

Recognition of foreign qualifications in times of COVID-19

A reflection document for the ENIC NARIC Networks and their
stakeholders

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Executive summary

The global health crisis caused by COVID-19 and its effects resonate deep into society, including education and -by extension- the recognition of foreign qualifications.

This document provides a first and joint perspective of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee Bureau and the ENIC-Bureau (EB) and NARIC Advisory Board (NAB) on the effects of COVID-19 on the recognition of foreign qualifications.

In doing so they aim to support ENIC-NARIC centres and their stakeholders to develop strategies to ensure qualifications are recognized in a fair manner despite unprecedented challenges caused by COVID-19. In addition, this document proposes actions at a network level to support ENIC-NARIC centres in this endeavor.

COVID-19 and recognition of foreign qualifications

Whilst there remains the uncertainty with the extent of the impact regarding on the recognition of foreign qualifications, few can be highlighted based on the disruption of both student mobility and education delivery. Admissions is affected due to reasons such as changes in education delivery, institutional closures and a possible drop of international students in the upcoming semester.

In addition, the disruption of learning may raise questions for the ENIC-NARICs on how to apply the LRC in these cases, as well as to consider how to keep delivering their services. The latter may include adopting policies and procedures favorable to digitization and digital student data. Looking forward, COVID-19 may accelerate already existing trends in education and recognition that possibly affect both operations and lead to further methodological questions.

The state of ENIC-NARIC centres in the time of COVID-19

At the end of March the LRC Committee Bureau conducted a survey in the ENIC-NARIC networks to map out how centres dealt with COVID-19, including any challenges and good practices encountered. This showed most ENIC-NARIC centres shifted to remote working. In general, the extent to which processes were digitized impacts the extent to which centres can continue in fulfilling their public service role.

In terms of recognition practices, challenges included legal obligations to use paper, the digital workflow not yet being fully operational and a lack of access to student records due to the closure of higher education institutions. A number of centres highlighted further challenges for the future, including whether learning outcomes from qualifications issued in this time are guaranteed.

Response from ENIC-NARIC networks

The ENIC-Bureau and NARIC Advisory Board are committed to support a dialogue in the ENIC-NARIC networks that ensures learning experiences captured in this time are recognized according to the LRC, and to organize peer support for specific challenges caused by COVID-19.

Therefore, the EB/NAB proposes the following actions to create a strategy:

- 1) Include "COVID-19" as a special entry and priority in the EB/NAB workplan;

- 2) Consider prioritizing the workplan items to be achieved this term;
- 3) Provide a coordinated (and possibly public) overview of measures taken in the LRC signatory countries due to COVID-19 that impact recognition and admissions;
- 4) Identify action(s) to support fair recognition of 'disrupted learning' due to COVID-19, in collaboration with the LRC Committee Bureau and external stakeholders including EUA, EURASHE, ESU, ENQA, EQAR, IAU, BFUG and others;
- 5) Organize peer support through the organization of online engagement activities (e.g., webinars, virtual conference, virtual meetings);
- 6) Undertake a new study in the ENIC-NARIC networks in the next months with a wider scope to widen the evidence base of the effects on recognition and identify challenges to be addressed;
- 7) Communicate the developed strategy to the networks and invite centres to bring in ideas to the EB/NAB, based on their experiences.
- 8) Distribute this document to public authorities, ministries in charge of higher education underlining the challenges appearing during the crisis, the role that the LRC and the ENIC-NARIC Networks play during this time and invite dialogue.

The strategy chosen should take into account the diversity of centres in the ENIC-NARIC Networks into account, as well as the limited resources available.

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global health and economic crisis affecting millions around the world. Yet, the measures taken by authorities to minimize the virus' spread continue to disrupt daily life and various sectors around the globe, including education at all levels. The partial or complete closure of borders, schools and campuses obstruct education programmes, exams and assessments and learning experiences for all students.

The different scenarios circulating on the effects of COVID-19 on education use time spans between 6, to 12 into 18 months, and some beyond. While the pandemic unfolds, new situations, challenges and innovative solutions may arise, of which some may have a more permanent transformative character.

