



ENSURING AND ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF RECOGNITION PROCESSES

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Key considerations
and recommendations



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/ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores the quality of academic recognition procedures in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It understands the term “quality” in the context of recognition both as compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) and as quality assurance (QA) of recognition procedures, in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

The report aims to provide key insights and recommendations on how to better implement the LRC (and, further, the ESG), as well as how to better link recognition and QA. The insights in this document are based on two studies:

1. an analysis of the extent to which recognition processes of higher education institutions in the EHEA are in line with the LRC and ESG 1.4, based on data collected through a survey and follow-up focus groups conducted in 2023.
2. An analysis of how QA agencies view the quality of recognition at higher education institutions in the EHEA, based on data from a quantitative and qualitative text analysis of reports from EQAR registered QA agencies, conducted in early 2024.

The report concludes with a set of three key considerations and recommendations based on findings from these two studies, which can be summarised as follows:

1. Upscale efforts to fully implement the LRC.
2. Ensure better links between recognition and QA.
3. Enhance support, cooperation and coordination between all stakeholders.

The considerations and recommendations are addressed to governmental actors and other policy makers, leadership and management staff at higher education institutions (HEIs), as well as other key actors with a mandate to influence academic recognition towards more LRC-compliant and duly quality-assured processes, such as the ENIC-NARIC centres and QA agencies, in the hope that they help to stimulate dialogue and cooperation.

/ INTRODUCTION

Quality is at the heart of smooth and fair recognition procedures, benefiting students, higher education institutions (HEIs) and the education system overall. Previous initiatives focusing on the quality dimension of recognition, such as the project [Linking Academic Recognition and Quality Assurance - LIREQA](#) (SKVC et al., 2019), however, found that there is still room for improvement. This report revisits the quality dimension of recognition, with a focus on recognition of foreign qualifications by HEIs. It does so by addressing quality from two viewpoints. In academic contexts, there are several definitions of quality: quality as excellence, quality as zero mistakes, quality as fitness of purpose (e.g. meeting threshold requirements, customer satisfaction), quality as fitness for purpose (value for money, value-added, quality as transformation). In some cases, the word “quality” may be a synonym for compliance with a standard. In the context of academic recognition, the term quality would thus primarily refer to the degree to which academic recognition is being conducted in compliance with the [Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region](#) – or Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) (Council of Europe & UNESCO, 1997) in short – since the LRC and its subsidiary texts define the basic principles on which academic recognition procedures should be based within its signatory countries.

On the other hand, the term “quality” may also refer to quality assurance and therefore to whether and how academic recognition is being covered by both internal and external quality assurance (QA) procedures. On the European policy level, there is an unmistakable call to ensure clear links between the LRC and the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area](#) (ESG, 2015). In this regard, Standard 1.4 on “Student admission, progression, recognition and certification” notes that “Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student ‘life cycle’, e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification” (see also Table 1). More specifically, the accompanying Guidelines state that recognition practices ought to be in line with the LRC and encourage cooperation between HEIs, QA agencies and the national ENIC-NARIC centre, in order to ensure a coherent approach within the same system.

ESG 1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

Standard:

Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student “life cycle”, e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification.

Guidelines:

Providing conditions and support that are necessary for students to make progress in their academic career is in the best interest of the individual students, programmes, institutions and systems. It is vital to have fit-for-purpose admission, recognition and completion procedures, particularly when students are mobile within and across higher education systems.

It is important that access policies, admission processes and criteria are implemented consistently and in a transparent manner. Induction to the institution and the programme is provided.

Institutions need to put in place both processes and tools to collect, monitor and act on information on student progression.

Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components for ensuring the students' progress in their studies, while promoting mobility. Appropriate recognition procedures rely on

- / institutional practice for recognition being in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention;
- / cooperation with other institutions, quality assurance agencies and the national ENIC-NARIC centre with a view to ensuring coherent recognition across the country.

Graduation represents the culmination of the students' period of study. Students need to receive documentation explaining the qualification gained, including achieved learning outcomes and the context, level, content and status of the studies that were pursued and successfully completed.

Table 1: ESG 1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

By viewing the quality of recognition from these two aligned perspectives, this report also applies another definition of the term “quality”, which is fitness-for-purpose, which in this case means the degree to which recognition processes and their outcomes serve the needs of the applicants, the recognition authority responsible for recognition processes and decisions, as well as the staff working there. Viewing recognition processes and their quality through a “fitness-for-purpose lens” ultimately mirrors the ethos of the LRC and the ESG. After all, both documents were drafted with a view to creating a higher education area where mobile students are supported through fair and transparent recognition processes, and where HEIs and their staff (can) conduct these processes in a harmonised, clear and efficient manner.

The report aims to provide key insights and recommendations on how to better implement the LRC (and, further, the ESG), as well as how to better link recognition and QA. Both of these ambitions require concerted efforts by all stakeholders, including national governments and other authorities responsible for recognition, HEIs and their staff members, QA agencies and ENIC-NARIC centres. The report thus hopes to provide useful information and inspiration to all of these entities.

Two main chapters present the key findings in this report, both based on original research:

1. chapter 3 analyses to what extent the recognition processes of HEIs in the EHEA are in line with the LRC and ESG 1.4. Findings in this chapter are based on two pools of data: first, a survey was conducted in 2023 among HEIs in the EHEA, based on questions that were designed in line with key principles of the LRC and ESG 1.4. Selected insights and follow-up questions arising from the survey results were then discussed in more detail in online focus groups: two with volunteering survey respondents and one with student representatives. Conclusions from both the survey and the focus groups are thus presented in a joint chapter below.
2. Chapter 4 takes an external perspective on the quality topic, by exploring how QA agencies view the quality of recognition at HEIs in the EHEA (i.e. ESG 1.4). Using quantitative and qualitative text analysis conducted in January 2024, this part of the publication looks into how EQAR-registered QA agencies render ESG 1.4 in their reviews and what aspects are the most prominent. The focus is on the institutional processes, which means that the reports produced at the programme level were not within the scope of the research.¹

¹ Earlier research by Manatos & Huisman (2019) delved deeper into the coverage of both the standard and the guidelines of ESG 1.4 in the programme review reports by one EQAR-registered agency via content analysis. The main findings show that, in reviewing the ESG 1.4, the review panels tend to provide more details for findings pertaining to admission and progression (specifically procedural aspects and methods to support student advancement in their studies), as well as certification, compared to areas related to informal learning and recognition (particularly significant European references concerning recognition such as Lisbon Recognition Convention and ENIC-NARICs).

A summary of key considerations and recommendations stemming from the findings of the research presented in this report are provided in Chapter 5, in the hope that they prove to be helpful in the realisation of the LRC's vision and in enhancing links between recognition and QA, bringing together all relevant stakeholders.

This report is an outcome of the work of the project [TPG-LRC Constructing Recognition in the European Higher Education Area - TPG-LRC CoRE](#) (2022-2025), co-funded by the European Union under the Erasmus+ programme. The project supports the work of the Thematic Peer Group B on the Lisbon Recognition Convention² (TPG B on LRC), which was established in 2018 by the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) with a view to fostering the implementation of the Bologna Process, more specifically its key commitment 2 “National legislation and procedures compliant with the LRC” in the TPG B member countries.³ The work on this report was conducted by the TPG B's working group on “quality of recognition”,⁴ which was established to explore the link between recognition and quality, as outlined above.

² In the 2018 Paris Ministerial Conference, it was decided to adopt a structured peer support approach to support the implementation of Bologna three key commitments, namely the Qualifications Frameworks and ECTS, the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) and Diploma Supplement, and Quality Assurance according to the Standards and guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG). To pursue this objective, the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group (BICG) was established as coordinating body to give guidance to the work of three Thematic Peer Groups (TPGs), one for each key commitment. The Thematic Peer Group B on the Lisbon Recognition Convention (TPG B on LRC) was created to support the implementation of the key commitment 2 on national legislation and procedures compliant with the LRC. The 2020 Rome Communiqué reconfirmed the determination to use the peer support approach to achieve full implementation of the key commitments asking the BFUG to continue working on this. See <https://www.ehea.info/page-peer-group-B-LRC> and <https://www.ehea.info/page-TPG-B-on-LRC-Meetings-2021-2024>.

³ See The European Higher Education Area in 2018: Bologna Process Implementation Report (European Commission, 2018): https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/2fe152b6-5efe-11e8-ab9c-01aa75ed71a1/language-en?WT.mc_id=Selectedpublications&WT.ria_c=677&WT.ria_f=706&WT.ria_ev=search, p. 145.

⁴ The working group consisted of the Italian ENIC-NARIC centre CIMEA (TPG co-chair and TPG-LRC CoRE project coordinator), the European University Association (EUA, working group leader), the Dutch ENIC-NARIC centre Nuffic, the Estonian ENIC-NARIC centre HARNO, the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) and the European Students' Union (ESU).

/ INSIGHTS FROM THE SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS

This chapter presents the methodology and results of a survey conducted in 2023 among HEIs in the EHEA, as well as two online focus groups conducted in the same year with survey participants and students covering a range of HEIs in the EHEA.

/ METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The survey aimed to explore whether HEI staff responsible for academic recognition consider the processes that they carry out to be compliant with the LRC and ensure the quality of their processes through monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in line with ESG 1.4. The survey was open to all HEIs in the EHEA, yet invited only one answer per HEI. It was primarily addressed to HEI staff responsible for academic recognition. However, in consideration of the QA-driven nature of some questions it also encouraged submissions in a team effort, including staff from admissions, internationalisation and quality assurance offices, to ensure fully comprehensive and accurate answers.

The survey resulted in 193 eligible and complete survey responses. In addition, only one response per HEI was processed. This restriction may not always reflect actual institutional practices, which in some cases may vary from faculty to faculty. However, the study was designed in this way in order not to distort the quantitative results and offer a broad-scale, institutional-level coverage of the EHEA.

