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INTRODUCTION

Information provision is a core theme of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, the so-called “[Lisbon Recognition Convention](#)”. The convention, which is the key treaty regulating recognition of qualifications from abroad across Europe and North America, was adopted in 1997 and to date it has been signed and/or ratified by 55 countries.

Three parts of the Lisbon Recognition Convention refer to information provision:

- Section III – Basic principles related to the assessment of qualifications.
- Section VIII – Information on the assessment of higher education institutions and programmes.
- Section IX – Information on recognition matters.

In line with these provisions, higher education institutions are expected to provide **relevant, accurate and updated information** on the programmes and courses offered to applicants in the admission phase and on the qualifications issued to graduates in the awarding phase.

Provision of information about recognition is also covered by Standards 1.4 and 1.8 of the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area \(ESG\)](#) making it an essential component of an institution’s quality assurance system.

Students and staff of higher education institutions need and have a right to receive adequate and comprehensive information from higher education institutions on admission requirements, recognition procedures and study programmes.

Well-designed information provision is a pre-requisite for institutions to ensure fair recognition of qualifications and is indicative of the quality of an institution's other activities too. The ability to **communicate clearly and effectively with applicants and graduates** is also an essential component of higher education institutions' activities to increase their international attractiveness.

To do this effectively, it is necessary to know the relevant contents to be conveyed, the role of the different actors involved and how to make the best use of tools and resources available such as websites and social networks.

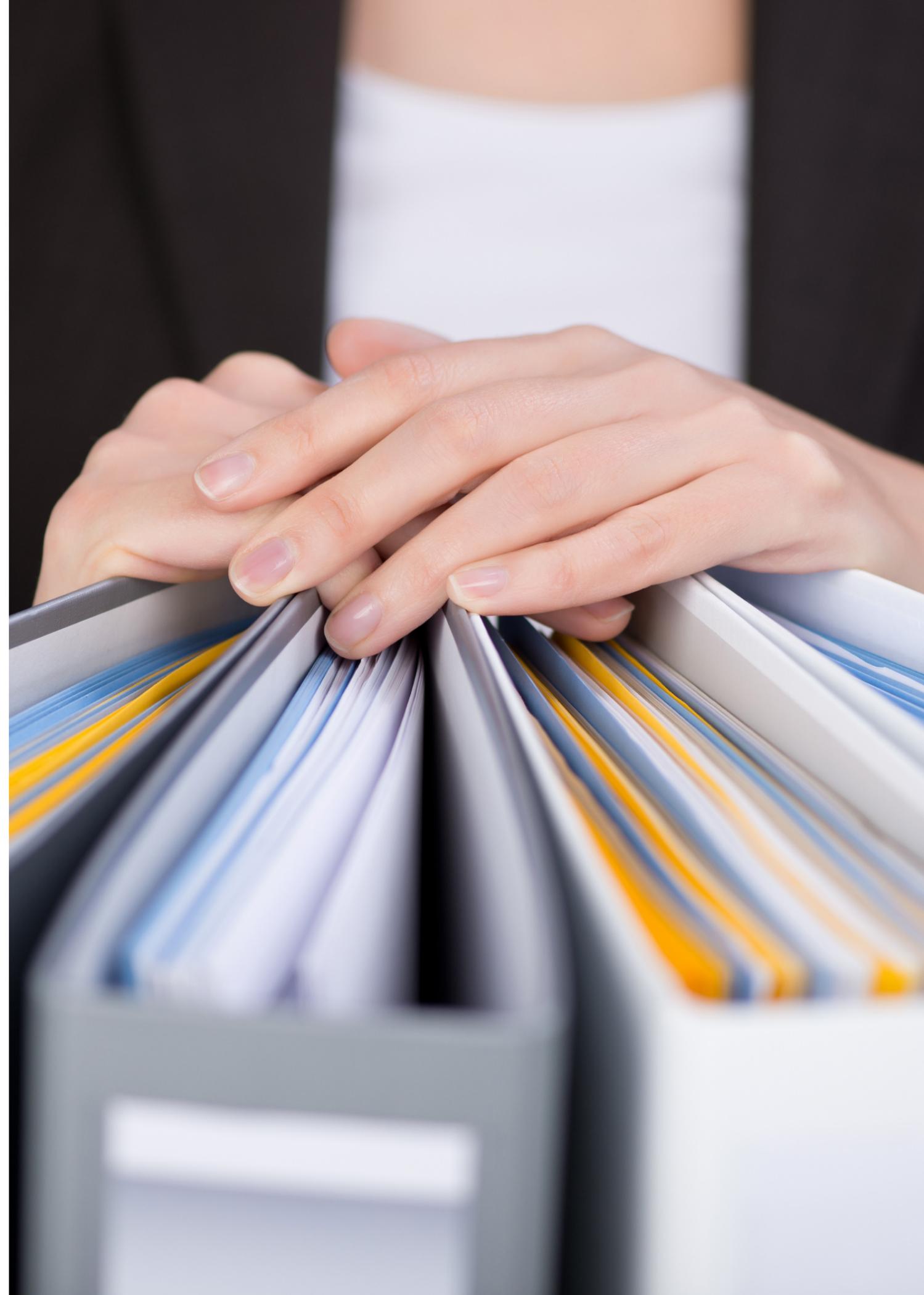
This practical guide is addressed to international relations and admission officers, registrars and staff in charge of information management and provision at higher education institutions. Its **main aim** is to **improve the quality of information provided by higher education institutions** in line with the provisions of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