As a linchpin of international student mobility, the recognition of foreign qualifications has been directly impacted, both in terms of operations (volume and workflow) and methodology (evaluations). The stakes here are high, for learners, education institutions and society at large.

For the countries that ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC), the treaty provides an internationally binding legal framework and principles on which solutions should be based. The operational framework is offered by the 57 centres of the 'European Network of Information Centres in the European Region' (ENIC) (in close cooperation with the 'National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union' (NARIC) Networks,) which are tasked by the LRC to promote the treaty's implementation.

To support ENIC-NARICs to fulfill their public role and support fair recognition in their national contexts in this time, the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee Bureau (LRCC Bureau) and the ENIC-Bureau and NARIC Advisory Board (EB-NAB) provide here a first and joint perspective on the effects of COVID-19 on the recognition of foreign qualifications. The main target group are the ENIC-NARIC Networks and other relevant stakeholders to ensure fair recognition of foreign qualifications (e.g. public authorities, higher education institutions, students, and quality assurance and accreditation organizations).

The document provides a general perspective on how COVID-19 may challenge the recognition of foreign qualifications (chapter 3), followed by the survey outcomes of how ENIC-NARIC operations have been affected thus far (chapter 4). Lastly, the document reflects on possible actions by the EB-NAB to support ENIC-NARIC centres in ensuring continued fair recognition of qualifications for the benefit of society.

In doing so, the LRCC Bureau and EB-NAB aim to support ENIC-NARIC centres and their stakeholders to prepare strategies to ensure the fair recognition of foreign qualifications despite the unique challenges caused by COVID-19, as well as to take action from network level to support ENIC-NARIC centres and (inter)national stakeholders in this endeavor.

2. COVID-19 and recognition of foreign qualifications

By now various organizations have published initial analyses and forecasts on the effects of COVID-19 on education in the short, medium and long term. How COVID-19 may specifically affect the recognition of foreign qualifications (as part of admissions to higher education) has been less well addressed and answering this question is complicated.

However, based on expected trends in student mobility and education delivery, which can be considered two main 'drivers' for change in recognition, some possible effects can be highlighted.

2.1 Disrupted mobility and admissions

Admissions for the next academic semester are disrupted in different ways: exams are delayed, admissions deadlines postponed and the start of the academic year may be postponed too.

In addition, there are increasing reports that international students (whom already may have applied) may decide to remain in their country of origin due to uncertainties of higher education operations at the start of the next academic year.

More generally, international student mobility is currently halted as a result of border closures and movement restriction measures. A scenario where this continues into the upcoming Fall semester, academic year or even longer, is likely to lead to a drop of enrollment of international students. At the same time we may see a growth in off-campus digital-based education provisions for many new international students for the Fall (and following) semester(s), in which they may have to stay in their country of origin until situation normalizes.

2.2 Recognizing disrupted learning and its impact on policies/procedures

COVID-19 has disrupted learning worldwide. This disruption occurs despite an unprecedented shift to offer education from in class to an online environment in order to continue delivering (at least part of) the curriculum.

While going online offers a solution to deliver education to many, it is not a solution for all. Some students have to quit their studies because they cannot afford to continue. Those who finish may see a delay in their studies because exams were postponed. This also may lead to a gap between the number of learners who are able to complete studies and those who cannot. Moreover, there are also education sectors (i.e TVET and VET) that, due to their applied and practical nature, are not being able to be provided through virtual learning for the full curriculum.

The cases that will land on our desks may reopen old debates, and may also create more unique cases shaped by the COVID-19 context. In line with the role of ENIC-NARICs and the principle of fairness promoted by the LRC, the networks may wish to strive to anticipate some of these issues now to ensure fair recognition is applied, especially to protect the learning of vulnerable students at risk. Examples of such cases are:

- How to assess quality of a qualification if the accreditation expired?
- If an examination was postponed, cancelled or altered, will this challenge the learning outcomes of the 2019-20 academic year?
- What will happen to the learning of students if their HEIs will not survive financially through the crises before they graduate?
- How to deal with incomplete applications because documents could not be retrieved by the applicant due to the closure of education institutions?