Responses to the survey cover a total of 22 EHEA countries, as can be seen in the summary table below:

Country	No. of responses
Austria	3
Belgium	2
Croatia	13
Cyprus	8
Czech Republic	9
Denmark	3
Estonia	1
Finland	2
Germany	2
Hungary	9
Ireland	2
Italy	5
Latvia	1
Lithuania	5
Netherlands	5
Poland	3
Portugal	2
Romania	48
Slovenia	4
Spain	4
Sweden	26
Ukraine	36
Total	193

Taking into account that some countries are vastly better represented in the survey responses than others, the overall survey results and their analysis presented below cannot be considered representative of national approaches to recognition, and thus do not allow for system-level comparisons.⁵ Nevertheless, these results offer a glimpse of a variety of issues HEIs and other recognition stakeholders may want to address in their own contexts, as part of their endeavours to enhance recognition processes.

⁵ In addition, one respondent from Croatia highlighted that the country had recently passed a new law at national level, on the basis of which new regulations on recognition would be passed. This might affect the validity of the data from HEIs in Croatia as presented in this report.

In addition, the summary of survey results below exclusively presents overall results from all responses, instead of breaking them down by country. The reason is that a national or system-level focus would in any case have been of limited use, since approaches to recognition vary greatly within the same country and even the same institution. This became evident when comparing responses from the same country and when selecting one submission out of multiple from the same institution.

The survey consisted of five parts:

1. Information on the institution and individual responding to the survey.
2. National context and collaboration within this context.
3. information on the recognition process.
4. Quality assurance of the recognition processes.
5. Invitation to join a follow-up online focus group (see also the full questionnaire in Annex 1).

Results from survey parts 2-4 are presented below. Where available, additional insights from the focus groups (see Annex 2) are presented in combination with survey results, since the structure of discussions in the focus groups was based on the survey questions.

/ FINDINGS: NATIONAL CONTEXT AND COLLABORATION

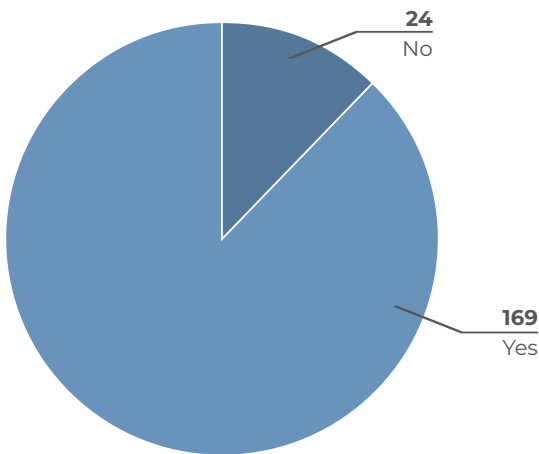
This part of the survey enquired about the existence of national or regional frameworks providing guidelines for recognition procedures, as well as support structures, activities and needs.

Survey question: *Is there a national or regional framework providing guidelines for addressing and ensuring the quality and compliance of recognition procedures with international frameworks such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the ESG?*

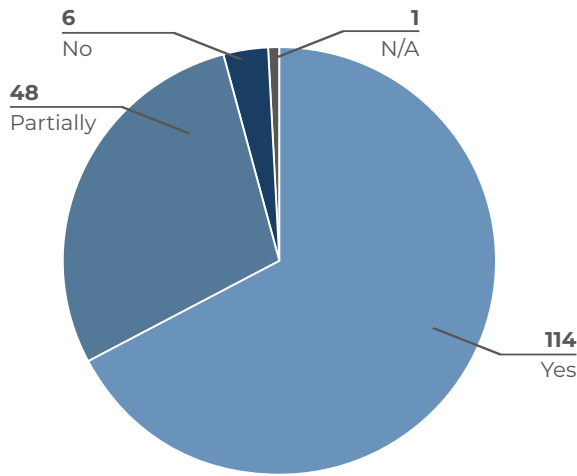
In response to the first survey question enquiring about the existence of a national or regional framework providing guidelines, the vast majority (165 respondents, equal to 86%) of the total 193 responding HEIs confirmed the existence of such a framework, while only a small portion (14 or 7%) denied it. An equally small portion (14 or 7%) responded that they did not know.

Survey question: *Do you receive national-level support for improving the quality and compliance with the LRC of your recognition procedures by your country's ENIC-NARIC?*

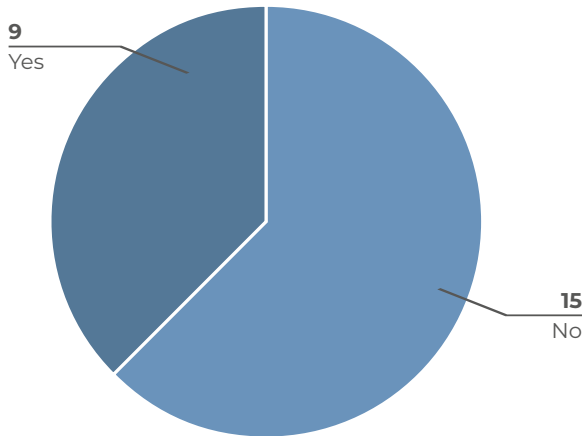
Graph 1. National-level support received by ENIC-NARIC centres



Graph 2. Satisfaction with the received support among those who responded "yes"



Graph 3. Other national body offering support (for those who responded "no")



When asked whether their country's ENIC-NARIC centre provided support for improving the quality and compliance of their recognition procedures with the LRC, most respondents (169 or 88%) responded positively. These respondents were also asked to state if the support they receive is sufficient, which was, again, answered largely positively, i.e. by 114 respondents (59%). Half as many respondents who had previously confirmed the receipt of support by their country's ENIC-NARIC centre stated that the support they received was "partially" sufficient (48 or 28%), while a small portion (6 or 4%) assessed the received support as not sufficient.

One respondent preferred not to answer the question through a multiple-choice answer but only provided the following comment: "We would like to have more information from NARIC concerning the educational systems worldwide, assessment of the level of qualifications and access to precedents of recognition". Other comments provided mostly concerned the waiting time to receive answers from an ENIC-NARIC centre, or called for more training opportunities. Also, respondents commented that international experience is essential for strengthening internal regulations and that they would like to have more guidance on this from the ENIC-NARIC centres.

Some comments highlighted the large remit of institutional autonomy, which was not considered a problem per se, but as something that could sometimes lead to uncertainty. This perception was confirmed and further explained by participants in the follow-up focus groups: when presented with the information that the survey results had revealed diverse approaches to recognition within the same country or even institution, focus group participants considered this a natural consequence of institutional autonomy, various institutional sizes and profiles, as well as the different groups of HEI staff (e.g., admissions officers vs HEI leadership) involved in any recognition process, who all have a different perspective on the matter. Rather than seeing this as a problem, focus group participants considered it a circumstance that requires clear and transparent but "flexible" approaches to recognition, thus cautioning against a one-size-fits-all solution for recognition.

On the other hand, to the original question whether the ENIC-NARIC centre provided national support for improving the quality and compliance of the institution's recognition procedures with the LRC, 24 of the total 193 responses (12%) were negative. These respondents were asked to further elaborate whether there are any other national bodies (e.g., a ministry responsible for higher education) that provide support, which a majority (15 or 63%) said did not exist and a minority (9 or 38%) confirmed. Those who had answered positively were asked for details on the national body and type of support, after which most respondents listed ministries and government agencies.

Survey question: *Do you receive national-level support in the quality assurance of recognition procedures?*

Survey participants were also asked if they receive national-level support in the quality assurance of recognition procedures, which the majority (142 or 74%) confirmed. Comparatively small portions of respondents denied any support (28 or 15%) or responded with “partially” (23 or 12%). Those respondents who had answered positively to the question were asked to provide details on the providing body and type of support, which most responded to by referring to the national QA agency or ENIC-NARIC centre, which provides consultations, guidance and support. Some respondents additionally mentioned information sharing and training, as well as workshops organised at EU level to gain international experience. There were also references to the ministries. Respondents also commented regarding consultations in terms of updating recognition methodologies, especially regarding the assessment of qualifications issued within the Ukrainian education system. Some respondents mentioned national databases where they can find information about accredited HEIs and programmes.

Those survey respondents who had answered “partially” were invited to provide further details. Some of the resulting comments referred to a need for consistent training and highlighted that this concerned especially the QA on recognition.

Survey question: *What kind of support would be necessary in your opinion? (multiple answers allowed)*

Graph 4. What kind of support would be needed



The final question in the survey section dedicated to the national context and collaboration enquired what kind of support would be necessary in the survey participants' opinion, with the option to select multiple options. The most popular answer option, selected by 146 respondents (76%) was, perhaps unsurprisingly, "training", followed by "networking" (selected by 124 respondents or 64%). Less than half of respondents pointed to "peer support" (83 or 43%). Respondents also had the option to mention additional types of support needed, with many stressing the need for quality handbooks, training on the practical impact of the LRC, and sharing best practices internationally. Some comments called for more joint processes between universities, as well as access to well-stocked databases.

