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Bologna Thematic Peer Group B on The Lisbon Recognition Convention

3rd Meeting

Online, hosted by France

17 June 2020

Minutes

List of participants

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France	Alexandre	Faby
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Apologies from Kazakhstan, North Macedonia and Portugal.

1. Welcome addresses by France as co-Chair country of the TPG B.

Hélène Bekker, the French Co-Chair, welcomed all participants on behalf of all TPG (Thematic Peer Group) B on LRC (Lisbon Recognition Convention) Co-Chairs and invited the Director General of France Éducation International to give an introductory speech.

Pierre-François Mourier, Director General of France Éducation International (Institution that celebrates its 25 years anniversary) welcomed everyone and stressed how the Institution's name change, which took place last year from CIEP to France Éducation International, reflects the scope of its activity and vocation in terms of international actions in the field of education. At the same time, the activity of the French ENIC-NARIC center has continuously grown, especially in the field of academic and professional mobility, demonstrating its ability to evolve and adapt itself to online recognition procedures since 2014- which is extremely important considering that students' data are increasingly in a digital format and it is necessary to share information in a secure way (the use of blockchain being one of the solutions experimented). Digitalization within the frame of implementation of the LRC, especially since the 2018 Paris Communiqué, has become a priority for the whole EHEA even more today with the impact of COVID-19, and the peer support approach based on solidarity, cooperation and mutual understanding is an effective way to approach the challenges of today's education. This spirit of solidarity seems to have grown stronger in all sectors of society, such as in the field of medical qualifications held by refugees. Thanks to an initiative of the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees- EQPR, specific session for refugees holding medical qualifications were organized in short time. As for digitalization, better integration of refugees and development of linguistic skills is a priority. The Director General of France Éducation International finally hoped that physical meetings would soon take place in the framework of staff mobility projects to share experiences and learn from each other.

Denis Despréaux, Director for European and International Affairs at French Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research, welcomed everyone on behalf of the French Ministry and stressed out that today's critical issue is recognition along with Quality Assurance. To this regard, the peer-support approach adopted since the 2018 Paris Communiqué reflects a new way of thinking the Bologna Process: sharing objectives, dialogue and cooperation, dedicating time on good practices and shedding a light on changing ways and ideas. As new challenges are coming up such as digitalization, distance learning, fair recognition on all qualifications including those held by refugees or the launch of European University Alliance, some initiatives are still to be taken and reforms to be made, which makes it essential to maintain cross-country discussions between peers and all the Bologna tools, whose implementation requires an effectively democratic context.

After these welcome addresses, French Co-chair informed all participants that questions during the meeting could be done through the chat and that recordings would be available at the end of the meeting.

The agenda was adopted without modifications.

Attachment: *TPG_B_LRC_3_Draft_Agenda.pdf*

2. Updated from the BFUG and BICG.

Ana Tecilazić Goršl, Croatian representative, presented the updates from three different perspectives: Co-Chair of the BFUG, Co-Chair of the BICG and Croatian Presidency of the EU.

From the BICG (Bologna Implementation Coordination Group) perspective, the Croatian representative reminded the three key commitments agreed upon in the 2018 Paris Communiqué which are crucial for the success of the Bologna Process.

The first key commitment is related to Qualifications Framework, to the full implementation of the National Qualification Framework compatible with the Bologna framework, and to the use of ECTS for the first cycles of higher education. The second key commitment concerns the full implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention with the use of the Diploma Supplement. The third key commitment is the use of the European Standards and Guidelines in Quality Assurance arrangements in the Bologna countries.

Besides the agreement between the member countries of the Bologna Process on these three commitments, Bologna countries also agreed on adopting a so-called “peer-support approach”: a method based on solidarity, cooperation and mutual learning in the implementation of the three key commitments. A long process was necessary to adopt this method, but it has proven to be very successful, because it gives countries the opportunity to exchange their experiences and challenging in the implementation of the three key commitments.

In this regard, the role of the BICG is rather a technical and organizational one, but still very important: it has been set up to organize and make a match-making between countries based on their expression of interest to participate in different groups related to the three key commitments. Co-Chairs of the three TPG groups are also members of the BICG, and this was an opportunity for them to communicate and exchange information about the activities implemented by the TPGs themselves. The BICG has also launched a survey through which it is collecting perspectives and perceptions by different members of different structures and different TPGs. The feedbacks received so far show an overall positive impression on the peer-support approach, as participants appreciate the opportunity to work together in TPGs.