This guide provides a set of **principles** and "golden rules" to **deliver well-designed and comprehensive information** during both the **input** phase, i.e., information on access to and enrolment in the higher education institution (before applying for admission) and the **output** phase, i.e., during the awarding of qualifications. It covers two main dimensions:

- 1) transversal elements needed to **structure information provision** and the communication strategy and
- 2) **contents that should be conveyed** to ensure the smooth exchange of information among students, higher education institutions, and all potential interested parties.

Furthermore, the guide provides practical advice on how to ensure the quality of the information provided.

A final section is devoted to **pertinent questions for self-assessment**.



LISBON RECOGNITION CONVENTION¹

Section III – Basic principles related to the assessment of qualifications

Article III.3

- Decisions on recognition shall be made on the basis of **appropriate information** on the qualifications for which recognition is sought.
- In the first instance, the **responsibility for providing adequate information rests with the applicant**, who shall provide such information in good faith.
- Notwithstanding the responsibility of the applicant, the **institutions having issued the qualifications** in question shall **have a duty to provide**, upon request of the applicant and within reasonable limits, **relevant information** to the holder of the qualification, to the institution, or to the competent authorities of the country in which recognition is sought.
- The Parties shall instruct or encourage, as appropriate, **all education institutions** belonging to their education systems **to comply with any reasonable request for information** for the purpose of assessing qualifications earned at the said institutions.
- The responsibility to demonstrate that an application does not fulfil the relevant requirements lies with the body undertaking the assessment.

Section VIII – Information on the assessment of higher education institutions and programmes

Article VIII.1

Each Party shall provide adequate information on any institution belonging to its higher education system, and on any programme operated by these institutions, with a view to enabling the competent authorities of other Parties to ascertain whether the quality of the qualifications issued by these institutions justifies recognition in the Party in which recognition is sought.

Section IX – Information on recognition matters

Article IX.1

In order to facilitate the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education, the Parties undertake to establish transparent systems for the complete description of the qualifications obtained.

¹For the full text of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, please visit www.coe.int. The bold has been added by authors of this publication and it is not in the original text of the Convention.

STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG)²

Section II - 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

[...] 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.

Section II – 1.8 PUBLIC INFORMATION

STANDARD

Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.

GUIDELINES

Information on institutions’ activities is useful for prospective and current students as well as for graduates, other stakeholders and the public. Therefore, institutions provide information about their activities, including the programmes they offer and the selection criteria for them, the intended learning outcomes of these programmes, the qualifications they award, the teaching, learning and assessment procedures used, the pass rates and the learning opportunities available to their students as well as graduate employment information.

²For the full text of ESG, please visit www.enqa.eu.

HOW CAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IMPROVE THEIR INFORMATION PROVISION?

STRUCTURING INFORMATION PROVISION

This section covers five key principles to improve the quality and efficiency of information provision. These principles concern both the input and the output phase.