With reference to this question, the working group also enquired among participants of the online focus group what kind of support measures at national level they would find most useful:

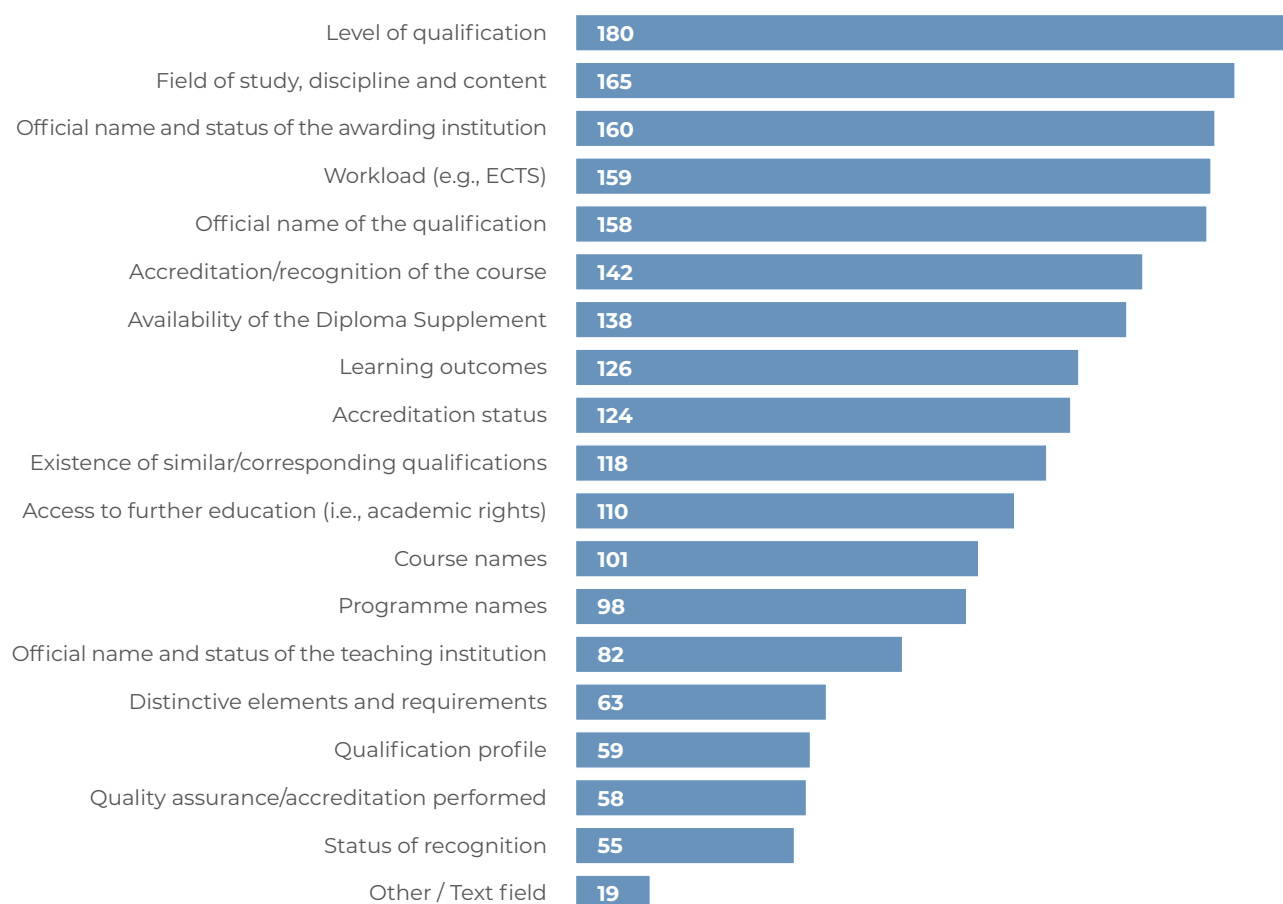
- / based on their own positive national experiences, some focus group participants suggested that an active network on recognition matters (such as a network of admissions officers) would be helpful. The task of this network could be to manage exchanges and updates and organise regular meetings. Project funding could be used to kick-start a network, as has happened in one of the countries represented in the focus group.
- / In other countries, there have been good experiences thus far with a software provided by a national agency, which helps admissions officers to use consistent procedures and provides information on corresponding qualifications.
- / Many participants had experience with institutional and/or regional databases of qualifications. Especially institutional databases were common since they are considered useful to prevent loss of institutional memory due to staff turnover. While these were generally found to be useful in practice, they were rarely complete and up to date. Participants thus suggested that a national, or even a common European database/intranet on qualification types, higher education systems, issued qualifications, guidelines, news and good practices would be a useful tool supporting the implementation of automatic recognition. Any such database should also be maintained by dedicated staff, in order to ensure it remains up to date.
- / Participants further reported that it was sometimes difficult to identify relevant counterparts/ contact persons at other HEIs (e.g., when trying to get information about a qualification). Thus, measures to make contact persons for recognition more easily identifiable would be welcome.

/ FINDINGS: RECOGNITION PROCESS

This part of the survey enquired how HEIs implement recognition procedures. The choice of questions in this part was inspired by key principles of the LRC and thus covers issues such as the elements of a qualification considered in the evaluation process, the right to appeal a recognition decision, and the recognition of qualifications of refugees or people in a refugee-like situation.

Survey question: *Please select all aspects which you take into consideration when evaluating a qualification for recognition purposes (multiple answers allowed).*

Graph 5. Elements taken into consideration when evaluating a qualification for recognition purposes



Survey participants were asked to identify all elements they take into consideration when evaluating a qualification for recognition purposes. The first three elements, selected by almost all respondents, are: “level of qualification” (180 or 93%); “field of study, discipline and content” (165 or 86%); and the “official name and status of the awarding institution” (160 or 83%). Conversely, the elements least selected from the list are: “status of recognition” (of course or institution) by other body within the context of the receiving institution (55 or 29%); whether the quality assurance/ accreditation was performed in line with the ESG (58 or 30%); and “qualification profile” (e.g., labour market vs research oriented, selected by 59 or 31%).

Nine out of 193 responding HEIs (5%) chose all the available options, meaning that they take into account all the aspects listed.

Respondents also had the option to list additional elements they take into consideration when evaluating a qualification, after which some respondents highlighted the relevance of the background information and regulations nationally and locally.

Survey question: *In cases where recognition is not (fully) granted, does your institution consistently provide applicants with an explanation for the decision taken?*

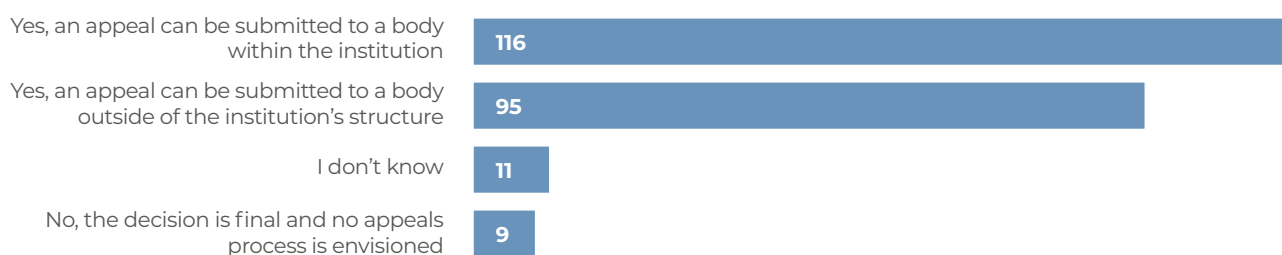
When asked whether their institution consistently provides applicants with an explanation when the decision to not (fully) grant recognition is taken, the vast majority (172 or 88%) responded positively. Among these positive answers, some respondents further specified that applicants receive a standard message including also instructions on how to appeal the decision and that information is provided about the learning outcomes that are lacking to grant equivalence.

On the other hand, 11 respondents (6%) stated that they do not consistently provide applicants with an explanation in case of denied or incomplete recognition, while 8 (4%) said that they do not know. Among the negative answers, some respondents added comments to clarify their positions. In one case, the respondent specified that “In cases where specialists in the university find that recognition cannot be granted, the documents are sent to the ENIC-NARIC centre for evaluation and a second opinion”. In another case, the institution further specified that applicants are provided with an explanation upon request (i.e, not consistently).

Two respondents preferred to not select any of the answers but provide only a comment instead: “There were no cases” (indicating that this institution had never denied full or partial recognition) and “We do if they ask for an explanation”.

Survey question: *In case recognition is not granted, can the applicant appeal the decision (multiple answers allowed)?*

Graph 6. Appeal decision



When asked whether applicants can appeal a negative recognition decision, the majority of respondents (170 or 88%) confirmed that an appeal can be submitted. Among these, 75 (39%) respondents noted that (only) "an appeal [...] to a body within the institution (such as the dean, the rector, the student ombudsperson, a special commission etc.)" can be submitted, 54 (28%) reported that the applicant (only) has the possibility to submit an appeal to a body outside of the institution's structure (e.g., national or regional centre, court etc.), while 41 (21%) replied that the appeal can be submitted both within and outside the institution. As for the cases in which the appeal can be submitted both to a body within and a body outside the institution, one respondent specified that "if the decision to not grant recognition is made within the university, an appeal can be submitted first to the person who made the decision and thereafter to the Head of Academic Affairs. If the decision to not grant recognition is made by the [...] ENIC-NARIC centre, an appeal can be submitted to them."

On the other hand, few responding institutions (9 or 5%) do not have an appeals process and consider the decision as final, while slightly more respondents (11 or 6%) stated they did not know the answer.

