

The implementation of specific areas of the LRC - Art. VII

Outcomes of the I-Comply Peer Learning Activity nr 3

Online meeting, 27 October 2020



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1. Introduction

About the PLA

This publication reflects the outcomes of the Peer Learning Activity (PLA) "The implementation of specific areas of the LRC - Art VII". The PLA is part of the Erasmus+ Key Action 3 EHEA Reform project "I-Comply", which is geared towards legal and practical implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in the European Higher Education Area.

This Peer Learning Activity (PLA) is part of the Erasmus+ Key Action 3 EHEA Reform project "I-Comply", which is geared towards legal and practical implementation with the Lisbon Recognition Convention in the European Higher Education Area.

The event focusses on article VII, because the Bologna Implementation Report 2018 highlights that work needs to be done in the specific areas of the LRC, notably article VII. Article 7 of the LRC on the recognition of qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation, states that:

"Each Party shall take all feasible and reasonable steps within the framework of its education system and in conformity with its constitutional, legal, and regulatory provisions to develop procedures designed to assess fairly and expeditiously whether refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation fulfil the relevant requirements for access to higher education, to further higher education programmes or to employment activities, even in cases in which the qualifications obtained in one of the Parties cannot be proven through documentary evidence."

In practice the implementation of article 7 is lacking behind. The Bologna Implementation report mentions that "the overall picture is that the implementation of Article VII has been patchy at best. Despite the widespread ratification of the LRC, it appears that countries have not necessarily followed up in national implementation with regard to Article VII" (150).

Therefore, the main objective of this PLA is to identify strategies and models of good practice support the implementation of article VII in HEI, to improve access to higher education for refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation.

The central question is twofold:

Q1: "How can ENIC-NARICs and government bodies support and improve recognition of refugees' qualifications within HEI?"

Q2: "How can online learning open-up higher education to refugees?"

Chapter two of this publication reflects the outcomes of the plenary, while chapter three contains the discussion of the three breakout sessions. Chapter four summarizes the main takeaways of the event. The annexes provide information about the agenda and the attendees.

The PLA was well attended with 35 registered participants from 17 countries.

2. Plenary presentations

2.1 Setting the stage: access of refugees to HE in Europe

A presentation was given by Katia Dolgova-Dreyer, programme coordinator at the Education Department of the Council of Europe. During her presentation, Katia first gave a broad introduction to the topic, with statistics on the number of refugees worldwide and their access to higher education. She then gave examples of initiatives to support refugees' access to higher education, like EU scholarship programmes and KIRON, a German NGO that helps refugees with online learning. Finally the Council of Europe actions in relation to recognition of refugees' qualification were explained. Special attention was given to the LRC and the recommendation on the recognition of refugee's qualification that was added in 2017, the LRC monitoring that was carried out in 2019 and the EQPR.

2.2 Monitoring art. VII of the LRC

Allan Bruun Pederson is vice president of the LRC Committee. He presented the outcomes of the LRC monitoring that was done in 2016 and 2019. The LRC includes an obligation for all parties to develop procedures for fair recognition of refugees' qualifications for the purpose of access to further studies or employment, even in cases in which the qualifications obtained in one of the parties cannot be proven through documentary evidence. It was found that since 2016 considerable progress was made in the national implementation of article VII, but challenges remain. Two procedures are generally used for recognition of refugees' qualifications: the background paper and the EQPR. In addition, Allan argues, HEI have a lot of instruments available to support admission of refugee students. These instruments include tests, writing essays, interviews, portfolios, recommendation letters, work experience and RPL procedures.