Moreover, could we expect a new type of vulnerable student, ending up in what could possibly be described as a refugee-like situation, in which Article VII of the LRC may come into relevance with the use of tools, such as the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR)?

Organizations responsible for evaluating and recognizing qualifications may need to adopt alternative policies and procedures. Especially during the pandemic, some authorities may temporarily not be able to issue paper copies of a student's academic documents and send them by mail. Policies and procedures favorable to the use of digital student data may be a promising route to secure continuation of services, based on the survey findings of ENIC-NARIC centres' current situation presented in the next chapter. These show a strong link between the extent of centres' digitization and the extent to which centres can continue their operations.

2.3 Long-term effects

While it is too early to say how this crisis will play out, some compare the COVID-19 crisis with a catalyst or pressure cooker, accelerating existing trends and developments already occurring, such as a future of more online education delivery, online education exchanges and changing geographic mobility trends, such as less "east-west" student mobility due to strengthened education capacity in Asia.

There may be new credentials introduced, mainly with the purpose to hamper unemployment, but perhaps also to prepare for further (higher) education. For example, new programmes that lead to a state-recognised Diploma, which would put focus on our ability to recognize credentials from the LLL sector.

COVID-19 has had significant economic repercussions worldwide that is already affecting the economic position of students, education institutions, governments and even ENIC-NARIC offices.

It is too early to tell, but these developments are something to monitor as this may transform recognition in the LRC treaty countries in terms of methodology and volume. In a similar way, COVID-19 could also affect developments in other regions, including with regards to the global recognition convention.

3. The state of ENIC-NARIC centres during the time of COVID-19

The parts of the text in italic are direct quotations from the surveys.

From the 20 of March till the beginning of April (the last answer was received on the 12 of April), a short survey, under the directions of the LRC Bureau, was sent to all ENIC-NARIC Centres. 43 centres out of 57 answered.

It must be repeated (or emphasised) that the role and status of each centre is extremely varied; from a simple advisory body to HEIs and applicants to a legally binding decision-making body; an autonomous organisation or a department that is completely integrated within the Ministry in charge of Higher Education. All this obviously plays a role in the capacities, role and power of each individual centre.

3.1 Moving to remote working

Following the different regulations in the different States, the ENIC-NARIC centres closed their physical offices from the 10 of March to the 18 of March, aiming to re-open from mid-April, again following the State's regulations. In many countries, the recognition of qualifications is perceived and thought of as a public service. The continuity of the public service has therefore been a priority. Almost all ENIC-NARIC centres have switched to remote working. Only one centre completely ceased their activities due to a lack of remote working facilities and lack of digitisation. It can also be noted that countries equipped for earthquake scenarios were more "prepared" due to existing civil protection mechanisms.

This transition to remote work was carried out smoothly in cases where there was already a legislative framework for remote work in place and where IT services were already fully or partially equipped for this mode of work. In one case, however, a centre had to close for 15 days, reopening on 2 April, in order to make telework technically possible for all staff members. Where a centre's switchover to digitisation was already complete or in progress, this made remote working possible. Some also very quickly installed a phone centre to help applicants, while in other cases the phone service was closed as the ENIC-NARIC centre

number could not be transferred to a private staff member or a Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) system.

As all organisations experienced telework, the centres faced a new working environment and they were not all prepared on the same level. They noticed that even in telework it is crucial to keep some social working contacts; *"It is also important to take into account the ergonomics of the teleworking: related to their material, including their reliability, also the isolation of the work which need to balance by some "social" event' or "Sport and health of staff needs also to be taken into account even in case of homework"*. As other workers, civil servants and staff in each society, ENIC-NARIC staff face the challenge of balancing professional and private life, especially the interaction with children or the feeling of being alone. This brought one centre to develop a "hierarchy of needs guidelines" tool for the whole ministry concerned. The same centre mentions that *"it is important to train people to deal with the new management approach. This was practically already started by webinars"*. Analyses shared by several centres underlined that they need to learn how to work at a distance. Collectively, staff members are increasing their capacity to apply the digital process and to get more familiar with It.