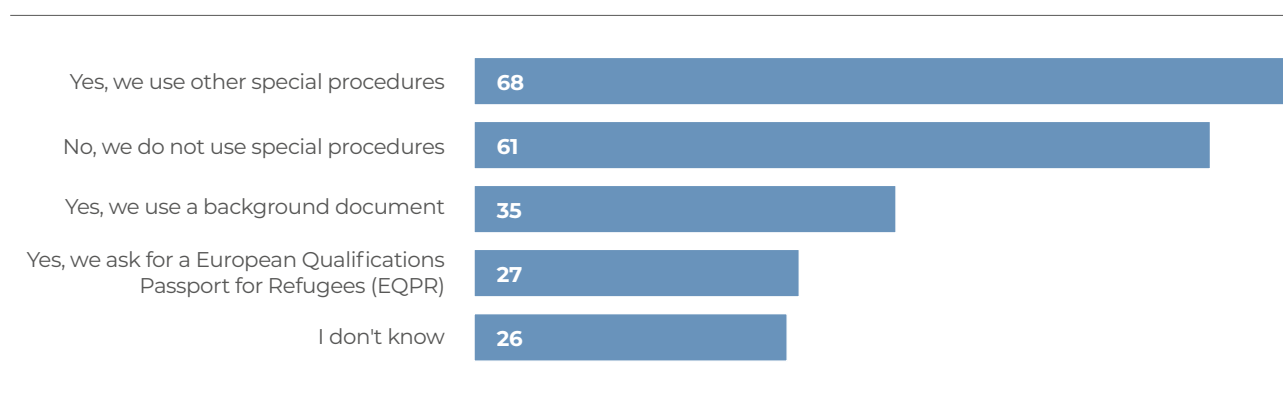
Survey question: *Does your institution or the national regulations specify a time limit by which a recognition decision has to be taken and communicated? If yes: Are you always able to adhere to this time limit?*

Following the question whether there is a time limit defined by either the institution or national regulations by which a recognition decision has to be taken and communicated, most respondents (164 or 85%) confirmed that this was indeed the case. Conversely, 18 respondents (9%) stated the opposite. The remaining 10 (5%) said they did not know.

As for compliance with time limit, from the 164 HEIs who answered positively to the question above, 119 HEIs confirmed their ability to adhere with it (73% of respondents). Some added in the comments that their compliance is respected considering additional external factors, as “when [the] application is complete with supporting documents and evidence” and “provided the application arrived on time (admissions) and was complete”. At the same time, some respondents also remarked that exceptional occasions can occur to delay the timing, as in the case when “additional information is needed, which is difficult to receive”, or “...when applicants do not pay the fee in time”. On the other hand, 34 HEIs or 21% responded that they are not always able to adhere to this time limit. Some of them remarked several of the motivations already mentioned, such as the “outside factors”; difficulties in communication with the applicant or the institutions; need of additional information and documents. Moreover, additional comments bring out other reasons, related to financial issues or time-schedule (“the administration has limited resources due to budget cuts”; “several stakeholders are involved in the process of evaluation”; “there are periods when due to the vast quantity of applies, we are not able to adhere the time”). Seven respondents (4%) admitted that they do not know, while 4 preferred to only provide clarifying comments, half of which highlight that the possibility to adhere to a set time limit depends on the individual case.

Survey question: *Do you have a special procedure for the recognition of qualifications of refugees or people in a refugee-like situation, i.e. with incomplete or entirely missing documentation (multiple answers allowed)?*

Graph 7. Special procedure for the recognition of qualifications of refugees or people in a refugee-like situation



Article VII of the LRC states that “Each Party shall take all feasible and reasonable steps [...] to develop procedures designed to assess fairly and expeditiously whether refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation fulfil the relevant requirements [...], even in cases in which the qualifications obtained in one of the Parties cannot be proven through documentary evidence” (Council of Europe & UNESCO, 1997, p. 9). In practice, the absence of complete documentation as proof of an obtained qualification requires the implementation of a special recognition procedure for such cases, like the establishment of a background paper (e.g., by conducting a discipline-specific interview with the applicant or on the basis of available information collected from various sources and a specific application form), or the use of the Council of Europe's [European Qualifications Passport for Refugees \(EQPR\)](#), as is also indicated by the LRC's subsidiary *Recommendation on the Recognition of Refugees' Qualifications under the Lisbon Recognition Convention and Explanatory Memorandum*. Thus, building on this legal and practical context, the survey enquired about special procedures for the recognition of qualifications of refugees or people in a refugee-like situation in case of incomplete or entirely missing documentation. In response to this question, 27 HEIs stated that they ask for the European Qualification Passport for Refugees (EQPR), corresponding to 14% of respondents. Thirty-five HEIs or 18% of respondents asserted that they use a background document. 68 or 35% respondents use other special procedures. On the other hand, 61 HEIs or 32% responding do not have any special procedure for the recognition of qualifications of refugees, while 14% of respondents did not know (26 HEIs).

Five respondents only provided a comment, stating that they do not have or do not know whether they have specific procedures of recognition of refugees' qualifications. However, among these,

one respondent added that the applicant can always apply for recognition of prior learning. Other comments confirmed that case-by-case methodology is used in the recognition process.

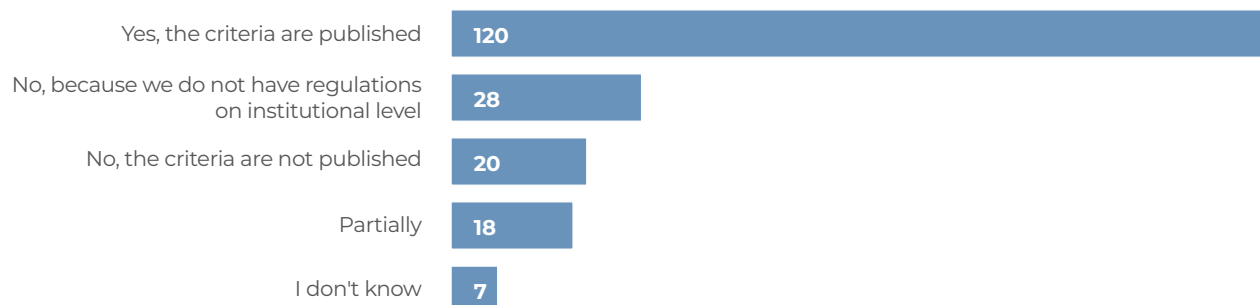
Many responding HEIs highlighted that there are specific procedures in place for Ukrainian refugees. In the focus group, some participants confirmed that there were indeed no such special procedures in place before 2022, since their country had not received a substantial enough number of refugees that would require the introduction of such procedures. In these cases, special procedures were originally introduced for Ukrainian refugees and ever since also applied to refugees from other countries, if “similar conditions” apply. During the discussion, it also emerged that procedures introduced for Ukrainian refugees are often not related to the Article VII since, in most cases, it is possible to access academic documentation of refugees coming from Ukraine.

When asked about their experience with any particular tools or procedures for refugees with insufficient documentation, such as background documents and interview-based approaches, many focus group participants expressed a lack of experience with such tools, since they were considered too time-consuming. As an absolute minimum requirement, participants considered a transcript of record necessary for any recognition procedure to be possible. However, participants were also hopeful that the advent of digital wallets and credentials would help solve part of this issue.

/ FINDINGS: QA OF THE RECOGNITION PROCESSES

This part of the survey enquired how institutional recognition processes are covered by internal QA. The questions in this part of the questionnaire were phrased based on the key principles of ESG 1.4 and thus cover issues such as published regulations covering recognition, as well as how the evaluation of recognition procedures is generally approached.

Survey question: *Has your institution published its regulations on the recognition procedures?*

Graph 8. Regulations on recognition procedures published

The majority of respondents (120 or 62%) stated that their institution has published its regulations concerning recognition procedures. Among them, some respondents clarified that these regulations were published on the HEI's intranet and thus only available to staff. In such cases institutional regulations, or relevant parts thereof, were published with the admissions officer as a target group in mind, rather than potential applicants. In addition, some other responses pointed to an ongoing revision of their institutional policies for recognition procedures, hence explaining the current absence of these documents online.

A smaller portion of respondents (28 or 15%) stated that there were no regulations at institutional level to be published. Even less respondents (20 or 10%) indicated that there were institutional-level regulations, but that these were not published. Seven respondents (4%) stated that they did not know the answer to this question.

All respondents, especially those who had selected the answer option "partially" (18 or 9%), had the option of adding clarifying comments or highlighting particular challenges they experienced regarding the topic of the question. Many of those who added a comment, highlighted that regulations were set at the national level.

Survey question: *How frequently does your institution evaluate its recognition procedures? If never: Why are there no evaluation processes in place?*

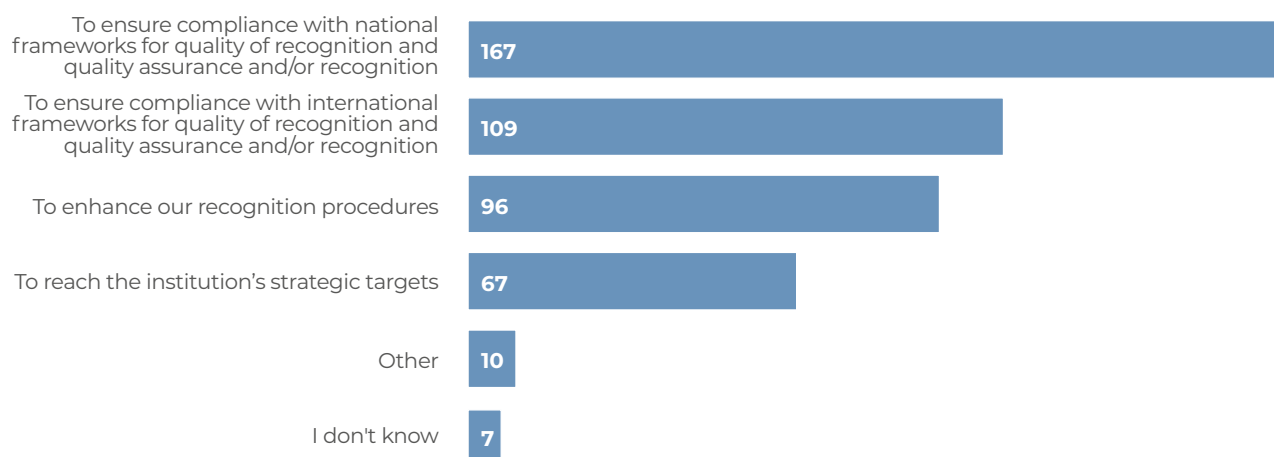
The majority of survey respondents (69 or 36%) reported that their institution evaluates its recognition procedures every few years. This result is not surprising as HEIs are expected to undergo a self-assessment every few years as part of external QA in most of the EHEA countries, and in all EQAR member countries. Only slightly fewer respondents (65 or 34%) who reported that their institution did so once per year.

