address this issue. The manual makes recognition practices clearer for credential evaluators and stakeholders, resulting in a comprehensive guide for the network, with recommendations for different recognition topics.

The second edition has been updated with new features to make it more user-friendly, with new chapters including an introduction to recognition, governance, ENIC-NARIC networks, the global recognition convention, the five elements of a qualification, the general evaluation process, specific types of procedures and qualifications, and information instruments. The manual also includes new elements such as micro-credentials, digital student data, quality assurance, and automatic recognition, and the update is part of the ongoing efforts to improve the EAR manual and ensure its relevance and effectiveness in the field of recognition. The manual is easily accessible and useful for stakeholders and staff members, serving as a valuable resource also for the ENIC-NARIC office.

8. Latest developments within the TPG-LRC CoRE project

Elisa Petrucci (Italy) provided an overview of the TPG-LRC CoRE project, which serves as the umbrella project supporting the institutional activity of the TPG B towards the implementation of the Bologna key commitment 2. Running until April 2025, the project focuses on research, publication, and peer support activities development. It has been working on the six thematic indications for the TPG B, prioritized in line with the survey conducted among the TPG B members in 2021 (with digital technology and diploma supplement for the recognition agenda, automatic recognition, and alternative pathways emerging as the top three topics). The project supports the institutional activities of TPG B, having organized six TPG meetings thus far, with the last one scheduled for April 23, 2024. Additionally, two seminars targeting HEIs have been conducted, with another planned for April. Transnational peer support activities, such as staff mobility and PLAs, have been included, with six PLAs planned, three of which were held in conjunction with TPG meetings and three online on digital solutions for the recognition agenda. The project aims to deliver four publications on quality of recognition, digital solutions, micro-credentials, and European joint degrees. The staff mobility activity was carried out and sixteen applications involving 13 different countries have been received. Various additional activities have been undertaken (not included in the Grant Agreement), with the consortium commended for their dedication and effort in achieving project objectives.

8.1. Peer Learning Activities and publications

Aleksandra Zhivkovikj (EQAR) provided an update on the working group dedicated to the digitalization of recognition tools within the TPG B LRC CoRE project, established at the project's onset with EQAR as the lead partner. The group's primary objective is to map digital tools for recognition in TPG B countries. To achieve this goal, the group organized three Peer Learning Activities (PLAs) aimed at enhancing digital processes.

The first PLA, held in September, focused on the input phase, addressing data reception and verification. Presentations covered topics such as digital credentials, active/passive databases, and the use of AI in recognition. The second peer learning webinar, concentrating on the throughput phase, discussed internal processing processes and interoperability between databases, with a focus on QA and evaluations of alternative providers. The final PLA in December centered on the output phase and data distribution, featuring presentations on data transfer processes. Examples showcased during the PLAs will be compiled into a publication scheduled for release in 2024, aimed at providing TPG B members with practical insights and solutions for further digitalization. The group encourages participants to share their digitalization examples by March 1st, 2024, for inclusion in the publication.

Helene Peterbauer (EUA) presented the work of the working group on Quality of Recognition which is part of the TPG on LRC CoRE project, whose aim is to explore the links between recognition and QA in HEIs. It was inquired

among HEIs, the approach they use for compliance with the LRC, but also how they comply with the standards and guidelines for QA in the EHEA. A survey was conducted in early 2023 that explores the national context and collaboration, focusing on internal QA within HEIs and its links with recognition. The survey received 193 responses from 22 countries. Findings from the survey were enriched with information gathered in three focus groups: 2 with HEIs and 1 with students to get the students perspectives.

Overall, compliance with LRC was very good across the countries, with more effort required in the implementation of Article VII. QA is a crucial aspect of HEIs, but there is room for improvement concerning the link between recognition and QA among those working on recognition. Feedback processes also showed the importance of involving relevant stakeholders in getting feedback on recognition procedures in internal evaluation processes. The draft document will be circulated among TPG B members before publishing it in May. In conclusion, the working group on quality of recognition is working to improve the relationship between recognition and QA in HEIs.

As an additional activity, a separate analysis by EQAR aimed to evaluate the fulfillment of ESG 1.4 by HEIs will be included in the document. The research focused on English language reports related to institutional reviews and external QA reviews, and in total there were approximately 700 reports. The frequency of terminology used in these reports was found to be high, with admission having the highest frequency, followed by progression and recognition. However, the evidence is diverse, as different nations have different experiences with these concepts.

9. **Staff mobility results. Roundtable involving participating countries – Armenia, France, Georgia, Greece, Lithuania, Norway, Romania**

Participant countries in the staff mobility organised within the TPG LRC CoRE project shared their experiences and the impact in their countries.

Armenia's National Information Center went to Italy (CIMEA). The implementation of the LRC holds significant importance for Armenian universities and the country's higher education system. Recognition serves as a cornerstone for equal access to higher education, establishing a crucial link between qualifications, QA, and recognition. The importance of face-to-face meetings was emphasized for fostering a friendly environment and exchanging experiences.

ENIC-NARIC Center colleagues from France visited CIMEA in Italy in November, reciprocated by Italian colleagues visiting France in January. While France is well-advanced in LRC implementation, automatic recognition is not yet fully integrated into all French HEIs and requires further promotion until 2025. In 2021, measures were initiated, including an English personal training account for employees, to enhance lifelong learning. A "Tour de France" initiative is planned by the center to promote EQAR for regional academics over the next two years, with support from the Ministry of Higher Education. In-person meetings with colleagues were highlighted as crucial for sharing best practices and experiences, with the staff mobility program identified as a valuable tool for promoting dialogue and understanding.

Georgia acknowledged the importance of face-to-face communication in promoting dialogue between countries and sharing information. While Georgia lacks practical experience in recognizing refugees' education, Chapter Seven of the Recognition Convention offers valuable insights for developing countries.

Greece hosted San Marino during the Staff Mobility activity, where digital recognition procedures and progress in interoperability with Greek government infrastructure were presented. Discussions focused on supporting thematic indication and optimizing digital technology for recognition, including diploma supplements. Participants expressed gratitude for the program and anticipate future events.

Lithuania visited Italy during the exchange and also served as a host, providing valuable insights into daily routines, workplace practices, the LRC, and digital tools. The mobility was deemed valuable and pleasant.

Romania visited Lithuania to learn about the QA agency's recognition procedure and the importance of digital solutions. They expressed interest in future peer-to-peer visits.

Norway hosted the Albanian ENIC-NARIC team, exchanging experiences on credential evaluation, recognition of vocational education, and professional recognition of teacher qualifications. The visit was mutually beneficial, with suggestions to facilitate opportunities for simultaneous visits by multiple centers.

Ireland has visited Sweden through this activity and learned about recognition procedures and the potential for digital technology. They believe AI is committed to expanding in this area and that it can make work more streamlined and efficient. They learned as well about their colleagues' approach to recognition, hoping to use this knowledge in their own work.

Participants thanked their hosts for the hospitality and valued this as a precious exchange experience.

10. Wrap up and conclusions

Elisa Petrucci (Italy) expressed gratitude to all participants for sharing their experiences, highlighting the importance of staff mobilities in providing full opportunities for all participants. She also emphasized the usefulness of this tool in peer support activities.

Chiara Finocchietti (TPG B, Italy) informed participants about the upcoming Monitoring Survey to evaluate the quality of work in alignment with the Ministerial Communique and Conference. She emphasized that all publications will be shared for members to provide feedback. Expressing gratitude for active participation and technical expertise, she looked forward to seeing everyone in April in Rome. As no other business was put forward, the meeting was closed.