Information should be:

- 1) Transparent and of high quality.
- 2) Targeted to stakeholders.
- 3) Up to date.
- 4) Accessible.
- 5) Digital and provided in a cross-channel environment.

1. Transparent and high-quality

Information is transparent and high quality when it allows for informed decisions based on all aspects of the issue in question, including who is involved in relevant decision-making processes.

Information should:

- Be user-friendly: it only provides relevant information and is designed for non-expert users in terms of content and language.
- Allow for interaction, e.g., through a Q&A forum, social media links, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses provided for further queries.
- Be provided in the national language and in another, widely spoken language, preferably English. It might also be worth providing translations into languages from those countries where a large portion of an institution's international students come from.

2. Targeted to stakeholders (“user-centric” and not “institution-centric”)

Information provision should be stakeholder-oriented, starting with the design and structure of information systems and the communication strategy. Different stakeholders requiring information on recognition may include applicants with qualifications, refugees, ENIC-NARICs, employers, public authorities, professional organisations, other higher education institutions, mobility and exchange agencies, and quality assurance agencies.

Information should:

- Have a scope and use a language that are commensurate with the target group – one size does not fit all.
- Be designed with a holistic view and in a centralised manner, avoiding overlapping and contradictory information by different offices of the same institution.
- Use channels that best reach the individual target groups.

3. Up to date

The information provided should be consistent and up to date. Education systems evolve, and the documentation required for the recognition process may change accordingly. It is advised that higher education institutions keep track of what information has been provided previously.

Information should:

- Include relevant updates, such as on regulations and documentation requested.
- Indicate clearly the date of the latest update.
- Be provided in a timely manner.
- Indicate the source, if different from the institution.

4. Accessible

Higher education institutions should follow international good practices in making their online content more accessible, encompassing a wider range of target audiences.

Information should be:

- Publicly available in multiple formats and readily accessible to all target audiences with regard to:
 - Format.
 - Style.
 - Language.
 - Data protection and data privacy.
 - Disabilities and other special needs of diverse target groups, which should be taken into consideration.
- Accessible within a single information source or via a single-entry point to ensure its best use.
- Based on clear messaging and a user-friendly and straightforward construction, especially for website navigation.
- Free of charge.

5. Digital and provided in a cross-channel environment

New technological solutions can enhance the quality and efficiency of information provision. Examples of good practices using new information technologies include an online application system to request an assessment of a qualification for the purpose of enrolling.

Information should be:

- Online:
 - Website, including an instant messaging function like a chat.
 - Mobile app.
 - Social media.
 - E-mail and newsletter.
- Offline:
 - Telephone.
 - In-person.
 - Mail/postal service.
 - Printed documentation.
 - Media outreach³.



³ Ringuette M., presentation in the "Seminar on recognition and information provision in the time of Covid-19: the role of Higher Education Institutions", 18 June 2020. More information on the [CIMEA website](#).

DESIGNING INFORMATION TARGETED TO STAKEHOLDERS: CREATION OF USER PERSONAS EXAMPLE⁴

This is a strategy to assist institutions in reaching individual target audiences through effective communications.

- Personas are the representation of fictional users (e.g., age, gender, background, technological affinity) that would be most likely to engage with your institution. Each one of your personas stands for a unique segment of: society; recognition process; your institution; potential user groups.
- Their creation involves your imagination, storytelling, and existing data on key stakeholders and how they tend to engage with you. Brainstorming with colleagues, potentially from different units, will likely help to develop more accurate user personas.
- It is useful to create a chronological flow-chart to describe the journey of each persona's interactions with the institution, from beginning to end.

Resources to use and reuse

INTERNAL	EXTERNAL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Data collected from procedures ● Existing digital data ● Previous research and publications ● Interviews with service users 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Other institutions' publications ● Stakeholders' publications ● Academic and research papers ● News articles ● Unsolicited reviews and feedback

Example: defining the user persona

Steps

- Identify main target audiences.
- Create multiple user personas, to understand each of their goals and typical profile
- Map typical interactions with the institution, from beginning to end, to identify if current processes and information systems are successful in transmitting the information (if not, plan necessary adjustments).

Example user persona

John – international student (22 years old) from Canada.

