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

Third Meeting, Hosted by France
9-10 June 2022

<u>Minutes</u>

List of Participants

Country/Organization	Name	Last Name
Albania (Co-Chair)	Linda	Pustina
Bulgaria	Vanya	Grashkina
Council of Europe	Katia	Dolgova-Dreyer
Croatia	Leonardo	Marušić
Denmark	Allan	Bruun Pedersen
EQAR	Colin	Tück
Estonia	Gunnar	Vaht
EUA	Helene	Peterbauer
EURASHE	John	Edwards
France (Co-Chair)	Hélène	Bekker
France (Organizer)	Nathalie	Nilsson Thiello
Georgia	Salome	Abramishvili
Germany	David	Akrami Flores
Ireland	Andrina	Wafer
Italy	Elisa	Petrucci
Italy (Co-Chair)	Chiara	Finocchietti
Latvia/ TPG A Co-Chair	Baiba	Ramiņa
Lithuania	Diana	Saruoliené
Lithuania	Kristina	Sutkute
Malta	Jon	Vercellono
Moldova	Lilia	Parhomenco
The Netherlands	Bas	Wegewijs
Norway	Dag	Hovdhaugen
Poland	Hanna	Reczulska
Romania	Adrian	Iordache
San Marino	Monica	Cavalli
Slovak Republic	Lucia	Húšťavová
Sweden	Ulrika	Axell
Ukraine	Kateryna	Suprun
UNESCO	Peter	Wells
UNESCO	Vanja	Gutovic
BFUG Secretariat	Aida	Myrto
BFUG Secretariat	Jora	Vaso

Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Czech Republic, EI-ETUCE, ESU, EC, Greece, Holy See, Hungary, Kazakhstan, North Macedonia, Portugal, Spain and UK did not attend the meeting. Belgium Flemish Community and Switzerland sent regrets.

1. Welcome addresses by French hosts

Hervé Ferrage (Deputy Director, France Éducation International) welcomed the participants to the third Meeting of the TPG B on LRC. Mr. Ferrage emphasized the mutual priorities of digitalization and interconnectivity for both EHEA and France Education International, and mentioned the importance of the peer support approach as an opportunity for France to share its experience and learn from its peers on a larger scale. The two peer support activities on digitalization and recognition of alternative pathways were cited as opportunities for participants to share experiences, needs and perspectives. Some of this meeting's

priorities included sharing up-to-date information relevant to the peer group and supporting the recognition of qualifications for displaced persons from Ukraine. Mr. Ferrage briefly introduced the work of France Education International and the Ukraine crises, stressing how actively ENIC-NARIC France supported recognition of qualifications from Ukraine. He mentioned the information on the Ukrainian educational system that was shared with national stakeholders, such as higher education institutions, associations, competent authorities for regulated professions, ministries of Education, Higher Education and Research, Interior, Social Affairs, Labour, through webinars and written documents. Information and experience were also shared with international partners dealing with massive return of students from Ukraine, such as the Ministry of Education of Lebanon. Mr Ferrage concluded by wishing a fruitful meeting.

Hélène Bekker (Co-Chair) opened by presenting a brief review of the group's meetings and achievements. Ms. Bekker reminded the TPG B members of the work plan outlined during the peer group's first meeting[1], and reiterated the three priorities that will be firstly addressed among the six specific thematic indications for the TPG B – recognition of alternative pathways, automatic recognition and digital technology for the recognition agenda and the Diploma Supplement, as well as the objective of the second meeting[2] to share experiences relating to digital technology and diploma supplement, within the larger agenda of recognition. The agenda of the meeting was introduced, which was adopted without changes.

For more detailed information, please see: *TPG B on LRC meeting Agenda*

2. Presentation of the Erasmus+ co-funded project TPG-LRC Constructing Recognition in the EHEA (TPG-LRC CoRE)

Chiara Finocchietti (Co-Chair) introduced the **Erasmus+ co-funded** project TPG-LRC CoRE,, meant to support the peer group's activities in a symmetric manner to the projects supporting the activities of TPG A and TPG C. Ms. Finocchietti reminded the members of the three key pillars of the Bologna Process: Qualification Framework (QF), ECTS and Recognition and Quality Assurance (QA), and went on to explain that the TPG-LRC CoRE is focused on key commitment 2, the Lisbon Recognition Convention in EHEA countries for the time period of May 2022 - April 2025. One of the key objectives of the project is to support the TPG B activities, enhance cooperation and information sharing between the different stakeholders involved in the recognition process.

