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Implementation of the Council of Europe Higher Education Programme in 2026

Report to the Bologna Follow-Up Group

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Introduction and organisational context

The Council of Europe's higher education programme is guided by its **Education Strategy 2024–2030, "Learners First".** The Strategy sets the direction for the Organisation's work in education and provides a roadmap for its Programme of Activities 2024–2027. This report reviews the implementation of the higher education programme in 2026 and outlines forthcoming activities.

The 27th Session of the Council of Europe Standing Conference of Ministers of Education will take place on 3–4 December 2026 in Montenegro, during its Presidency of the Committee of Ministers. At this mid-point in the implementation of the Education Strategy, ministers will review progress and consider priorities for 2027–2030, while also shaping commitments beyond 2030.

The proposed theme of the Conference is "Empowering Educators for a Democratic and Digital Europe".

Ministers will discuss how to strengthen, protect and modernise the teaching profession across schools, vocational education and training (VET), and higher education. The discussions will focus on the needs of learners and the wider education community, recognising that support for teachers is essential to democratic, inclusive and digitally responsible education systems.

The Council of Europe Higher Education Programme

The Higher Education Programme forms part of the Council of Europe's Education Programme 2024–2027. It supports implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention through the joint Secretariat with UNESCO and the joint operation of the ENIC Network. Its wider work covers recognition of qualifications, including automatic recognition and the use of artificial intelligence; academic freedom and the democratic mission of higher education; ethics, transparency and integrity through the ETINED Platform; and recognition of refugees' qualifications through the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR).

The Sub-Group on Higher Education Policy oversees the programme. Its 25 members represent ministries responsible for higher education, the academic community and international non-governmental organisations. A representative of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) participates to support coordination with the Bologna Process.

The Sub-Group reports to the of the Steering Committee for Education (CDEDU), which brings together representativesof public authorities responsible for education from the Council of Europe's 46 member States, the Holy See and Kazakhstan, alongside a number of observers.

The Sub-Group meets at least twice a year. Its most recent meeting took place on 7–8 September 2026 in Venice, Italy.

Further information is available here

Higher education projects

1. Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee

Overview

The Council of Europe and UNESCO jointly provide the Secretariat of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC). Adopted in Lisbon in 1997 and ratified by 57 States, the LRC is one of the Council of

Europe's most widely ratified conventions. It remains the only legally binding text in the EHEA and the main legal instrument for the fair recognition of qualifications in Europe.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee (LRCC) meets at least every three years. Between sessions, the LRC Bureau implements its work programme.

The Committee held its tenth session on 22 October 2025 at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris.

The meeting elected a new LRC Bureau, comprising:
- Allan Bruun Pedersen (Denmark), President
- Jenneke Lokhoff (the Netherlands), 1st Vice-President
- Michael Ringuette (Canada), 2nd Vice-President
- Elisa Petrucci (Italy), Rapporteur

The Bureau's current work plan addresses how Parties to the Convention understand and apply the concept of "substantial difference" and how the LRC relates to UNESCO's Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education. The Bureau is also drafting a subsidiary text on digital solutions in recognition, including artificial intelligence (AI), in close coordination with the CDEDU Working Group on AI and Recognition.

The Bureau has also strengthened its communication activities. It presented its work at a workshop during the most recent annual ENIC-NARIC meeting, issued its first newsletter and published interviews with its members on the Council of Europe website.

2. Contribution to the ENIC-NARIC Networks

Overview

The Council of Europe and UNESCO have jointly operated the European Network of National Information Centres (ENIC) since 1994. ENIC works closely with the NationalAcademic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) network, established in 1984, whose Secretariat is provided by the European Commission.

The ENIC-NARIC Networks exchange information on qualifications recognition policies and practices, support capacity building and contribute to consultations on international normative instruments concerning recognition.

The Networks and the implementation of the LRC must continue to adapt to developments in higher education. These include digitalisation, automatic recognition, micro-credentials, transnational education, and the recognition of prior learning and of non-formal and informal learning.

The ENIC Bureau currently comprises:
- Chiara Finocchietti (Italy) – ENIC President
- Dženan Omanović (Bosnia and Herzegovina) – ENIC Vice-President
- Hanna Reczulska (Poland) – Vice-President

The NARIC Advisory Board currently comprises:
- Gunnar Vaht (Estonia)
- Helén Sophie Haugen (Norway)
- Gianina Chirazi (Romania)

The joint ENIC Bureau and NARIC Advisory Board (EB/NAB) Work Plan 2025–2027 focuses on three priorities:

- strengthening the quality of the ENIC and NARIC Networks;
- fostering cooperation and dialogue across the Networks; and
- enhancing their visibility and transparency.