Considerably fewer respondents stated that their institution evaluated its recognition procedures a few times per year (13%) or never (10%). Fifteen respondents (8%) expressed a lack of knowledge.

Of those 19 respondents who stated that their institution never evaluated its recognition procedures, almost half (8 or 42%) explained this through a lack of need for a structured evaluation process, as “the practice shows that the recognition processes work well”. Fewer respondents stated that they aimed to conduct such an evaluation but were still refining the approach (4 or 21%), or that they did not have enough resources (3 or 16%). One respondent stated that they did not know why no evaluation of recognition practices took place. Another three respondents explained that the evaluation was conducted externally.

Survey question: *What is the objective behind your evaluation activities? (multiple answers allowed)*

Graph 9. Objective behind your evaluation activities



The survey continued by enquiring what the objective behind an evaluation of the institution's recognition procedures was, to which respondents could give several answers. The most-selected answer (167 or 87%) was "To ensure compliance with national frameworks for quality of recognition and quality assurance and/or recognition". Fewer respondents (109 or 57%) stated that the objective was compliance with international frameworks for quality of recognition and quality assurance and/or recognition. However, one of these respondents also selected the answer option "I don't know", indicating a certain level of uncertainty either with regard to potential additional objectives behind an evaluation of recognition procedures, or with regard to the objective of achieving compliance with international frameworks itself. 96 respondents (50%) identified the enhancement of recognition procedures as an objective behind their institution's evaluation processes. Comparatively few respondents (67 or 34%) selected the answer option "To reach the institution's strategic target" and very few respondents (7 or 4%, including the one respondent highlighted above) expressed a lack of knowledge of the objective behind their institution's evaluation activities.

The findings indicate that current approaches to evaluating recognition processes are either designed or viewed as primarily geared towards compliance, rather than enhancement. This in turn suggests a need to strengthen links between institutional QA and recognition, and to adequately communicate this link to relevant recognition professionals at HEIs.

Survey question: *Which of the following tools and processes does your institution have in order to ensure consistent application of the recognition procedures and in the decision-making (multiple answers allowed)?*

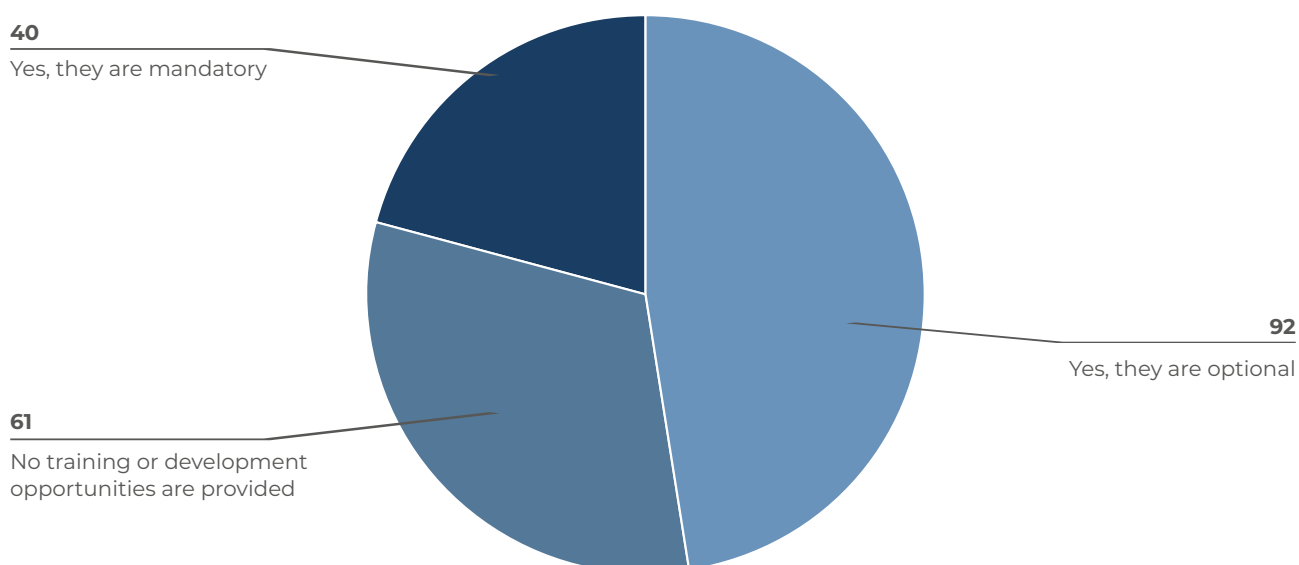
Next, the survey enquired which tools and processes the respondents' institution has in order to ensure consistent application of the recognition processes and in the decision-making, and offered again the option to select more than one answer. Almost two thirds of respondents (123 or 64%) listed staff meetings where recognition officers exchange information on current and past cases, while more than half of respondents (selected by 110 or 57%) reported that recognition officers follow a table describing every step and requirements of the recognition process. Slightly less than half of respondents (92 or 48%) reported the use of a shared database of decisions and precedents that could be accessed by recognition officers. Only 42 or 22% of respondents pointed to the use of a platform that enables recognition officers to exchange information on previous cases, while the same share of respondents reported the performance of a periodic analysis of

the reasons for appeals and the final outcomes. 12 respondents (6%) stated they did not know the answer to this question.

Other tools and processes listed by the survey respondents include externally provided guidelines, the use of a national database to check recognition equivalency, subscription to Country Education Profiles online, the ENIC-NARIC website, the WHED Portal online, institutional-level committees or commissions responsible for either establishing a standard procedure for recognition procedures or applying such a standard procedure directly to applications; as well as joint workshops of academics, administrative staff, the vice rector for student affairs and teaching and the senate chairman.

Survey question: *Do you and your colleagues receive staff training and development opportunities on matters of academic recognition?*

Graph 10. Staff training and development opportunities on matters of academic recognition

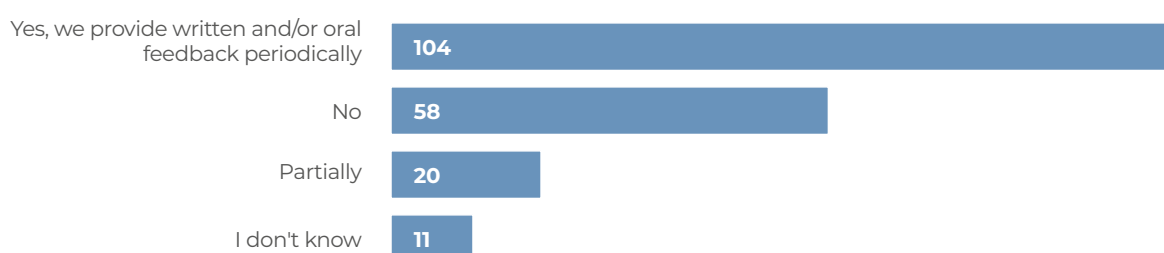


When asked whether they or their colleagues receive staff training and development opportunities on matters of academic recognition, more than two thirds (132 or 68%) confirmed that training and development opportunities were indeed being offered, with most of these positive responses (92 or 48% of the total number of responses) specifying that such training and development opportunities were optional. Much fewer (40 or 21%) stated that training and development opportunities offered to staff were mandatory. The remaining 61 responses (32%) stated that no training or development opportunities were provided.

The responses to this question were discussed in further detail in the online focus groups, with some participants reporting that mandatory training was organised on the occasion of big national-level reforms or developments. Participants further highlighted that mandatory training might not in every case be the most effective measure to provide staff with necessary knowledge and skills; instead, in some cases it might prevent a much-needed shift towards a pro-recognition, enhancement-gearred work culture.

Survey question: *Do you and your colleagues provide feedback on the recognition procedures in the internal evaluation processes of your institution?*

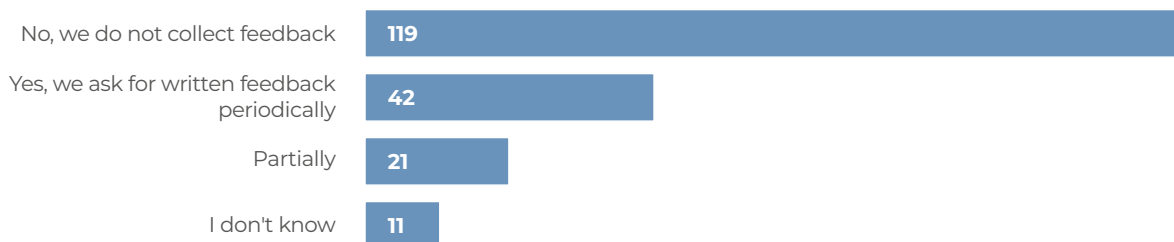
Graph 11. Feedback on the recognition procedures in the internal evaluation processes of your institution.



Upon being asked whether they or their colleagues provide feedback on the recognition procedures in the internal evaluation processes of their institution, more than half of respondents (104 or 54%) stated that they provide written and/or oral feedback periodically. Conversely, a third of respondents (58 or 30%) stated that they and their colleagues provide no feedback. Another 11 respondents (6%) stated they did not know the answer to this question, which could simply mean that they could only answer the question for themselves, but not their colleagues. The remaining 20 respondents (10%) selected “partially”. Some of these responses elaborated that feedback was provided on an ad-hoc basis (e.g., when a particular issue had been identified) or periodically for internal review purposes. Other comments highlighted that the provision of feedback is the remit of one particular staff member instead of being in the remit of several colleagues, or that the provision of feedback was entirely optional.