2.3 Example 1: REACT toolkit

The REACT toolkit was presented by Marina Malgina, head of section interview-based procedures at NOKUT. Within the context of the Erasmus+ Refugees and Recognition project a toolkit was developed for recognition of refugees' qualifications. Next, this toolkit was tested and further refined by a select group of European higher education institutions. In addition a number of country briefings were developed with information on the education systems of Afghanistan, Iran, Eritrea, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Ethiopia, Somalia, Venezuela and DRC. From 2020-2022 the Arena project will take NOKUTs work on recognition of refugees' qualifications further. More information is available at <https://www.nokut.no/om-nokut/internasjonalt-samarbeid/erasmus-projekter/arena/>

2.4 Example 2: Use of RPL for admission of disadvantaged groups

Cecilia George, senior credential evaluator at Naric Sweden and elected member of the Naric Advisory Board, presented the RPL in practice project (<https://www.uhr.se/en/rplinpractice>). The aim of this project is to promote different ways of recognising competences for access to further studies and for credits, as 'nobody should be required to study something they already know'. During the presentation four steps in the RPL process are identified:

1. identification of knowledge, skills and competences
2. documentation, to provide evidence of the acquired knowledge, skills and competences
3. assessment of these experiences and
4. certification of the results of the assessment - which may lead to a partial or full qualification.

Examples were given of instruments and procedures that can be used to identify, document, assess and certify prior learning. Cecilia also called out to the conference participants to register for the RPL in higher education webinar on 5 November.

3. How can ENIC-NARIC and government bodies support admission of refugees to he?

Report of 4 parallel breakout sessions

Session 1

The first part of the session was a tour de table on the implementation of Article VII in the respective countries. It was clear that each country has put in place measures and procedures according to the need (some of the countries that were in the session do not have a high number of refugees or cases where refugees have partial or missing documentation) and the national approach (policies in place to work on the implementation of article VII) towards the topic of recognition of qualifications held by refugees. For instance, Italy and Norway have procedures in place for the evaluation of qualifications held by refugees, Ireland is in the process while Croatia, Poland and Romania pointed out that no main initiatives are taking place due to small number of cases where refugees have non-documented qualifications (Poland indicated that they evaluate many qualifications held by refugees from Ukraine, but no cases of partial documentation have been registered).

Considering the time spent for this part, we could not focus properly on the question, but we formulated some suggestions starting from the challenges that were mentioned during the tour de table.

Here are the suggestions:

- ENIC-NARIC can join projects to provide a framework also at national level, keeping also the topic high in the agenda;
- A political implication at national level was indicated as necessary to foster the work related to the implementation of Article VII. It is very much related to the previous bullet point and to the next one;
- As a consequence of the previous bullet point, the involvement of relevant stakeholders at national level is found useful in order to provide HEIs with a consistent support;

- RPL, recognition of e-learning, MOOCs and microcredentials are to be implemented within ENIC-NARIC centres and HEIs in support of refugees;
- Language support has also been mentioned as a crucial aspect related to the possibility of integration of refugees in higher education institutions.

Session 2

We had a fruitful discussion. The main topic which was highlighted during the breakout session was about flexibility in the process of recognition for refugees or people in a refugee-like situation (the lack of information or documents like curricula must be replaced by a deeper research from credential evaluators).

State of play and perspectives :

- If needed, HEIs can present to ENIC-NARIC centers documents shown by refugees and claim for ENIC-NARIC support by explaining what it deals with. ENIC-NARIC Center proposes assistance (webinars, trainings, seminar to HEIs) to explain art. 7 and how to react to this article. This interaction is possible in all the countries.
- We can also mention that was highlighted the question of background documents (I think about the Danish system for example) which is a relevant help for refugees. I did not write a lot about this topic, because we already had an interesting presentation from Allan at the beginning of the PLA, but this point has to be mentioned.
- We can also report that some countries have permitted the creation of specific curricula and degrees (university degrees) for refugees who hold at least a secondary school leaving certificate (in France for example). These degrees permit holders to obtain more financial support for further studies and to obtain a place to settle afterward. These academic programs have legal authorizations from ministries and competent authorities. As Silvia mentioned, the first purpose of these trainings is about language support, civilisation support, etc).
- We can finally mention that some centers have implemented a Guide about recognition for HEIs (tool to develop their internal procedures) like in Croatia.
- Regarding propositions and perspectives, we can mention that countries who participated in the EQPR methodology can create their own EQPR methodology in relation with HEIs for student without documents. It could be an interesting perspective. (We will work on this topic from the beginning of next year in France to see what can be implemented in France).