The presentation outlined the project's work packages which, respectively, aim at supporting the organization of TPG B meetings, organizing public seminars, researching and publication, transnational peer support activities, project management and dissemination and sustainability. The group is to prioritize thematic priorities with the most immediate being digitalization, automatic recognition and alternative pathways. The schedule of all of the future TPG B meetings up until the ministerial conference was shared with the members. The meetings will alternate between in-presence, to foster peer support, and online, which have proved efficient for information sharing.

Regarding project deliverables, a publication is expected by October 2023 which will be targeted at HEIs and address micro-credentials and recognition. It was noted that, following the agreement among all TPGs, a second MICROBOL project will not be undertaken. The three groups will collaborate to include the topics of QA, QF, as well as ECTS and recognition within one single publication, in order to explore micro-credentials from the perspective of the key pillars of the three TPGs. Details on the rest of the deliverables and budget were shared with members. Lastly noted were the future plans to have three PLAs to address the three thematic priorities of alternative pathways, digitalization and automatic recognition.

For more detailed information, please see: *TPG-LRC CoRE Project*

3. Cooperation with other Thematic Peer Groups

Linda Pustina (Co-Chair) welcomed and introduced the speakers of the session by emphasizing the importance of cooperation among all TPGs.

3.1. Input from the TPG A

Baiba Ramina (Co-Chair, TPG A) introduced herself, the other two TPG A Co-Chairs, Khatia Tsiramaua (Georgia) and Karin Riegler (Austria), and reiterated the challenges facing TPG A and the group's work on the key commitments. She introduced the group's umbrella project, focused on organizing TPG meetings,

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[1] First Meeting of the TPG B on LRC, online, 14 September 2021.
[2] Second Meeting of the TPG B on LRC, online, 18 January 2022.

peer learning activities, and working groups for the dissemination of other projects. It was clarified that due to regulations, many of the participants in the project are limited or associate partners.

The group's planned PLAs were listed, with the first activity on micro-credentials and their use by stakeholders, and the second activity aimed at the implementation of QF focusing on learning outcomes. It was explained that, because Georgia is interested in writing a self-certification report and submit it to BFUG, the center of this particular project will be there, while in Estonia the focus will be on the assessment of learning outcomes. The three planned working groups were described, dedicated respectively to micro-credentials, self-certification, and short-cycle education, noting that participation in the micro-credentials group was preferred among partners, with the working group on short-cycle being the less popular choice.

The presentation concluded with mentions of possible collaborators with TPG A, such as the WG on learning and teaching or members of the European Training Foundation, both of which are currently working on recommendations for micro-credentials and have expressed interest in joining the PLA.

For more detailed information, please see: *Input from the TPG A*

3.2.   Input from the TPG C

The Co-Chair of the TPG C was not able to attend the TPG B meeting and sent her apologies.

4. Supporting recognition of qualifications from Ukraine: information and experiences sharing

4.1.   Practices and digital tools to support recognition of Ukrainian qualifications

Kateryna Suprun (Ministry of Education, Ukraine) presented on the current practices and digital tools to support recognition of Ukrainian qualifications. Ms. Suprun began with the latest information on damages caused by the war in Ukraine and the number of people currently in need of support. This information is updated daily on the website launched since the first week of the war.

The difficult circumstances in Ukraine were shared and it was noted that very few institutions in the country deliver full–time studies. The need to maximally digitalize the process was cited as crucial. Thus far, business learning tools have been developed, digital content provisions are being negotiated, teachers and students are being provided with computers, and education platforms are being modernized. All available data on specific locations of people and their needs is corroborated so as to manage the massive internal displacement. The support of UNICEF was cited, and host countries to Ukrainian students and academic staff were thanked for their support.

The presentation continued to cover issues of digitalization, such as the software modernization of the country's database so that all applications to HEIs become electronic. It was also reported that the destroyed and/or damaged education facilities require extraordinary efforts to be rebuilt in the short–term, middle-term and long-term. The impact of the digital architecture to support recognition of Ukrainian qualifications was highlighted. Among the tools and structures in place is the EDEBO system, a unified database of education which contains a collection of registers and documents for verification purposes.

Instruments to be launched in the near future included the mobile application Diia, set to provide digital legal documents, and a second initiative that is developing the digital version of the diploma supplement in Ukraine, expected to be finalized in the beginning of next year. Guidelines on the fast-track recognition of Ukrainian academic qualifications have been published. It was also announced that a webinar organized by CIMEA, ENIC Ukraine and the European Commission (EC), was organised in April. Moreover, it was noted that the work on the self-certification exercise has been completed and received positive feedback regarding EHEA qualifications, and comparison reports are expected to be finalized by the end of the year.