Survey question: *Do you and your colleagues ask for and collect feedback on the recognition procedures by applicants?*

Graph 12. Feedback on the recognition procedures provided by applicants



When asked whether they or their colleagues ask for and collect feedback on the recognition procedures by applicants, almost two thirds (119 or 62%) said they did not. Conversely, slightly more than one fifth of respondents (42 or 22%) confirmed that they did invite and collect feedback from applicants. Another 11 respondents (6%) stated that they did not know, which might indicate the absence of a structural process for obtaining applicant feedback in these institutions. The remaining 21 respondents (11%) answered “partially”, with some of these responses specifying that applicants could “sometimes” give feedback, for example as part of an appeals procedure. Other comments stated that collecting feedback on the recognition process was part of the institution’s annual students’ survey or a dedicated survey on the admissions process, or that feedback was received indirectly through the study administration. One respondent stated that their institution was collaborating with other institutions in order to get insights into the organisation of recognition procedures there. One response stated that students were consulted in the case of a revision of recognition procedures.

Taking the responses to this question as a basis, the working group enquired among participants of the online focus group for student representatives whether they or their peers were generally being consulted on recognition matters, for example when a specific aspect of the process was being revised. Focus group participants stated that recognition was a blind spot in this regard: while student consultation was a core part of QA measures in their contexts, recognition matters

were generally not being addressed with students. However, when asked further if they thought students should in fact be consulted on recognition matters, participants responded positively yet also highlighted that it would very much depend on the representatives' remit and, importantly, that any consulted students would first need to receive adequate training on the topic.

/ INSIGHTS FROM THE ANALYSIS OF REPORTS BY EQAR REGISTERED AGENCIES

/ METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Aiming to develop an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of how QA processes outside of the HEIs cover the state of quality of recognition, this chapter explores how both the standard and the more detailed guidelines of ESG 1.4 regarding recognition are evaluated by EQAR registered agencies.

Two main research questions guided the research process:

1. are the elements of the ESG 1.4 (on student admission, progression, recognition and certification) explicitly covered in review reports of EQAR registered agencies? How frequent is the topic of recognition in the external evaluation of the HEIs?
2. What are the observations of EQAR registered QA agencies regarding the quality of recognition procedures of HEIs in the EHEA?

The analysis of the findings of the first research question includes all phases of the student life cycle recognised in the ESG 1.4 in order to identify the relative weight given to recognition in external QA.

The findings of the second research question are dissected following the guidelines related to recognition in ESG 1.4, namely whether institutions have (a) fair procedures (b) implemented in a consistent and transparent manner, (c) in line with the principles of the LRC and (d) made in cooperation with other institutions, QA agencies and the national ENIC-NARIC centres with a view to ensuring coherent recognition across the country. Following the guidelines, the analysis takes into consideration the periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

The main data source for this study is the information stored on the Database for External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR),⁶ notably institutional reviews uploaded by EQAR registered agencies. A second set of information for the part of the study on DEQAR stored reports draws on the ESG aligned methodologies used by EQAR registered agencies (see full list in Annex 3). In order to understand further the methodologies for institutional reviews, a secondary source of information was consulted: EQAR registered QA agencies' websites and their documentation.

Among the institutional reviews available on DEQAR, only those fitting four main criteria⁷ were selected for this part of the study:

1. reports written in English language.
2. Reports published after 2015 (i.e. the year of the publication of the revised ESG).
3. Reports of HEIs based in the EHEA.
4. Reports resulting from institutional reviews only.

Following the criteria outlined above, the analysis covered a total of 337 reports from QA agencies based in 11 EHEA countries. All but one agency (i.e. IAAR) are national agencies.⁸ Table 2 below presents a detailed overview per system.

⁶ DEQAR is the Database of External Quality Assurance Results on activities performed by EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies. DEQAR not only collects their reports and decisions but also helps to understand reports in their context by describing the national QA frameworks of the European Higher Education Area countries. More information can be accessed at www.deqar.eu.

⁷ After applying the criteria and narrowing down the selection, a more detailed analysis of the type of reports of the sample led to the adoption of other exclusion criteria. The adoption of these criteria aimed at a more coherent and consistent sample. In this sense, the following types of documents were excluded: (a) follow-up reports; (b) institutional responses and appeals; (c) reports assessing study programmes, despite being classified as institutional assessment reports; (d) reports assessing faculties or departments. Furthermore, in order to have a more homogeneous sample, only one report per institution was assessed, meaning that when there were several reports related to the same institution, the older ones were excluded and only the most recent reports were analysed. The aim of this approach was to ensure that all the reports follow the most recent QA agencies' methodologies.

⁸ An organisation typically established at the national level within a participating country. Its primary role is to ensure and monitor the quality of higher education institutions and programs within that country.

Higher Education System	QA agency	Number of Reports included	Number of HEIs covered
Armenia	National Centre for Professional Education Quality Assurance Foundation (ANQA)	38	38
Croatia	Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE)	34	34
Cyprus	Cyprus Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education (CYQAA)	10	10
Estonia	Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA)	16	16
Finland	Finnish Education Evaluation Center (FINEEC)	13	13
Georgia	National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE)	15	15
Kazakhstan	Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating (IAAR)	29	29
Lithuania	Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC)	36	36
Romania	Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS)	45	45
United Kingdom (England)	Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)	63	63
United Kingdom (Scotland)	Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)	38	38

Table 2: Research sample

/ FINDINGS

Are the elements of the ESG 1.4 (on student admission, progression, recognition and certification) explicitly covered in review reports of EQAR registered agencies?

In the first stage, key words from the standard and guidelines of ESG 1.4 were selected. In order to put into perspective how much recognition is covered compared to the other elements, the keyword search involved the main stages of the student cycle included in the standard: “admission”, “progression”, “recognition” and “certification”. In addition, following the focus of interest of this research, additional keywords were included: “Diploma”, “Diploma Supplement”, “ENIC-NARIC” and “Lisbon Recognition Convention”.

Before delving into the results, it is worth mentioning that all QA agencies that wish to be included on EQAR need to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG. While the standards may be addressed differently depending on the type of external QA carried out, the agency is expected to systematically include all standards of Part 1 of the ESG in their criteria and procedures. Having

this in mind, it is expected that concepts of the ESG 1.4 appear in institutional reviews of the HEIs.

When analysing the frequency of the main words of the ESG 1.4, what can be observed is that they are present in the majority of the reports, though sometimes at very different frequency.

Overall, it seems that QA agencies tend to focus more on the phases of admission and recognition, followed by certification (including diploma and the diploma supplement). The reports included the keyword “progression” the least.

Focusing on the recognition aspects, in most of the reports, the concept appears twice on average. Some exceptions include Estonia (average of 9), Lithuania (average of 8), Georgia (average of 6) and Croatia (average of 5). On the other end of the spectrum is Romania in which it could happen that “recognition” is not included in the report analysis⁹, as shown in Table 3.

Higher Education systems	Admission		Progression		Recognition		Certification		Diploma or Diploma supplement		ENIC-NARIC		Lisbon Recognition Convention	
	Frequency	Average weight	Frequency	Average weight	Frequency	Average weight	Frequency	Average weight	Frequency	Average weight	Frequency	Average weight	Frequency	Average weight
Armenia	465	12,23	24	0.63	61	1.60	31	0.81	11	0.28	2	0.05	0	0
Croatia	292	8,58	47	1.38	159	4.67	15	0.44	540	15.88	0	0	0	0
Cyprus	90	9	13	1.3	27	2.7	5	0.5	6	0.6	3	0.3	0	0
Estonia	475	29,68	41	2.56	250	15.62	16	1	70	4.37	1	0.06	1	0.06
Finland	47	3.61	28	2.15	27	2.07	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Georgia	23	1,53	0	0	91	6.06	0	0	24	1.6	0	0	0	0
Kazakhstan	169	5,82	0	0	130	4.48	97	3.34	98	3.37	7	0.24	27	0.93
Lithuania	92	2,55	18	0.5	271	7.52	58	1.61	32	0.88	0	0	3	0.83
Romania	57	1,26	10	0.22	28	0.62	6	0.13	15	0.33	0	0	0	0
UK England	444	7,04	186	2.25	142	2.19	16	0.25	43	0.68	0	0	0	0
UK Scotland	90	2,36	143	3.76	80	2.10	0	0	9	0.23	0	0	0	0

Table 3: Frequency and average weight of keywords in reports. Average weight: admission (7.60), progression (1.45), recognition (4.52), certification (0.74), diploma and Diploma Supplement (2.47).

⁹ There could be several factors that influence the low average weight. One reason could be that some of the agencies use alternative, system specific, terminology regarding recognition. For example, a quick background exercise in the research phase demonstrated that the number of alternative keywords for “certification” surpasses the number of use of the keyword “certification” in the reports of few agencies. Another that the recognition aspects are more thoroughly covered through the programme evaluations or another type of focused external QA.

What are the observations of EQAR registered QA agencies regarding the quality of recognition procedures of HEIs?

ESG can and should be adapted to the national context and phrased into operational criteria in each context; there may be a natural difference in how the principles of the standards are addressed by different QA agencies. However, the analysis of agencies' methodologies (see list in Annex 3) and the reports showed that, in the majority of cases, the evaluations of HEIs cover similar aspects.

Diving deeper into the content of the reports, it can be noted that some positive elements can be highlighted. The procedures of HEIs cover not only the recognition of qualifications gained through academic programmes, but also skills and competencies gained through other means/ methods of learning. For example, from the reports emerge that aspects addressed are:

- / the development of standard processes for the recognition of prior learning, including initiatives to turn job competencies into academic ones.
- / The implementation of recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

Often, when the reports include recommendations to the institution, they focus on policies for targeting recognition of prior learning gained through academic mobility and non-formal and informal pathways.

Looking further into the specific elements of the quality of the recognition process (as understood by the ESG 1.4, see Table 1), the most prominent area tackled is the consistency and transparency of recognition procedures. Most reports provide evidence on institutions' recognition processes assessing also their transparency. Below some elements included in the reports:

- / inclusion of consistent recognition of foreign qualifications, partial studies and prior non formal and informal learning.
- / Consistent application of regulations for all phases of student life cycle that are published.