Although the work of TPGs has focused on the three key commitments, it was inevitable that new and specific issues would raise, so that all groups have addressed some more recent and specific issues- which in the case of TPG B was the perception and interpretation of automatic recognition, not part of the key commitments but still very important and interesting for future developments in this policy area. The Croatian Co-Chair also emphasized the importance of the support received by the Erasmus+ project supports the three TPGs, but also other different smaller projects that focused on different issues. Therefore, it has been possible to find a balance between focusing on key commitments and exploring new policy developments.

Another very useful aspect appreciated by participants in TPGs is that all the three TPG groups also had seminars open to everyone, which has been an opportunity to communicate and exchange views and information also with stakeholders’ participants. Concerning national Action plans, it is quite challenging from the coordination perspectives to agree with all countries on three different key commitments to set up national action plans also in coordination with stakeholders, which is very helpful for monitoring progress in the implementation of the three commitments. These national Action plans are to be constantly updated and, most importantly, set up by countries themselves: each country assesses its needs and plans for the future and shares with others the challenges that they are specifically facing.

It was explained that the work of the BICG (TPGs included) will be presented in next BFUG online meeting on 25 June hosted by Croatia. During the meeting there three parallel sessions will be organized and the TPGs Co-Chairs will present to the BFUG

the most important issues, recommendations and outcomes of their work. The message that the whole BICG wishes to enhance to the BFUG is the willingness to continue with the work of TPGs, with the implementation of the peer-support approach in the next-2020 period. This will be an opportunity to discuss with the BFUG members about the usefulness of the method of the TPGs, as it is crucial to show that it has been a very hard work the engagement of all participants, even if it took some time to set up the structure.

During the next BFUG meeting there will also be a focus on issues related to the outbreak of the pandemic, as this crisis is having a huge impact on the whole EHEA. To this purpose, there will be two parallel sessions dedicated to the impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education, one focusing on the perspective of students and the other focusing on the perspective of higher education institutions.

The Draft Ministerial Communiqué and the Draft of the Bologna Global Policy Statement will also be discussed during the next BFUG meeting.

Lastly, Croatian Co-Chair provided some information from EU Member States. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, Croatian Presidency has organized a collection of information related to the impact of Covid-19 to all levels of education (higher included). The results of this survey are regularly updated and the collected information has been made available to Ministers in a conference held during the Croatian Presidency.

3. Introduction to the working groups: results of the BICG survey, staff mobility and impact of COVID 19 on implementation of LRC in EHEA countries.

The Italian Co-Chair, Chiara Finocchietti introduced the working groups by showing with a power point presentation the results of the BICG survey, staff mobility project and impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of the LRC in EHEA countries.

The Italian Co-Chair pointed out that, since this meeting was supposed to be held in presence but then postponed due to the pandemic, the TPG B Co-Chairs are following with the Executive Agency the request of *force majeure* for the project (knowing that there were financial implications for members of TPG B who were supposed to participate in the physical meeting). The Italian Co-Chair also thanked the French colleagues, who were very flexible and took care of all practicalities showing a concrete spirit of solidarity when the physical meeting was cancelled.

TPG B Co-Chairs decided to shift this meeting to the online format and focus on the impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of LRC in the EHEA.

Regarding the staff mobility project, this has been suspended at least in physical format, but partially rescheduled to be held online at least for the part possible to be held in online mode. The deadline for staff mobility in presence has been postponed until the end of November (hoping that it will be able to be held in presence). Also, it is still possible to apply, and hopefully the new call will be launched at the end of August.

Concerning information on the BICG survey, the Italian Co-Chair gave more details for the TPG B related part. The survey was conducted by the BICG; TPG B Co-Chairs have received 23 answers so far, in line with the other TPGs, and the final results are going to be reported in the BICG Report. The main outcomes are largely

positive: peer support should continue, there is positive boost for implementation, new legislation and practices. On the other side, some countries have also reported that they already have everything in place concerning the implementation of the LRC and expressed the need for more synergies with existing networks.

Albanian Co-Chair Linda Pustina reminded that the BICG report will be discussed in the next BFUG meeting in Split on 25 June, the actual report is not the final one: it has been drafted by the BICG based on the survey conducted, but further comments will be sent, included the conclusions of this meeting. The final version of the BICG report, including the comments that the group will send, will be shared with TPG B participants in order to have a more inclusive approach and gather comments. If necessary, TPG B Co-Chairs will organize another *ad hoc* meeting, but this will be decided based on the inputs received.