Session 3

The implementation of Art. VII of LRC was enhanced and promoted in the recent years by many initiatives of the European Commission and the LRC Committee.

First by adopting new Recommendation on Recognition of Qualifications held by Refugees, Displaced Persons and Persons in a Refugee-like Situation by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee on 14 November, 2017. As we have seen today this and other developments promoted the work on facilitating the recognition of refugees' qualifications, even those that cannot be fully documented.

Several other projects and developments were supported by the EC that strengthen inclusion policies for refugees, like Erasmus+ projects, New Pact on Migration and Asylum, etc.

Speaking about specific countries it is an excellent achievement to see that recognition issues of refugees' qualifications are fixed at the legislative level in many countries even in spite of the limited experience of working with the refugees, especially with non-documented qualifications.

In Poland the legislation basis was created in 2015 to provide for the recognition procedure and statements for refugees with and without documentation. At the moment there have not been any applications of the non-documented refugees' qualifications. The center sees its role also in information provision for the universities to help them formulate the internal university admission regulations that provide for the refugees' application process, especially for those with non-documented qualifications.

In Ukraine the legislation was in place in 2015, the information on the topic was added to the ENIC Ukraine site, and provided to HEIs through seminars and webinars. Refugees' applications for recognition (thou limited in number) are mostly documented secondary school education.

In Estonia extra time is provided for the provision of the background paper in case of recognition of the non-documented refugee qualification. The background paper can be issued by the ENIC-NARIC center and is used by applicant in pursuing the further education and joining the labor market. HEIs could use this information to do the further research and validation of the qualification.

An interesting initiative was done by Nuffic office in 2016 after a number of questions from universities on how to use the background paper in refugees' cases. As a result the steering group was created and worked on a toolkit to help the universities to design their internal procedures and collect practical tools to recognize the refugees' qualifications.

A remark from the Holy See added a new perspective on the understanding of the recognition of the non-documented refugees' qualifications. Looking for ways to provide the various possibilities for HEIs, the work was refocused with the non-documented refugee's qualification to see and prove the abilities of the applicant (not the past achievements), that is to determine whether a holder of the qualification would be capable of doing the desired path and fulfill the desired level of studies.

To sum up the group agreed that some of the answers to the abovementioned question would be:

- Legislation in place to provide for the recognition of the refugees' qualifications, especially non-documented
- Detailed information provision for the universities and other stakeholders (including information support on internal admission policies, recognition procedures and practical recognition tools)

Session 4

The group started with a tour de table:

Sweden: Applicants not registered as refugees or have specific legislation to cater for them. Reason is that higher education is free for all residents. Sweden have a background paper as a

policy, which makes clear (and acts as a disclaimer) that recognition is based without having seen the actual documents.

Italy: informed that CIMEA is a partner of the EQPR project. Started delivering academic passes for refugees - similar to EQPR, same value but this is a national tool. CIMEA issues certificates of comparability free of charge. As confirmed at Conference of Italian University Rectors, some universities have started accepting such documents to allow students to gain access to higher education.

CoE: provided an anecdote about the French authorities who during COVID noted that some refugees could assist in the health sector. They thus set up the scheme: 'COVID reinforcement'. Herewith the health authorities/sector carried out background checks on refugees and could therefore quickly identify qualified personnel that could be deployed to work in the health sector.

Georgia informed us that they don't have any cases of refugee applicants, nobody has applied which makes it difficult to talk about best practice. However, their legislation includes some specific rules for refugee people, and work is being done to improve their regulations and adopt best approaches for future cases.

Malta informed us that no distinction is made between refugees and normal applicants. They are however spared administrative charges. He noted that it is easier to process undocumented refugees with a high level of education than those with a lower level of education, as the former are much easier to verify through test or assessments.

The groups' conclusions were that:

- there is no need to identify person as a refugee
- all centres give indication of level
- support of HEI by the ENIC-NARICs is crucial
- networking needs to be maintained and supported
- short pathway need to be always identified and used
- recognition of prior learning is important to avoid refugees having to restudy what they already know
- due consideration to underlying learning outcomes of education pathways
- equal treatment can be given to refugees but to always take account of their special circumstances.