3.2 The process of "recognition" during the time of COVID-19

However, even in cases where the transition to telework ran as smoothly as possible, some centres found themselves legally obliged to provide certificates of recognition in hard copy, and these had to be signed, stamped and sent. It is not always possible to deal with all steps of the process through remote working. To receive, to analyse, to take a decision, to stamp or sign the final paper, and to send the decision are not, separately or together, always possible through a digital process. To the extent that one step of the process is not fully operational, or not yet possible, through digital tools, some centres' employees have had to travel to their workplace - albeit in compliance with the protection rules - to carry out this obligation. Very few centres rely entirely on paper-based processing. However, the lack of digitisation of even some parts of the whole recognition process will probably cause some delay of the decision.

Some external factors also played a role: the closing of HEIs, difficulty to access records of similar decisions already taken, if the records were not digitalised; difficulties to get in contact with certain closed HEIs and access to their archives, difficulty being in contact with other centres. It should also be noted that sometimes the obligation to use paper hard copy, or to deny the use of electronic signatures, are a decision of the HEIs themselves.

In very specific cases, it can be a real challenge for the applicant. For example, *"Some people cannot apply as they don't have a Danish ID number or when we ask to see the original documents."* In this time of "stay at home", the obligation for applicants to provide original documents can be difficult as they can have difficulty gaining access to them.

3.3 Some challenges

"With difficult cases, sharing ideas, internal review and consultations are not as efficient as face to face". Remote working can increase challenges that existed also before the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in terms of the authentication of documents, and guarding against false diplomas. The pandemic has resulted in a real drop in the number of applications, with the concomitant fear that this number will soar after the crisis.

One may also note that the recognition of qualifications is related to regulated professions, particularly in the health and medical fields. This has led some countries to speed up recognition processes for this type of qualification, notably by shifting the final level of decision from the national to the regional level.

At the crossroads of several social realities and expectations (e.g., personal development, internationalisation of Higher Education, employability, migration), ENIC-NARIC centres face large challenges now and in the future with regard to their recognition processes:

- How will they evaluate qualifications obtained in 2019/2020?
- What will be the learning outcomes guaranteed by the assessments and exams held during this period?
- Taking into account the experience of digitalisation during the COVID-19 pandemic, what could be the consequence on the way to deal with transnational education and online education?

The capacity of the centres to fully execute their role depends also on the answers provided by public authorities to these questions and on the support they receive. Particularly, it seems clear that the emphasis will be on digitisation, since this has ensured that the whole process has not been blocked.

Ultimately, the efforts and energy of all ENIC NARIC staff to continue to play their role in responding to citizen requests must be underlined.

4. Response of the ENIC-NARIC Networks

Dialogue and networking are essential to the life of the ENIC-NARIC Networks. They enable the exchange of information needed for centres to perform their tasks as national information centres, and allow for peer-to-peer reflection on common problems, thus enabling fair recognition and innovations where needed. Face-to-face meetings are an important facilitator to this end. The COVID-19 pandemic makes face-to-face meetings less likely, if not impossible, in the near future.

Whilst the centres of the networks form a strong bond and the various electronic listservs of the networks are essential and efficient tools to exchange information, alternatives for the dialogue/networking aspect may be desired if the pandemic endures. This should also be seen in light of a possible aftermath of the pandemic in which offices may have fewer resources, both due to strains on public finances and substantially reduced mobility, as well as a reduced or different demand for recognition services.

4.1 The role of the EB/NAB

One of the main tasks of the ENIC Bureau (EB) and NARIC Advisory Board (NAB) is to support the dialogue between the ENIC-NARIC centres to facilitate fair recognition and the implementation of the LRC. Therefore, the EB/NAB proposes to take on the following role to tackle the challenges the networks face due to COVID-19:

- Help ensure that learning experiences captured in this time are recognized following the principles of the LRC;

- Coordinate (peer) support in the ENIC-NARIC Networks for the specific challenges faced by COVID-19, supported by ELCORE.