For more detailed information, please see: *Practices and digital tools to support recognition of Ukrainian qualifications*

4.2.   Tools and instruments from a country perspective

Hanna Reczulska (NAWA, Poland) presented on the development of tools and instruments in Poland to support Ukrainian citizens. The presentation began with an overview of key statistics on the number of Ukrainians in Poland and the number of students who have joined the Polish education system. It was noted that this situation has brought to the forefront issues regarding recognition of the Ukrainian education system, legislation and incomplete documentation.

Regarding legal support from Poland, an important law for Ukrainian citizens has been recently put into place, which ensures that the stay of all individuals who cross the Polish-Ukrainian border from 24 February 2022 is considered legal for a period of 18 months. Noted also were the additional measures taken to ensure recognition for the employment of Ukrainian teachers by Polish schools, as well as the general facilitation of medical staff employment. It was also highlighted that special legislation for the recognition of qualifications of refugees with incomplete documentation is being implemented.

Regarding NAWA initiatives, tools and training is provided for HEIs and other authorities on the Ukrainian education system, as well as the recognition of Ukrainian qualifications and cases with missing documentation. A hotline in Ukrainian and an Information Point in the NAWA offices have been made available while special funding programs have been created to support Ukrainian students with scholarships, language courses, and more. The presentation concluded with a mention of the recently-held Polish-Ukrainian conference "Solidarity with Ukraine," which has built more bridges between the two countries and encouraged further support for Ukraine.

For more detailed information, please see: *Tools and instruments from a country perspective*

4.3. Cooperation with higher education institutions

Silvia Bianco (CIMEA, Italy) presented on several of CIMEA's initiatives and their collaboration with HEIs in Italy. It was noted that the beginning of the war increased the requests from Italian HEIs on the specifics of the Ukrainian qualifications and HE system and, to this end, CIMEA has provided customized trainings.

The webinar held by CIMEA in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Science in Ukraine was followed by a dedicated webpage named "Focus Ukraine" where all relevant information on recognition and qualifications regarding Ukraine is uploaded and regularly updated. Among the others, it includes very recent information shared by colleagues in the Ministry of Education in Italy and data from the Ukrainian Qualifications Database, containing more than 300 samples of Ukrainian qualifications and available for all the institutions that may need it.

In the follow-up discussion to the above presentations, specific cases where certain qualifications are automatically denied recognition were treated. EQPR was suggested as a practical tool that can be used in the assess refugee's qualification for which there is insufficient or missing documentation. Regarding additional support, it was suggested that the efficient use of all current tools and instruments in order to reach maximum recognition for Ukrainian qualifications is a priority. This may include trainings of national HEIs in understanding Ukrainian documentation. Also noted were initiatives from several Ukrainian institutions and international bodies, like the World Bank, to ensure all academic staff are remunerated and supported for their current efforts. Finally, efforts are underway to secure digital content which will be provided free-of-charge to Ukrainian students in HEIs in the near future.

For more detailed information, please see*: Cooperation with higher education institutions*

Hélène Bekker (Co-Chair) concluded the session by suggesting that the information regarding the recognition of qualifications from Ukraine could be centralized, for instance in the EHEA website.

5. Introduction to the peer support activities

Chiara Finocchietti (Co-Chair) invited members to exchange experiences in order to mutually support one another in the implementation of LRC and to discuss goals related to digitalization at the national level. The breakout session groups were invited to share their action plans, goals, and foreseeable future steps as well as concrete national examples on such topics as alternative pathways and staff mobility and consider potential matchmaking of several countries.

5.1. Peer support activity 1: Digitalization for the recognition agenda

The session began with presentations on national experiences from Germany and Moldova, followed by the discussion on the digitalization for the recognition agenda with focus on the following areas: secure, trusted, and transparent data provision; platforms for credential sharing; criteria and principles of the LRC applied to the digitisation of the recognition process.

- National experiences

David Akrami Flores (Germany) presented the two-year joint project DiBiHo on Digital Credentials for Higher Education Institutions. The project aims at exploring a trusted, distributed, and internationally interoperable infrastructure standard for issuing, storing, presenting, and verifying digital academic credentials in a national and international context for German Higher Education Institutions. The first prototype for selected cases has been tested and future recommendations are underway. The presentation concluded citing the importance of digital credentials at transition points in the education system, the improvement of legal and organizational frameworks, the standardization of data management practices, and the development of open technologies that support digital credentials. Members were urged to join DiBiHo and its mailing list or to attend a related conference in Berlin, in November.