To pursue these priorities, the Networks develop shared methodologies, quality assurance frameworks and standards, support peer learning and information exchange, and advance digital tools. They also bring national and international stakeholders together to promote fair and reliable recognition processes and address challenges such as digitalisation, automatic recognition and education fraud.

This work aims to improve the quality and transparency of academic and professional qualifications recognition across Europe and beyond.

The 34th annual meeting will take place in Oslo, Norway, on 20–22 June 2027.

3. Automatic recognition

In January 2026, the Committee of Ministers mandated the CDEDU to begin drafting *the "Convention on the Conditions of Transparency and Quality Assurance for Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in Europe*".

An intergovernmental drafting group is presently preparing the text. The Convention is expected to open for signature in the second half of 2027.

The future Convention will set the conditions for automatic recognition, rather than introduce it directly. It will require States Parties to ensure that their higher education systems meet essential requirements, including:

- robust and transparent quality assurance aligned with European standards;
- national qualifications frameworks self-certified against the QF-EHEA and referenced against the EQF;
- reliable public registers of recognised institutions and qualifications;
- effective use of core Bologna tools, such as the ECTS and the Diploma Supplement; and
- safeguards for academic freedom, institutional autonomy and integrity.

These commitments will provide a common framework within which automatic recognition may be implemented through bilateral, regional or multilateral agreements.

The Convention will complement existing instruments, including the LRC and regional agreements, without interfering with admission decisions, professional recognition regimes or institutional autonomy.

4. Recognition of refugees' qualifications

The European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR) is a Council of Europe initiative that facilitates the recognition of refugees' qualifications, including when full documentation is unavailable.

The EQPR project works with UNESCO's Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants, which focuses on countries outside the European region. Strategic and technical coordination helps the two initiatives build on each other's work.

The EQPR currently has 24 participating countries: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Croatia, France, Germany, Georgia, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Republic of Moldova, Romania, San Marino, Serbia, Spain and the United Kingdom. More than 1,000 EQPRs have been issued to date.

More than 100 credential evaluators from the 24 participating ENICs have been trained in the interview-based EQPR methodology. This training strengthens the project's capacity to assess refugees' qualifications reliably when supporting documentation is insufficient.

On 28 April 2026, an awareness-raising event took place in Chisinau under the Moldovan Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers. It was entitled "Supporting refugees' participation in higher education and labour market – European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR) as an international instrument to address national challenges".

The event brought together more than 100 stakeholders to discuss how recognition of qualifications can support refugees' integration into higher education and the labour market, with a focus on the Republic of Moldova. It was organised by the Council of Europe's Education Department, the Ministry of Education and Research and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Secretariat presented recent EQPR activities, including the latest interview sessions, and outlined forthcoming work. Planned outputs include a publication sharing EQPR holders' stories and an online training module on implementing Recommendation CM/Rec(2025)6 on the qualifications and linguistic competences of refugees in Europe.

A further EQPR event is planned for 23–26 November 2026 in Sèvres, in cooperation with France Education International. It will combine awareness raising, training for credential evaluators and interviews with EQPR applicants.

5. Democratic mission of higher education

Work on the democratic mission of higher education is rooted in the Council of Europe's fundamental values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Through its "Academic Freedom in Action" project, the Council of Europe's Education Department continues to protect and promote academic freedom. This work builds on Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the responsibility of public authorities for academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

The legal protection of academic freedom will be one of three key topics at the 27th Session of the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education in Podgorica on 3–4 December 2026. Ministers will consider a Report on the Legal Protection of Academic Freedom and Feasibility of a Council of Europe Convention on Academic Freedom. As a first step, they will be asked to mandate the CDEDU to develop a new standard-setting recommendation addressing the challenges facing Europe's academic community.

Preparations for this discussion will be supported by the third Academic Freedom in Action Conference, organised by the Education Department on 25–26 November 2026. Policymakers, academics, students, civil society and international organisations, human rights institutions and legal experts will examine practical responses to threats to academic freedom. The conference aims to strengthen cooperation across sectors and contribute to a more coherent European approach to its protection.

Four questions will guide the conference:
• Why does academic freedom matter for democracy, human rights and the rule of law?
• Who shares responsibility for protecting it?
• Which legal, institutional and policy mechanisms protect academic freedom most effectively?
• How can protection be strengthened and analysis translated into action?

The Academic Freedom Insights Series complements this work with ten policy briefs based on the findings of the Council of Europe Expert Working Group on the Democratic Mission of Higher Education. Each brief examines a specific dimension of academic freedom, addressing challenges, opportunities and threats in the Group's priority areas.

The series raises awareness and informs policy development within the Council of Europe and among partners across Europe and beyond. It aims to turn dialogue into practical action to protect academic freedom and strengthen democratic societies.

6. Pan-European Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education(ETINED)
Overview and main developments

ETINED brings together specialists appointed by Council of Europe member States and States Parties to the European Cultural Convention.