Other elements sometimes addressed in the reports are the institutional approach to recognition and how the quality of recognition is linked to the efforts of the HEI to attract more international students. In addition, it emerges that the management of the recognition of prior learning at the HEI is in some cases given to the vice rectors responsible for internationalisation, signalling senior management involvement in the recognition policies.

In some cases, the reports also confirmed, as emerged in Chapter 3, that there is room for

improvement in some aspects of the recognition procedures. The following elements are highlighted in some of the reports:

- / possible improvement of the efficacy of the recognition process.
- / Procedures related to prior studies and credit transfer need to be more transparent and clear.
- / Lack of familiarity with the procedures by the applicants.

Overall, the reports show that the HEIs (and further QA agencies) do take into consideration the LRC. Though the majority of reports do not have specific references to the LRC, as demonstrated by the quantitative analysis in Table 3, some of the **principles of the Convention** are present (specifically transparent, fair and flexible procedures for the qualifications' recognition). Although the term "Lisbon Recognition Convention" is rarely used, alternative terms are used simultaneously. A few examples demonstrate this:

- / recognition procedures regulated in line with European standards and/or international practices.
Recognition procedures based on international conventions and agreements.
- / Cooperation agreements with ENIC-NARIC centres that support the capacity of HEIs to act in
- / compliance with the LRC.

Further findings demonstrate that only some HEIs **collaborate with the national ENIC-NARICs**. Cooperation between the HEIs, the QA agency and the ENIC-NARIC has not been frequently observed. This is somewhat contradictory to the findings in Chapter 3 that demonstrate that a large percentage of HEIs found that the national ENIC-NARIC offers support in improving the quality and compliance of their recognition procedures with the LRC. One interpretation is that the collaboration between the national ENIC-NARIC and the HEIs mainly targets individuals working on recognition (i.e. the main participants in the analysis in Chapter 3), rather than having institutional agreements between the organisations/entities. This would imply that collaborations occur sporadically (e.g. when recognition officers need further help with a particular case) rather than having regular joint activities (e.g. annual meetings to exchange good practices, consultations and/or drafting recognition policies together).

Another possible explanation lies on the selection of countries involved in this analysis, according to the criteria outlined above. Some good practices purported refer to the fact that HEIs receive support from the national ENIC-NARIC centre to verify authenticity and accuracy of documents provided by candidates as well as to ensure comparable recognition of qualifications.

Another finding is that the **fitness for purpose** of the recognition processes is explored by (some) QA agencies though not to a very wide extent. Hence it is challenging to evaluate how adequate the recognition processes of the HEIs are and whether they achieve the set aims and objectives.

Some good practices laid out in the reports comes from the external review team, which draws a specific recommendation with regard to the credit recognition for students who participated in international mobility programmes, suggesting minimise students' academic debt and expand possibilities for exchanges beyond the Erasmus+ programme.

/ KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from the two studies outlined above in Chapters 3 and 4, a few concluding considerations are presented below. They have been developed in full awareness of the studies' limitations, but are nevertheless put forward in the hope that they help to stimulate much-needed dialogue and cooperation among relevant recognition stakeholders.

The considerations and recommendations are addressed to governmental actors and other policy makers, leadership and management staff at HEIs, as well as other key actors with a mandate to influence academic recognition towards more LRC-compliant and duly quality-assured processes, such as the ENIC-NARIC centres and QA agencies. Many of these considerations are interlinked, but they can generally be clustered into three overarching recommendations.

/ #1: UPSCALE EFFORTS TO FULLY IMPLEMENT THE LRC

Results from the study presented in Chapter 3 in particular indicate that academic recognition in the EHEA is generally conducted with a **high degree of compliance with the main principles of the LRC**. This could be explained by the fact that those HEIs that took part in the study are already part of the wider Bologna Process ecosystem, which suggests that the work done at the governmental level within the Bologna Process may have a positive effect on compliance with the LRC, for example by facilitating communication among different actors involved in the recognition process.

Furthermore, the findings show that approaches to recognition may vary within the same country or even the same HEI. From a HEI perspective, this is a natural consequence of institutional autonomy and complexity. It can also be seen as evidence of the **necessity of operating within the common framework of the LRC**, while ensuring **fair and non-discriminatory assessment through a case-by-case approach** to recognition. In this regard, HEIs can greatly benefit from the support received by ENIC-NARIC centres and other actors involved in recognition.

With regard to the LRC's Article VII, the findings from this study suggest that there is still room for improvement in the **awareness and use of special procedures for applicants with no or incomplete documentation**. As a matter of fact, the creation of special procedures for refugees with incomplete documentation is often seen as an onerous task that only becomes a necessity in cases of high numbers of refugees entering the country. This lack of awareness and understanding could be alleviated through a **clearly communicated governmental commitment** to the implementation of Article VII, as well as through **institutional capacity building** on methodologies to assess refugees' qualifications in case of absent or incomplete documentation. These support needs inevitably include an **adequate allocation of resources**, since the Article's practical implementation might require additional (human and other) resources to conduct interviews. In addition, training and support on this matter could also be offered by ENIC-NARIC centres, for example in the form of **information on the available practices and methodologies adopted in the EHEA**, such as the EQPR.

Another measure that could help support the practical implementation of the LRC in general is **enhanced dissemination of available tools supporting the quality of recognition procedures**, in particular the "[European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions](#)" (EAR-HEI manual) (Nuffic, 2020) as a basic manual on the LRC. Other tools that can support the quality of recognition procedures through a focus on clear and transparent information provision include the publication "[Information provision on recognition of qualifications. A practical guide for higher education institutions](#)" (CIMEA & EUA, 2021). Additionally, the self-assessment tool "[Improved recognition](#)" (EUA, 2022) developed through the "Spotlight on recognition" project – a QA instrument – can assist HEIs in reflecting on the extent to which they comply with the LRC, as described in the EAR-HEI manual, and make improvements accordingly.

/ #2: ENSURE BETTER LINKS BETWEEN RECOGNITION AND QA

The findings clearly highlight that there is still **room for improvement in ensuring adequate links between QA and recognition**. In this sense, the findings in this report come to the same conclusion as the LIREQA project. The project's final report (SKVC et al., 2019) issued several recommendations addressed to HEIs, QA agencies and ENIC-NARIC centres, with the aim to support these actors in addressing fair recognition of qualifications via external and internal QA.

Following up on the LIREQA findings and taking into consideration the findings in this report, recognition still seems not sufficiently embedded in existing QA frameworks, at least at the institutional level. In most HEIs, regulations concerning recognition procedures are available

(either on the HEI's intranet or online) and these procedures are reviewed on a regular basis. However, survey responses point to a need for **improving the involvement of relevant staff and applicants in feedback procedures**, which in turn could help improve existing recognition processes. In addition, when looking at the objective behind these evaluation procedures, findings indicate an understanding of QA among recognition professionals as compliance, rather than enhancement-driven, as was highlighted in Chapter 3.

Thus, **strengthening communication and cooperation between institutional QA and recognition professionals at HEIs** could help both QA departments and admission officers to rely on valuable sources of information and useful feedback on how to make recognition processes fairer and more efficient for applicants. In addition, the provision of information by admissions offices to QA departments may in itself inspire an **enhancement-gear reflection process**, as exemplified by one comment on the survey, which stated that “by answering the questions [they] have just noticed how many blind spots [they] have at [their] own institution”. **Better understanding by QA departments of the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention**, which constitutes the backbone of the ESG 1.4 regarding admission, progression, recognition and certification, could help to embed a common understanding of the relevance of recognition for the institution's internationalisation and other strategic priorities.

Adopting a more long-term view, a better connection between QA and recognition processes may also support a more comprehensive understanding of the elements - including recognition - that make up quality at an institutional level. Considering that the LRC itself is also based on a commitment to shared principles and values, a **more stringent alignment of the principles and values underlying both QA and the LRC** by embedding HEIs' academic recognition activities into institutional QA frameworks and broader quality culture could guide a common understanding of how to put these principles and values into practice. A closer link between recognition and QA would thus ultimately benefit HEIs and their staff too, as the rationale behind fair and transparent recognition and QA processes might then appear more evident.

In practice, and in reference to the survey results, tightening this link could include simple steps like sending a feedback form to recognition applicants along with the results of the process, more training and capacity building for both admissions and QA departments, as well as a more comprehensive integration of admissions' offices in internal QA processes.

The **role of external QA** is another important aspect in enhancing the quality of recognition within HEIs, as it can offer an **outside perspective and advice**. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, QA

agencies generally seem to take into consideration the principles of the LRC and cover all aspects of ESG 1.4 regarding recognition in their evaluations. However, there is still progress to be made, especially in terms of evaluating whether the recognition procedures are fit for purpose. On an institutional level, it is important that the internal QA processes do take into consideration and follow up on the recommendations given by the QA agencies.

/ #3: ENHANCE SUPPORT, COOPERATION AND COORDINATION BETWEEN ALL STAKEHOLDERS

A recurring, overarching need that emerges from the recommendations above is for **more structured and targeted exchange and cooperation between HEIs, ENIC-NARIC centres, QA agencies, governments and other stakeholders** towards a better implementation of the LRC and coverage of recognition by QA. This need has also emerged from previous studies,¹⁰ but it is still worth repeating and addressing again in more detail as a separate point, since the present study's findings indicate that many resources that were highlighted by the survey and focus group participants as something they would need already exist. This, in turn, indicates that relevant actors in recognition should **join forces in communicating and sharing available resources** in a concerted and coordinated manner.

For example, some focus group participants called for national level coordination in connecting admissions officers, as well as in the provision of resources and training on academic recognition. In a sense, this is already in place in the form of the ENIC-NARIC centres, yet not all relevant university staff members might be aware of the existence of these centres or their full range of services. This was also demonstrated in the findings of the content analysis of external QA reports (Chapter 4), which showed that HEIs do not always have collaboration agreements or continuous joint activities with the national ENIC-NARIC. In this regard, **increased communication and information activities on the side of ENIC-NARIC centres** might thus be beneficial, although capabilities for ENIC-NARIC centres to do so may vary due to differences in remit and available resources.