4.2 Possible actions for the EB/NAB

Resulting from its role, the EB/NAB proposes to create a strategy at the network level to support the challenges faced by the (centres of the) ENIC-NARIC Networks amidst the COVID-19 crisis. This paragraph proposes the actions to be part of such a strategy:

1. Include "COVID-19" as a special entry and priority in the EB/NAB workplan, formulating the main actions needed and assign persons responsible for their implementation. Note this entry may overlap and support actions in other dimensions (e.g. digitization, strengthening ENIC-NARIC centres and collaboration stakeholders). The EB/NAB workplan will be adjusted accordingly. Appoint a coordinator to monitor this item;
2. Consider prioritizing the workplan items to be achieved this term. The EB/NAB needs to balance the resources needed for immediate actions posed by COVID-19, with those needed for longer-term priorities in the networks to ensure structural progress for fair recognition is still made;
3. Provide a coordinated overview of measures taken in the LRC Treaty countries due to COVID-19 that impact recognition and admissions (e.g., delayed exam dates, admissions deadlines, extended and delayed accreditation decisions and quality assurance procedures, relevant changes in national law).

Consider making the overview publicly available (e.g. on ENIC-NARIC.net) to benefit a wider group of stakeholders and as such deliver a service to society. The action may require an EB/NAB member to periodically collect the information, as well as resources to upload and manage the information;

4. Identify actions to support the fair recognition of 'disrupted learning' due to COVID-19. The main goal is fair recognition of all learning (credit mobility as well as degree mobility) adhering to the principles of the LRC. This may include: 1) take advanced action and raise this in the networks, 2) collaborate with LRC Committee Bureau on core aspects of this conversation, 3) collaborate on COVID-19-related items with external stakeholders like EUA, EURASHE, ESU, ENQA, EQAR, BFUG and IAU and potentially others, 4) explore if automatic recognition could be a solution for the recognition of disturbed learning;

5. Continue dialogue and peer support through the organization of online engagement activities (e.g., webinars, virtual conference, virtual meetings). Already before COVID-19, ELCORE was proposing a series of webinars on various topics, and in addition to the ENIC-NARIC Networks Annual Joint meeting, to further strengthen this dialogue and encourage resource sharing to ensure efficiency, effectiveness as well as avoiding overlap in efforts

Now that the ENIC-NARIC Networks Annual Joint meeting has been postponed, priority could be given to the implementation of these online engagement activities, including topics related to challenges faced because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it could also provide an opportunity to organize a modified ENIC-NARIC Networks Annual Joint meeting by transforming it as a virtual event, instead of the traditional in-person event.

In addition, the EB/NAB could provide an interface for dialogue with the Networks (preferably through the Co-Secretariats), and/or a place to meet virtually (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, BlueJeans) instead of in person;

6. Consider taking stock of the situation in the next few months to identify challenges in recognition (wider scope than operations alone) that need to be addressed and actions the networks (and EB/NAB) could undertake to support centres;

7. Transparency of actions. Communicate to the networks what the EB/NAB is intending to do to ensure we can offer peer support, as well as support our stakeholders. Invite centres to bring in ideas to the EB/NAB, based on their experiences.

8. Distribute this document to public authorities, including ministries in charge of higher education, to underline the challenges appearing during the crisis. Also emphasize the role that the LRC and the ENIC-NARIC Networks play during this time and invite dialogue.

Lastly, the strategy chosen should respect the limited resources within the EB/NAB as well as the networks' centres. The strategy should always respect the diversity of the types of centres in the networks and note that the COVID-19 pandemic's impact and resulting actions may vary from one country to another. Moreover, as the COVID-19 pandemic progresses, the EB/NAB should anticipate the inclusion of new actions in the strategy, as new issues and challenges surface.

Further suggested reading:

- [Effect of the COVID-19 on higher education and recognition. Information note for HEIs](#), CIMEA, 2020.
- [Digital Student Data & Recognition. A White Paper for the ENIC-NARIC networks](#), DigiRec Consortium, 2020.
- [Guidance on free movement of health professionals and minimum harmonisation of training in relation to COVID-19 emergency measures – recommendations regarding Directive 2005/36/EC](#). European Commission Communication, C(2020) 3072 final