All participants were split in three working groups to have a more effective discussion, using as input the Preparatory Note sent to all participants before the meeting. The main topics to discuss were those expressed as priorities for the TPG B: access to HE, recognition of qualifications held by refugees, digitalization, recognition of alternative pathways and disrupted learning, which is the part more related to Covid-19, and automatic recognition. As this list is not exhaustive, all participants were invited to discuss even other aspects related to the implementation of the LRC.

Italian Co-Chair then outlined the structure of the Preparatory Note: for each topic, there was a reference to an LRC article or to a thematic indication for the TPG B; then some questions for discussion were drafted; finally, the Preparatory Note also included insertion of bibliography reference and relevant Erasmus+ co-funded projects.

It was stressed that the main goal of these working groups was to collect challenges, responses (something that is still not in place and could be implemented) as well as good practices (something already implemented) related to the impact of Covid-19 on implementation of LRC. Representatives of stakeholder organizations were also invited to bring their teacher, students and HEIs perspective in order to collect also the challenges, best goals and good practices from their point of view. The second goal was to provide inputs in order to update the Action plan published on the [EHEA website](#). After this meeting, TPG B Co-Chairs would send the Action plan to participants asking them to update it with achievements and good practices implemented during this one year and a half work. Lastly, the idea is that as soon as staff mobility opens, even in a virtual format, this is also an opportunity to do some matchmaking for peer support.

Italian Co-Chair outlined the next steps after this TPG B third and last meeting:

- send the updated Action plans within 15 July 2020;
- the results of this meeting and of the updated Action plans will be integrated with the final version of the BICG Report;
- the BUCG Report will be presented during the BFUG meeting in Berlin (24-25 September).

TPG_B_HR_UA_3_Preparatory Note

4. Parallel working groups on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the implementation of LRC at national level.

Participants were divided into three groups that discussed the same topics, chaired by Estonia, The Netherlands and Ukraine representatives, that reported the final outcomes of each working group to the plenary.

The Key topics proposed to be discussed in the group, as indicated in the Preparatory note, were:

- Access to higher education (LRC: section IV);
- Recognition of qualifications held by refugees (LRC: section VII);
- Digitalisation (specific thematic indication for the TPG B);
- Recognition of alternative pathways (specific thematic indication for the TPG B);
- Automatic recognition (specific thematic indication for the TPG B).

Rapporteurs presented the outcomes of the working groups discussions.

Working Group 1 - Estonia representative as rapporteur

Access to higher education and completing upper secondary school were recognized as significant challenges by this group. These two points are connected with the need for centralized information on the impact of Covid-19 on education systems, especially outside the ENIC-NARIC networks, as well as with the importance of available and update information on disrupted learning, both on secondary schools and higher education. In this regard, it is of great importance the communication at national and European level with relevant stakeholders to share the available information, along with the extremely important role of ENIC-NARIC networks cooperation and sharing on information. In all cases, the fact that many countries have still not taken final decisions on how to cope with the situation requires an every-day communication within networks, with higher education institutions and stakeholders, in order to be updated on all the new changes. A good practice on this was identified in the ENIC-NARIC survey conducted on secondary school examinations and changes due to Covid-19, and more in general it is a good practice for institutions in charge of recognition to get in touch with NARIC centers of the country of origin of the applicant.

Another big challenge identified among the group was digitalization, that involves several aspects. Most schools and higher education institutions in many countries have adopted different alternative pathways of teaching, so education providers and learners have moved from day-to-day contacts and classes to online, distance or individual teaching study. In addition to this, a number of countries does not consider alternative pathways as equal as the regular ones, which signifies an obstacle to recognize qualifications issued at the end of such alternative study paths. This situation has caused several problems to higher education institutions as well as to recognition authorities: difficulties in keeping in touch with applicants in the process of assessment of foreign qualifications; difficulties in digital assessment of higher education courses and the quality assurance of teaching in distance mode (as well as the related need for skills in using technology), which may cause obstacles in the recognition process of qualifications obtained after similar alternative pathways. As a response to this, it may be suggested to institutions and recognition authorities to

adopt greater flexibility in procedures, examinations and courses according to the situation. The creation of national registers of maturity qualifications and the use of artificial intelligence to run examinations were also suggested as possible responses to these challenges.