¹⁰ Final report of the project "Focus on Automatic Institutional Recognition - FAIR" (2015-2017), for example, examined the impact of national recognition structures on recognition processes and concluded that more streamlined communication on a national level greatly supports fair and transparent recognition processes at institutional level (Nuffic, 2017). A similar conclusion was reached by the project "Implementation of LRC Compliant Practices in the EHEA - I-Comply" (2019-2021), which aimed to support improved compliance with the LRC through strengthening national and institutional recognition structures (Nuffic, 2021).

Besides the already existing ENIC-NARIC centres, some countries have also set up dedicated national admissions networks, which are networks of admissions officers working at HEIs, who exchange practices and offer peer support. These networks have in the recent past proven successful, since they provide HEIs with a community of practice to exchange information, practices and experiences through a peer approach, thus supporting expertise building among admissions officers and contributing to improved recognition processes.

In addition, communication and cooperation within individual HEIs should be streamlined in order to ensure that the wealth of knowledge obtained by more senior staff members is evenly shared across all relevant staff. The advent of **digital infrastructure and resources** can greatly facilitate such efforts, as also indicated by focus group participants. For example, online programmes provided by a national agency and helping admissions officers in using consistent procedures and providing information on corresponding qualifications have been greatly successful in some countries, as have been institutional and regional databases of qualifications. In order to ensure that such databases are complete and remain up to date, dedicated resources and staff are needed, and a national or supra-national body might be in the best position to provide both. Alternatively, existing databases and programmes could be shared to the extent possible, which, again, requires committed coordination and collaboration among HEIs and national-level actors such as ENIC-NARIC centres, QA agencies and relevant government bodies.

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/ ANNEX 1

FULL LIST OF SURVEY QUESTIONS AND ANSWER OPTIONS

I. INSTITUTIONAL INFORMATION

Name of institution:

Country:

Institutional website:

Name of contact person:

Position:

Email address:

II. NATIONAL CONTEXT AND COLLABORATION

1. Is there a national or regional framework providing guidelines for addressing and ensuring the quality and compliance of recognition procedures with international frameworks such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the ESG?

☐ Yes, available here:

☐ No

☐ I don't know

2. Do you receive national-level support for improving the quality and compliance with the LRC of your recognition procedures by your country's ENIC-NARIC?

☐ Yes (if selected, continue with Q2a below)

a. Would you say the support you receive is sufficient?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Partially

Comments (optional):

☐ No (if selected, continue with Q2b below)

b. Are there any other national bodies (e.g., ministry) from which you receive support?

☐ Yes, the following (please provide details on national body and type of support):

☐ No

3. Do you receive national-level support in the quality assurance of recognition procedures?

☐ Yes, the following (please provide details on providing body and type of support):

☐ No

☐ Partially (please provide further details):

4. What kind of support would be necessary in your opinion? (multiple answers allowed)

☐ Training

☐ Networking

☐ Peer support

☐ Other:

III. RECOGNITION PROCESS

1. Please select all aspects which you take into consideration when evaluating a qualification for recognition purposes (multiple answers allowed):

- ☐ Official name of the qualification
- ☐ Official name and status of the institution that has awarded the qualification (awarding institution)
- ☐ Official name and status of the institution which provided the tuition – where different from the former case (teaching institution)
- ☐ Accreditation/recognition of the course
- ☐ Level of qualification
- ☐ Field of study, discipline and content
- ☐ Workload (e.g., ECTS)
- ☐ The existence of similar/corresponding qualifications in my institution's system
- ☐ Accreditation status
- ☐ Whether the quality assurance/accreditation was performed in line with the ESG
- ☐ Status of recognition (of course or institution) by other body within the context of the receiving institution
- ☐ Qualification profile (e.g., labour market vs research oriented)
- ☐ Learning outcomes
- ☐ Access to further education (i.e., academic rights, would the qualification give access to similar programmes in the system where the qualification was awarded)
- ☐ Distinctive elements and requirements (e.g., thesis, single exam)
- ☐ Course names
- ☐ Programme names
- ☐ Availability of the Diploma Supplement
- ☐ Other:

2. In cases where recognition is not (fully) granted, does your institution consistently provide applicants with an explanation for the decision taken?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ I don't know

Comments (optional):

3. In case recognition is not granted, can the applicant appeal the decision (multiple answers allowed)?

☐ Yes, an appeal can be submitted to a body within the institution (such as the dean, the rector, the student ombudsperson, a special commission etc.)

☐ Yes, an appeal can be submitted to a body outside of the institution's structure (e.g., national or regional centre, court etc.)

☐ No, the decision is final and no appeals process is envisioned

☐ I don't know

Comments (optional):

4. Does your institution or the national regulations specify a time limit by which a recognition decision has to be taken and communicated?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ I don't know

Comments (optional):

5. Are you always able to adhere to this time limit?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ I don't know

Comments (optional):

6. Do you have a special procedure for the recognition of qualifications of refugees or people in a refugee-like situation, i.e. with incomplete or entirely missing documentation?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

Comments (optional):

IV. QUALITY ASSURANCE OF THE RECOGNITION PROCESSES

1. Has your institution published its regulations on the recognition procedures?

- ☐ Yes, they are available here:
- ☐ No, the criteria are not published
- ☐ No, because we do not have regulations on institutional level
- ☐ I don't know
- ☐ Partially

If you ticked "Partially", or if there any particular challenges you experience, please provide further details:

2. How frequently does your institution evaluate its recognition procedures?

- ☐ A few times per year
- ☐ Once per year
- ☐ Every few years
- ☐ Never (if selected, continue with Q3a below)

a. Why are there no evaluation processes in place?

- ☐ We do not have the need for a structured evaluation process as the practice shows that the recognition processes work well
- ☐ We do not have enough resources
- ☐ We aim to, but are still refining the approach
- ☐ I don't know
- ☐ Other (please elaborate):

3. What is the objective behind your evaluation activities? (multiple answers allowed)

- ☐ To ensure compliance with national frameworks for quality of recognition and quality assurance and/or recognition
- ☐ To ensure compliance with international frameworks for quality of recognition and quality assurance and/or recognition
- ☐ To reach the institution's strategic targets
- ☐ To enhance our recognition procedures
- ☐ I don't know
- ☐ Other (please elaborate):

4. Which of the following tools and processes does your institution have in order to ensure consistent application of the recognition procedures and in the decision-making (multiple answers allowed):

- ☐ Recognition officers follow a table describing every step and requirements of the recognition process
- ☐ Shared database of decisions and precedents that could be accessed by recognition officers
- ☐ Platform that enables recognition officers to exchange information on previous cases
- ☐ Staff meetings where recognition officers exchange information on current and past cases
- ☐ Performing periodic analysis of the reasons for appeals and the final outcomes
- ☐ Other tools (please elaborate):
- ☐ I don't know

5. Do you and your colleagues receive staff training and development opportunities on matters of academic recognition?

- ☐ Yes, they are mandatory
- ☐ Yes, they are optional
- ☐ No training or development opportunities are provided

6. Do you and your colleagues provide feedback on the recognition procedures in the internal evaluation processes of your institution?

☐ Yes, we provide written and/or oral feedback periodically

☐ No

☐ I don't know

Partially (please elaborate):

7. Do you and your colleagues ask for and collect feedback on the recognition procedures by applicants?

☐ Yes, we provide written and/or oral feedback periodically

☐ No

☐ I don't know

Partially (please elaborate):

/ ANNEX 2

LIST OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

The working group would like to express its gratitude to the following online focus group participants, whose insights and perspectives greatly contributed to enriching this report:

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- / Hilal Karaoglan, Türkiye
- / Shalimova Kateryna, Ukraine
- / Olha Lavro, Ukraine

/ ANNEX 3

LIST OF EVALUATED METHODOLOGIES

QA Agency	Methodology	Link to documents
Armenia	Accreditation Manual	https://www.anqa.am/en/accreditation/#Papers
Croatia	Procedures for the Re-Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions	https://www.azvo.hr/en/evaluations/evaluations-in-higher-education/re-accreditation-of-higher-education-institutions/procedure-for-the-re-accreditation-of-heis
Cyprus	Guidelines for Evaluation / Accreditation of an Institution	https://www.dipae.ac.cy/index.php/en/evaluation-en/institution-department-programme-en
Estonia	Guidelines for Institutional Accreditation	https://haka.ee/en/regulations/regulations-in-higher-education/
Finland	Audit for Higher Education Institutions (2018-2014)	https://www.karvi.fi/en/publications/audit-manual-higher-education-institutions-2019-2024
	Audit of quality systems (2012-2018)	https://www.karvi.fi/en/evaluations/higher-education/audits-quality-systems-2012-2018
Georgia	Authorization Standards for Higher Education Institutions	https://eqe.ge/en/page/static/449/avtorizatsiis-standartebi
Kazakhstan	Standards for Institutional Accreditation of the Organisation of Higher Education and (or) Postgraduate education	https://iaar.agency/accreditations/institucionalnaya-akkreditaciya/en
Lithuania	Methodology for Conducting Institutional Review of a Higher Education Institution	https://www.skvc.lt/default/lt/kokybes-uztikrinimas/aukstuju-mokyklu-vertinimas/am-procesas
Romania	External assessment for institutional authorisation/ accreditation	https://www.aracis.ro/ghid-raport-autoevaluare-evaluare-institutionala/
UK England	Quality Enhancement Review	https://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/quality-enhancement-review
	Higher Education Review and Annual Monitoring	https://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/higher-education-review
UK Scotland	Quality Enhancement and Standards Review	https://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/quality-enhancement-and-standards-review