For more detailed information, please see: *National experiences from Germany*

Lilia Parhomenco (Moldova) presented an overview of the Moldovan Perspective on Digitalization. The presentation began with a short summary of the Moldovan educational system. It was cited that being part of the Bologna Process set the stage for a new HE system in 2014, but it was also challenging due to its lack of compatibility to the prior system. The presentation went on to list steps undertaken for the internationalization and recognition of qualifications since 2014, such as the establishment of the national QA agency and other initiatives aimed at partly decentralizing HE. Further developments included the approval of HE diploma models and supplements, and a national website on the verification of qualifications (containing documents issued after 2008). In conclusion, next steps in digitalization included improving the digitalization of university archives, the digitalization of Diploma Supplement, the establishment of HEMIS (Higher Education Management System) and an e-admission system for public education.

For more detailed information, please see: *National experiences from Moldova*

- Parallel Breakout Session I: Group 1

The breakout session was intended to encourage discussion on future achievements on the topic of digitalization, the future work of the TPG on sharing concrete and effective support and exchange methods, and on each country's specific needs within the area of digitalization. Session chair Colin Tück asked members to provide their specific focus regarding the digitalization of the LRC process for the next two-three years and where they would like to see more support. A discussion followed which revealed each country's current position on digitalization and next steps, related to local needs and those across borders.

Some of the priorities cited from Moldova included the national qualification framework, the introduction of micro-credentials to HE, and the development of a system that can track students' paths until their degree completion. Related to the latter, in Poland a public IT research institute has been established to digitalize diplomas and supplements, wherein students upload their recognition statement into the system. An issue discussed included funding for digitalization being often omitted from public funding. National governments were cited as the main actors that can push digitalization initiatives forward, with the financial support in some cases of the EC. Another suggestion was that all recognition authorities should acquire the ability to digitally verify credentials.

In Norway, there is a digital register of shareable data with the next step being to make it work across borders. Validity across borders was another prominent subject. One of the main challenges in Malta is the digital diploma's potential lack of validity abroad while another concern in Moldova involved the perception or reluctance of employers regarding digital credentials. In France, there is an initiative to make the recognition process more accessible and a database is being developed currently at the high school level. Albania has had a central database of HE diplomas for the last decade, but the first digital diploma to be issued is expected this July. In Croatia and Romania, the national database can be used to produce transcripts or diploma supplements but no digital qualification documents.

It was further discussed that while many European initiatives are based on digitally signed documents and electronic seals should be accepted by law, trust issues with digital documents do exist. Stamps and seals are often required so digital qualifications are often printed out and stamped. At the European level, there are still problems with digital signatures between countries not being recognized. Staff mobility opportunities that can serve to introduce countries to one another's system were suggested. The session

concluded by citing the Covid-19 vaccine digital certificate case, although very different, as a success story in the digitalization sphere.

- Parallel Breakout Session I: Group 2

Chiara Finocchietti (Co-chair) invited the participants to introduce themselves and their respective duties in their organizations. The participants then shared their experiences and current situation in their countries regarding digital credentials and future objectives. It was suggested that countries may take advantage of this knowledge-sharing, select that which is useful from the experience of other countries, so that there is no need to begin entire systems from scratch. One of the most important aspects in the process of digitalization is trusting the source or institution that issues the diploma. It was added that the infrastructure in most countries already exists and that there should be special care from institutions when dealing with management of personal data. Almost all of the countries confirmed that they are working on converting physical diplomas into digital ones, and that the legal aspect of the process needs time and attention.

The key challenges cited included internalization, the need of a platform for technicalities of the recognition process, the definition of digital credentials, how HEIs should submit applications for recognition, personal resistance to technology, the requirements of encrypted ID and secure data. It was noted that most countries remain skeptical about advancing with their own platforms of recognition as they assume a common one will be made available soon. The EQAR representative suggested that HEIs can download a large amount of information and credible data from their website. EQAR can serve as a trusted source for the recognition process and that there is no need for the duplication of the information. That which exists on the international database for accreditation can be used at the national level.

It was suggested that digitalization at the national level will help the cross-border process and that EQAR is a trusted source of information. The importance of working towards a common qualification framework was reiterated.

5.2. Peer support activity 2: Recognition of alternative pathways

Katia Dolgova-Dreyer (Council of Europe) introduced the speakers who would share best practices of national experiences on recognition from France and Ireland. The session then followed the discussion on the recognition of alternative pathways with focus on the following areas: recognition of prior learning; recognition of non-traditional learning; micro-credentials.