Since its launch in 2015, ETINED has promoted ethics and integrity in education. Its work includes guidelines on ethical practices in the teaching profession and targeted recommendations on academic integrity, informed by assessments and exchanges with stakeholders.

The 10th ETINED Plenary Meeting took place in Strasbourg on 14 October 2026, marking ten years of plenary meetings. A roundtable and retrospective session brought delegates, observers and experts together to review the Platform's achievements, ongoing work and future priorities.

Discussions focused on two areas:

- guidelines for developing open school data policies in European education systems; and
- a reporting methodology for the Centre for Preventing and Countering Education Fraud (PCEF).

Participants also reviewed progress on the proposed Convention on the Conditions of Transparency and Quality Assurance for Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications, focusing on its links with ETINED's work. Delegates shared national and international developments, while a breakout session explored priorities for the Platform's 2028–2031 work programme, including continued action against education fraud.

International Forum on Transparency in Governance of Higher Education Institutions
On 15–16 October 2026, immediately after the plenary meeting, ETINED held its first International Forum on "Transparency in Governance of Higher Education Institutions". Building on the Council of Europe's collaboration with UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP-UNESCO) on open school data, the Forum examined how transparency in higher education can strengthen accountability, public trust, student engagement and democratic governance.

Policymakers, higher education representatives, international organisations, researchers, students and other experts from Europe and beyond explored how data on higher education, research and institutional governance are collected, managed and shared. Discussions gave particular attention to students' perspectives and to making data accessible, relevant and meaningful to different stakeholders.

Through panel discussions and group work, participants considered common principles for transparency in higher education data and how these could guide the Council of Europe's future work.

7. Centre for Preventing and Countering Education Fraud

The Centre for Preventing and Countering Education Fraud is a multilateral initiative to strengthen States' capacity to prevent, monitor and address education fraud. Its activities include secure information exchange, systematic data collection, awareness raising and capacity building across Europe and beyond. It will serve as a hub for international cooperation against practices such as diploma mills, fake credentials and contract cheating.

The Centre was launched in June 2025 under a Memorandum of Understanding between the Council of Europe and CIMEA (Information Centre on Academic Mobility and Equivalence).

The Centre is conducting its first expert studies, whose initial findings point to major gaps in national and international responses to education fraud.

These gaps include inconsistent enforcement, fragmented responsibilities and limited data collection, particularly for cross-border and digital fraud. The findings highlight the need for stronger coordination, better data systems and closer cooperation between quality assurance and recognition bodies, while recognising that legal approaches and institutional roles differ across countries. A proposed reporting methodology would establish common definitions and a shared monitoring framework while respecting national autonomy. Ethical standards for education agents are also being considered.

The Centre's website is now operational at PCEF.EU.

8. Council of Europe Students' Rights Charter

The Council of Europe Students' Rights Charter is one of the main actions proposed in the Education Strategy 2024–2030, "Learners First". It aims to safeguard equality, inclusion and democratic participation for students across Europe, reinforcing higher education as a public good and a cornerstone of democratic culture.

In line with CDEDU decisions, the Working Group has been set up with the Council of Europe and the European Students' Union (ESU) co-lead the drafting process, supported by extensive stakeholder consultation.

The Working Group submitted a "zero draft" to the Sub-Group on Higher Education Policy at its September 2026 meeting for comments and suggestions.

Members welcomed the draft, highlighting its potential to strengthen student rights across Europe. They particularly valued its emphasis on freedom of association, which enables students to organise and act collectively.

The draft Charter will be presented for a first reading at the CDEDU plenary session in March 2027.

9. Artificial intelligence and recognition

The Council of Europe's three-year programme on Artificial Intelligence and the Recognition of Qualifications (2025–2027) examines how AI can support and transform credential evaluation while safeguarding its integrity. A dedicated Working Group of Experts guides this work, ensuring alignment with the values of the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and the LRC.

The programme focuses on four areas:

- Opportunities and risks: exploring how AI can automate recognition processes, verify authenticity, detect fraud and support international academic mobility, while mitigating risks such as bias and inequality;
- Capacity development: training stakeholders in the ethical and effective use of AI in recognition workflows, mapping its current use in ENIC-NARIC centres and identifying good practices;
- Policy and frameworks: drafting a White Paper on AI's role in qualifications recognition and a Code of Practice for AI-enhanced credential evaluation; and
- Digital transformation: piloting AI-based credential evaluation tools and supporting international cooperation to develop data repositories.

The Working Group's Survey on AI and Recognition found that AI is not yet widely used by ENIC-NARIC centres. The Group has also examined the HUDERIA methodology as a practical tool for assessing risks associated with the context of use, design, development and deployment of AI systems. Work is under way on a White Paper and an online training module for credential evaluators.

10. Education information notes

The Education Information Notes provide further information on projects implemented under the Council of Europe's Education Programme.