4. Recognition of e-learning, lessons of the e-Valuate project

During the last session of the PLA, e-learning was discussed as a means to improve refugees' access to higher education. Katrien Bardoel, senior policy officer at Nuffic, presented the Erasmus+ e-valuate project (<https://www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/recognition-projects/e-valuate>). Within this project a methodology was developed to recognise e-learning on the basis of seven criteria:

quality, level, learning outcomes, workload, verification, testing and identification. Currently e-learning is very diverse in terms of content and quality, and for admissions officers it is often difficult to find the relevant information. Further standardization can facilitate fast and fair recognition within higher education. Noteworthy initiatives to standardise microcredentials are the Common Microcredentials Framework and the Microbol project.

5. Conclusions

Societies have multiple stakes in supporting and facilitating the access of refugees to education and the labor market. Recognition of qualifications is done, in principle, regardless of the status of refugees. Only if documents are missing, there is a need for special procedures as outlined in article VII. Participants of the PLA widely agreed that these should be flexible and adaptable to the specific needs of the refugee.

Governments and ENIC-NARIC centres should ensure national legislation is in line with article VII of the LRC. The LRC monitoring reports show that, although important steps have been made since 2016, not all countries fulfill the requirements. It was also noted that, even if at the national level provisions are in place, internal regulations at HEI may still prevent recognition of undocumented refugee qualifications. Governments and ENIC-NARIC centres therefore have an important role to play in informing HEI about the LRC and its consequences for recognition of refugees' qualifications.

Practical tools for recognition of refugee qualifications include the background paper and the EQPR. In addition HEI have the possibility to make use of other instruments to assess the level of applicants, like testing, RPL procedures, interviews etc. These can also be used for admission of refugee students. To encourage peer-learning, some of these instruments were explained during the PLA and they were further discussed during the breakout sessions. Moreover, in the current COVID-19 pandemic there are several examples where persons with a refugee background were provided with a short track to nursing and medical professions. Participants called to explore these type of pathways for access further in normal times and see if this could be extrapolated to other areas too.

During the last session e-learning as a means to improve refugees' access to higher education was discussed. Although admissions officers indicate they are willing to accept online credentials, the lack of information often is an impediment to recognition. However, as a result of Covid-19, HEI are offering part of their programmes online. This allows them to experiment with online education and will eventually increase the online offer. Furthermore, it can be expected that initiatives to standardise e-learning will facilitate fast and fair recognition in line with the LRC.

Annex 1: Agenda PLA

Tuesday 27 October 2020

PLA - The implementation of specific areas of the LRC

Agenda

13.00 -13.05	Welcome host	Hanna Reczulska, NAWA
13.05 -13.10	Welcome coordinator I-Comply	Sophie Duijser, Dutch Ministry of Education
13.10 - 13.15	Introduction programme by moderator	Katrien Bardoel, Nuffic
13.15 - 13.25	Setting the stage: admission of refugees to HEIs in Europe?	Katia Dolgova-Dreyer, Council of Europe
13.25 - 13.35	Art 7 and RPL; Monitoring implementation of the LRC	Allan Bruun Pedersen, Danish Ministry of Education and Science
13.35 - 13.45	Example 1: REACT Toolkit	Marina Malgina, NOKUT
13.45 - 13:55	Example 2: Use of RPL for admission of disadvantaged groups	Cecilia George, Swedish Council for Higher Education
13:55 - 14:10	Q&A	
14:10 - 14:20	Health break	
14:20 - 14:50	Parallel breakout sessions	
	How can ENIC-NARICs and government bodies support and improve recognition of refugees qualifications in HEI?	

- > Share good practice
- > Identify models of good practice

14:50 - 15:10 Report from the breakout groups

15:10 - 15:20 Health break

15:20 - 15:30 Recognition of e-learning: lessons from the e-Valuate project Katrien Bardoel, Nuffic

15:30 - 15:50 Plenary discussion

15:50 - 15:55 Reflection: finding agreement on the main outcomes Katrien Bardoel, Nuffic

15:55 - 16:00 Closure Hanna Reczulska, NAWA



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