Spoken languages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● French, English, Spanish.
Aspiration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Wishes to study architecture and then work for an international architect firm.
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Acquire new knowledge ● Use the qualification in the labour market
Frustrations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Institutional website has too much information deemed irrelevant
Personal traits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adaptable ● Always connected to the web

Guiding questions for the institution

The identification of user personas helps the institution design the information and its dissemination, in order to maximize reach of the targeted audience. Try to answer to the following guiding questions, while having in mind the user persona.

Pre-study and application (input phase): John wishes to continue further studies in architecture at the master level. He is exploring his options, including potentially submitting an application to a higher education institution as an international student in France. Questions:

- What study programmes are available at your institution?
- What is your admission policy?
- What steps would I need to complete in your admission process?
- Would I have the option of completing part of my studies at a partner institution, and receive transfer credits?
- Which documents do I need to submit, and can this be done electronically?
- When will I receive an answer about my application in your admission process?
- Do I need to pay any fee for the application?

Graduation and entry in the labour market (output phase): John successfully completed his studies in architecture at the higher education institution in France. He is currently exploring the possibility of applying for a job at an architect firm in Rome, Italy. The prospect employer requested more information about John's qualifications from France and Canada. Questions:

- Where can I find information on my completed qualification, to present it to my prospective employer?
- Can I obtain documents to help convey the value of my completed qualifications in another country?

⁴ Ringuette M., presentation in the "Seminar on recognition and information provision in the time of Covid-19: the role of Higher Education Institutions", 18 June 2020. More information on [CIMEA website](#).

INPUT PHASE (ACCESS AND ENROLMENT)

This section aims to provide a list of elements of information that should be provided on access to and enrollment in higher education institutions before applying for admission. The good practices listed in this section touch upon the different phases of the application process (before, during and after the recognition procedure) and categories of applicants (e.g., refugees in cases in which the qualifications obtained in one of the Parties cannot be proven through documentary evidence) that should be taken into consideration.

Information provided on recognition procedures should cover:

- General procedures and criteria for the assessment of foreign qualifications, expected case processing time, and appeal procedures.
- Rights and obligations of the applicant and the institution, including fees charged if any.
- Types of decisions: full recognition, partial recognition, alternative recognition, denial.
- Status of recognition: recommendation or legally binding decision, and (if relevant) different types of recognition statements.
- References to the national legislation governing admission to higher education, and information on how the Lisbon Recognition Convention is applied locally (covering substantial differences, minimum length of schooling, requirement for additional national examination to be admitted to higher education etc.).

Information provided on required documentation should cover:

- Application forms, documentation and translation requirements.
- List of required supporting documents.
- Need for or non-applicability of authentication from issuing bodies.
- Information on the acceptance of digital credentials.
- Ways to submit required documentation.

Information provided during the recognition process should include:

- A confirmation of receipt of request issued without delay.
- A request of missing documentation if necessary.
- General advice to applicants on how to obtain missing documentation.
- Any updates on the status of applicant's request.
- Any delays or issues relating to applicant's request, communicated promptly.

Information provided on the recognition decision should include:

- The reasons in case of a negative decision.
- Possibility for partial or alternative recognition.

In any case, the recognition decision should be communicated promptly.

CONTENTS IN THE INPUT AND OUTPUT PHASE

Information on recognition of refugees' qualifications, in case of missing documentation

Taking into account the number of **refugees**, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation who seek recognition of their qualifications, many higher education institutions provide information on recognition issues for refugees. In cases where individuals are unable to provide the documentation needed for a recognition process, the institution should provide information on how to proceed with the assessment and recognition procedure, as well as the policy in place. The information should include how to apply, alternative documents required, applicable fees (if any), expected timeline for processing, criteria for assessment and appeals procedures.

Information on respect of privacy and data protection

Information on how data will be treated in order to ensure data privacy and data protection should be provided according to the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation⁵.

OUTPUT PHASE (AWARDING OF QUALIFICATIONS)

This section summarises the information that should be provided about the awarding of a qualification, to ease its potential subsequent recognition.

Information provided on qualifications awarded should include:

- Qualification/title/degree (in the national language/s).
- Curriculum/learning outcomes.
- Diploma Supplement.
- Number of credits.
- Grading system.
- Academic entitlements/access to further studies.