Another issue linked with digitalization is that many recognition centers and education institutions were not ready to move to digital solutions, as they need paper documents, such as originals or certified copies (mostly because national legislations require so), so they are facing limits in processing applications. Good practices on this were identified in the adoption of alternative application forms which do not include receiving paper documents. More in general, this may be the opportunity for changes in national legislations to adapt to the new circumstances, such as through the provision of general recognition statements digitally signed.

Difficulties in assessing qualifications held by refugees were also mentioned as a topic, due to the need to interview the applicant, which is now not possible. Good practice was seen in the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees, through interviews carried out online, was suggested as good practice about this issue.

Automatic recognition was not identified as big problem *per se*, as challenges are present at all levels of recognition procedures.

Working Group 2 - The Netherlands representative as rapporteur

The first topic discussed by this group was access, both in terms of issuing of school leaving certificates from upper secondary schools (postponed date of issuing due to late exams / format of the document according to national legislation and regulations that can also help other countries to accept documents) and of accepting applicants in the same way that has been done before. These issues were not regarded as a big challenge, as there was a consensus within the group that digital documents should be accepted and there should also be some flexibility in terms of documentation requirements (for example, if exams are cancelled, student should not be asked to provide evidence of it).

The second topic addressed was digitalization. Many systems have already gone through the digitalization process, and even those who had to shift to digital means seem not to have had difficulties. Greater difficulties rise when it comes to evaluation processes, as there are still some issues with specific documents that need to be digitally signed, as well as Apostille stamp which is still required in many systems. In some countries, the number of applications has decreased due to Covid-19 compared to last year. In this situation, it is important to find alternative ways to maintain the evaluation process and grant recognition, and in a certain way Covid-19 has been something that encourages digital responses at different levels, resulting in an acceleration of current practices and suggestions for digitalization such as online meetings, online methods for assessment and shifts of procedures. Among other responses and good practices, some have addressed national measures to support online application and digital process; shift to a remote work; introduction of electronic statements; in place of Apostille stamps, directly contact the awarding institution in order to receive a confirmation of authenticity.

Recognition of qualifications held by refugees was also mentioned as a big topic, especially in terms of lack of documents and information when it comes to access into a different system. Even in this case, the pandemic has encouraged the

implementation of new procedures, through the collaboration of Council of Europe and the implementation of the EQPR for Health-Related Profession, also through the support of Ministries of Health that could give the authorization to evaluate these type of qualifications.

Another big area of debate within this group was automatic recognition, especially in the case of accreditation of higher education institutions that are in the timeframe of accreditation process (accreditation decisions have been delayed in many cases), which may cause an impact on students. Participants agreed that, on one hand, accreditation decisions should be followed as usual, but on the other hand there should also be flexibility if these decisions are delayed (not being too strict in this regards). This is also related to gathering updated information on secondary education institutions on how they have worked in this time in terms of quality assurance at national level for secondary school. Many recognition authorities have responded to this challenge of lack of renewal of accreditation due to Covid-19, deciding to recognize the foreign qualification if the majority of studies was conducted when the awarding institution was accredited.

The biggest challenge identified was recognition in general, in terms of difficulties in access to information as well as to be in direct contact with foreign HEIs in order to get clear information (it is important to remember the timeframe), especially when it comes to areas outside the EHEA. In this regard, the role of the ENIC-NARIC may be crucial in collecting information beyond the EHEA. The survey on the secondary school examination dates that it conducted was seen as a good practice and inspiration for possible future information exchanges with other regions of the world. Also, within the spirit of the peer support approach, ENIC-NARIC centers could share good practices in adapting to digital solutions.

Some open questions were raised during the discussion: the shift to digital learning has caused problems in recognition, due to quality assurance concerns and difficulties for education providers in shifting to digital means. Good practices were identified on this, such as Lithuania initiative to create help desks for teachers, training for teachers and infrastructure to help with the digitalization process.