- National experiences

Nathalie Nilsson-Thiello (France) provided an outline of ENIC-NARIC France center (which is part of France Education international) within the context of recognition. She explained that ENIC-NARIC France issues statement of comparability for academic and vocational degrees. It does not issue statements of comparability for professional qualifications and for working in a regulated sector. She reminded that ENIC-NARIC France compares the foreign degree to a level of the French NQF. She outlined that the validation of prior learning and experience in France is based on a strong legal framework, and is considered as a path to obtain a degree. Therefore, this makes the evaluation of foreign qualifications issued after validation of prior learning easier. Considering the evaluation of micro-credentials, the French ENIC-NARIC does not evaluate these credentials so far. Ms. Nilsson-Thiello pointed out that some improvements are needed such as the revision of the content of the statement of comparability, and the importance that micro-credentials are positioned in the NQF. Recognition of micro-credentials was reiterated as an important ongoing challenge.

Andrina Wafer (Ireland) shared her country experience regarding the discussed topics, emphasizing that recognition should be efficient and that it is important to follow the LRC guidelines as well as to update the legislation. Ms. Wafer underlined that it is important to focus on the study programs, that all the sectors should work together because this process is ultimately about people and their livelihoods. The definition of recognition still remains a challenge, in terms of awareness about the difference between access and admission, according to the presenter. She affirmed the importance of micro-credentials and explained the way in which the Microbol project promotes diversity. The final point of the presentation regarded the fact that micro-credentials ought to be effective.

- Parallel Breakout Session I: Group 1

The session chair, Gunnar Vaht, urged participants to discuss the main challenges and obstacles regarding the recognition of alternative pathways, for instance, informal learning. France led the discussion by stressing that the challenge at national level was currently to make the procedure, which is rather heavy administratively easier and more flexible, with the help of digital technology. The discussion continued with professional programs where credits are given without the need of formal studies. One point of discussion involved academic institutions that may accept formal and informal learning, while there is no method of ensuring the quality of informal learning and micro-credentials.

Both the academic and professional perspectives were discussed in terms of a lack of QA regarding the recognition of micro-credentials and the conversion of informal learning/professional experience to academic credits. In Norway, practice in the workplace is encouraged but QA is necessary to render these experiences valid and recognized. In Moldova, validation centers for professional education were established only to serve the labor market, not for academic reasons. These centers check the quality of programs, but there is still much reluctance form academic communities in accepting training certifications.

Micro-credentials from non-higher education providers, such as training centers were compared and discussed further in terms of the difference in QA. It was noted that some institutions are venturing into offering certification for micro-credentials, using the same ESG standards as HEIs, which can help with recognition. A suggestion called for a clear division between professional and academic recognition, as well as the careful gauging of the actors who are able to provide recognition. It was suggested that universities are responsible autonomously for validating prior learning, whilst foreign students are always advised to validate their training. An example by Croatia was shared, wherein a sectoral program in the maritime industry was created specifically for people who have non-formal experience so as to have them enroll in a shorter version of an accredited three-year program.

It was concluded that one of the most crucial tasks of TPG B is specific information exchange among countries. While each country is in a different stage of the recognition process and national initiatives, the sharing of recommendations and learning outcomes from different levels of frameworks can prove helpful.

- Parallel Breakout Session II: Group 2

The session started with the presentation of challenges from all country members. Some of the main challenges mentioned were the discrepancies in the level of NQFs, the absence of data on micro-credentials, the need for accurate information from the HEIs, the vulnerability of qualification holders and employers with digital badges and the gap on needs of individual qualification holders, among others.

The suggested solutions included the relevance of learning outcomes (micro-credentials/formal study programs), the specific role that ENIC should have, sharing information and advice, promoting a shared understanding among HEIs, financial initiatives and legal support, co-constructing an individual trajectory for micro-credentials, and having an online toolkit to bridge the gap of the individual's needs.

Several future steps were suggested such as discussions with HEIs on the implementation of peer learning on RPL with other countries, financial incentives for HEIs to do RPL, introducing micro-credentials into DEQAR and the standardization of micro-credentials.

6. Wrap up and conclusions

Hélène Bekker (Co-Chair) concluded by highlighting the event as successful in the sharing of knowledge and national experiences among working groups and European University Alliance members, the initiatives created to overcome the challenge of understanding diversity, and the desire to find a common path forward for the future of the recognition of alternative pathways. Noted were also the effective breakout sessions on the recognition of alternative pathways and digitalization and the links between them. The TPG-LRC CoRE was cited for offering an interesting dimension to the overall discussion.

The schedule of future meetings was shared, with the next TPG B meeting to be held online in January 2023, an in-presence seminar on automatic recognition to be held before in the first semester of 2023, and another in the Spring of 2024 on digitalization. No other business was brought forward, thus the third meeting of the TPG B on LRC was successfully concluded with special thanks to the Co-Chairs, members and guests for their contributions and input to the meeting.