In addition, it is recommended that your institutional website provides:

- Details on other useful local, national or international information sources on recognition (e.g., the national [ENIC-NARIC office](#), the website of the National Qualification Framework, etc.).
- Information on qualifications awarded (covering, e.g., the pre-Bologna qualifications).

Information provided on digital credentials should cover:

- Format and structure.
- Technology used.
- Security, privacy, ownership and portability.

CONTINGENCY PLAN FOR EMERGENCY SITUATION: THE ROLE OF DIGITALISATION

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need to have resilient information provision systems that remain functional in emergency situations. The issue of digitalisation has become more and more relevant since remote working requirements made it impossible for offices to access paper archives, while at the same time rendering it difficult to issue hard copy recognition decisions.

Establishing protocols for situations in which the flow of information provision is disrupted is a good practice. When establishing such protocols, it is important to:

- Develop a digital workflow for the recognition process, from the application phase to the awarding phase.
- Develop a service continuity plan as a preparatory measure.
- Adjust service delivery/operations.
- Update information systems.
- Communicate with your audience⁶.

⁶ Ringuette, M. cit.



⁵ [Regulation \(EU\) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016](#) on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation).

PERTINENT QUESTIONS FOR SELF-ASSESSMENT

Based on the information provided in this document, the questions listed below can support self-assessment at institutional level.

- 1) When looking at the primary space of information provision to potential applicants for recognition (e.g., the institutional website), does it seem like a one-stop-shop? Is it comprehensive enough to allow applicants to apply for recognition?
- 2) Regardless of whether provision of information on recognition and awarded qualifications is in the remit of one single contact point or various department/faculties, is it easy to find the relevant contact person/office and establish contact (e.g., by e-mail, online form, phone number)?
- 3) Is the information provided in at least one widely spoken language (e.g., English) alongside a national language?
- 4) Do you have a F.A.Q. section on your website or other easily accessible communication channel?
- 5) What is the average turnaround time for answering questions on qualifications awarded? Would you consider this time reasonable?
- 6) While an evaluation is ongoing, are applicants always informed, without delay, about the status of their application, the next steps and when to expect the initiation of those steps?
- 7) Is the information contained in a qualification issued by your institution comprehensive enough to allow other international institutions to evaluate it for the purpose of recognition? If you had to evaluate the qualification based on the information provided in or together with it, would you be able to take an informed decision for the purpose of recognition?
- 8) Does the information provided to potential applicants also cover qualifications held by refugees in cases in which the qualifications obtained in one of the Parties cannot be proven through documentary evidence?
- 9) Does your information provision include a reference to main sources of information at national level (e.g., the ENIC-NARIC centre, the national qualifications framework)?
- 10) Does your institution's framework for recognition procedures allow for a full provision of information and services in an entirely digital environment?
- 11) Do you have a contingency plan for situations in which your usual flow of information is disrupted due to an emergency situation?
- 12) Are the admissions officers and other staff in charge of recognition connected at a national level, e.g., through an established network?
- 13) Do you receive support from your national ENIC-NARIC centre to help you ensure the quality of your information provision?

To ensure the continuous improvement of your information provision, it is also recommended to collect feedback from students and other stakeholders, by giving them the opportunity to reach out to you and/or asking them specific questions.



SOURCES AND REFERENCES

This publication is based on the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) and on the following documents, publications and projects as main sources of information:

- [Lisbon Recognition Convention](#), 1997.
- [Guidelines for National Online Information Systems](#), 2019.
- [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area \(ESG\)](#), 2015.
- [Seminar on recognition and information provision in the time of Covid-19: the role of Higher Education Institutions](#), June 2020, in the framework of the EU co-funded project "[Thematic Peer Group on the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in EHEA countries](#)".
- [European Area of Recognition \(EAR\) Manual](#), 2012.
- [The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions](#), third edition, 2020.

This document is edited in the framework of the Thematic Peer Group on the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in EHEA countries (TPG-LRC) project. The seminar on recognition and information provision, held online on the 18th of June 2020, organised within the aforementioned project, was the occasion for a common reflection on the theme of information provision from the perspective of higher education institutions.

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