Working Group 3 - Ukraine representative as rapporteur

One of the most widely discussed challenge by this group was the access to higher education, which involves equal access, different enrollment patterns and international enrollment (as there are different national regulations and rules in place for international applicants, but this year poses additional challenges). Regarding these challenges several responses were provided. One of these would be conditional admission for international students who already belong to the institution, meaning that they would need to pass examinations on the outcomes achieved during the study period when they were conditionally admitted. Another response suggested related to access to higher education may be to accept the access qualifications from all countries as it was done last year, provided that those qualifications follow the laws and regulations previously decided. Participants recognized some good practices on this, such as the change of the format of final examinations certificates which can be done in a secure and consistent way. Also, there is a need for overcoming and facilitating the work of institutions on acceptance of students, and the credential evaluation process needs to be supported in this timeframe. In this regard, good practices were identified such as CIMEA's initiatives

to launch webinars dedicated to higher education institutions, specific on the issues of access and admission, and to launch a university course for credential evaluators offered to higher education institution staff.

In connection to the topic of access to higher education, this group also identified the challenge of completion of higher education, that follows the same patterns of challenges as access and admission. The group discussed in different ways how the process of completion is undergoing various challenges, also addressing the issue of alternative ways (how the completion can be secured), and how learning outcomes can be catered for as well.

The topic of recognition of qualifications held by refugees was not largely discussed, although some comments have been made related to the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees, which is regarded as a huge help to the current crisis; as a matter of fact, it was mentioned by a number of countries to be used later on.

The topic of digitalization was one of the most discussed ones also in this group. One of the challenges under this topic would be the sustainable operation of ENIC centers; a response it was suggested that it is important that ENIC-NARIC network can provide relevant and timely/updated information on various trends of information provision, particularly on pre-higher education qualifications that graduates obtained in 2020 in their respective countries. In order to ensure good and sufficiently sustainable operation of ENIC centers, participants mentioned that in some cases it is useful to contact the issuing institution using digitally enhanced solutions as well when it is not possible to have the original documents obtained and verified. Interestingly so, some participants mentioned the importance of having distance cloud management systems for ENIC centers to allow for efficient operations of credential evaluator regardless if at the office or in distance mode. Among other trends related to digitalization and how it can be used in the current outbreak, it was mentioned that some national legislations do not allow for national examinations to take place, which is a challenge in terms of ensuring that graduation takes place through alternative ways, an issue for which a solution can still be found.

In the frame of academic recognition, automatic recognition was regarded by participants as a response and good practice for the difficulties in place, in one way or another. A challenge was also seen in the increase in the phenomena of Diploma mills and document fraud as a result of the current outbreak. To face this problem, all participants agreed upon the need for digitally-enhanced solutions that have to be found and implemented.

Participants also discussed the difficulty of completing higher education (which both involves alternative ways and the process itself), and more in general the shift to digital, online delivery mode of learning. This poses several challenges, such as the fact that some national legislations do not allow for online exams and the difficulty of granting quality assurance on e-learning as well as good quality mechanisms for e-learning (e-learning quality assurance in some national contexts is still under the accreditation process). Some responses were suggested on these topics, mainly focused on the digitalization of educational evidence, such as digitalized Diploma Supplements, to ensure that various elements of the online learning process can go as smoothly as possible.

One further challenge pointed out was the decrease in exchange if programs start to be delivered into online mode, but a possible response to this may be internationalization at home.

Other general responses recognized as useful was automatic recognition, and general good practices such as policy guidelines for higher education institutions and sharing information were also highlighted.

6. Conclusions and way forward.

French Co-Chair thanked all rapporteurs for the rich reports and briefly summarized the main inputs of the discussion. Among all the topics addressed, digitalization is regarded at the same time as a challenge and as a response best practice, like the need to share information and the role of ENIC-NARIC networks. Moreover, the necessity to show flexibility for student documents and accreditation of issuing institutions, as well as the Quality Assurance of online education were also emphasized.

The most important outcome of the meeting was pointed out to be the success of the peer support approach according to the BICG survey, as mentioned by Croatian representative and Italian Co-Chair. During the next BFUG meeting in Split the TPG B Co-Chairs will also report the on the peer support work and its success among this group.

Meeting reference materials will be made available to participants, and it was mentioned that applications for participating in the staff mobility activity are still possible.

Some final practical information were given: in accordance with the BFUG Secretariat and upon agreement of all participants, the deadline for comments to the BICG report was set on **8 July**, and the deadline for updating countries Action plan was set on **15 July**.

All co-Chairs thanked again all participants for the effort and willingness to innovate and change the modalities of the meeting, as well as for the active participation on all TPG B meetings, highlighting that peer support approach is a way of serving the fundamental values of the EHEA.