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Maria Kelo is currently serving as the Director of the ENQA Secretariat and has a wide range of experience related to higher education. Her tasks within ENQA include: to manage the work of the ENQA Secretariat, act as Secretary to the ENQA Board, support and coordinate ENQA member agencies, manage projects, and represent the association. She previously worked as Senior Officer for the Academic Cooperation Association, where she was actively involved as an expert in higher education policy developments and reforms at the national and European level (Bologna, ET2010); higher education internationalisation and international cooperation; mobility; student services and attractiveness of European higher education; and trans-national education.

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Lindsey Kerber has been working as the Project and Administrative Officer at ENQA since June 2016. She joined ENQA in 2013 first as a trainee and then as Administrative and Communications Assistant. Her main tasks include managing communications matters for the association and coordinating ENQA's involvement in several EU projects, including NQF-J, WEXHE, TEEDE, LIREQA, and MIELES, as well as ENQA's two working groups on recognition and e-learning. Lindsey received an MPhil degree in higher education from the University of Helsinki. She previously attended the University of Arizona, from where she received bachelor's degrees in political science and art history.

Proposal

Title: Current practices on external quality assurance of academic recognition among QA agencies

Abstract (150 words max):

Fair recognition of qualifications, periods of study, and prior learning has been one of the main objectives of the Bologna Process since its creation. The Lisbon Recognition Convention establishes some agreed common operating principles at the European level. These principles concern all organisations conducting recognition practices and, in particular, higher education institutions.

With the formulation of the ESG 2015 (particularly ESG 1.4), it is clear that higher education institutions and QA agencies now have the responsibility of addressing academic recognition issues in their internal and external quality assurance (EQA) processes. This paper provides a synthesis of the main conclusions of a survey conducted by the ENQA working group VII on quality assurance and recognition in September 2016. The survey explores the current practices on EQA of institutional recognition practices among QA agencies as well as the links between QA agencies and ENIC-NARIC centres.

The paper is based on: research

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? No.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

1. Introduction

Fair recognition of qualifications, periods of study, and prior learning (to which will be referred in this paper as "academic recognition") has been one of the main objectives of the Bologna Process since its creation. The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) [1] establishes some agreed common operating principles that are legally binding for the concerned countries.

However, according to the 2015 Bologna Process Implementation Report (BPIR) [2], after two decades of existence, implementation of the LRC is still a challenge. In particular, students are still facing major barriers to mobility because of inefficient or inappropriate academic recognition of periods of study, certificates, diplomas, and degrees obtained in other national systems or institutions [3]. Even though

the situation varies between countries (with different legal frameworks and bodies involved), the BPIR makes it evident that academic recognition in European higher education is largely in the hands of higher education institutions (HEIs). The fact that HEIs are autonomous, and the signatory countries have limited capacity to bind them to the principles of the LRC, is identified as a major challenge.

As the 2015 BPIR states, this issue has been taken up in the context of improving quality assurance and in particular was addressed during the revision of the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). The ESG 2015 (standard 1.4) [4] explicitly considers academic recognition as an essential component of the internal quality assurance (IQA) system of an HEI:

> *Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study, and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components for ensuring the students' progress in their studies, while promoting mobility. Appropriate recognition procedures rely on:*
> - *institutional practice for recognition being in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention;*
> - *cooperation with other institutions, quality assurance agencies, and the national ENIC/NARIC centre with a view to ensuring coherent recognition across the country.*

With the adoption of the ESG 2015, it is clear that QA agencies now have the responsibility to address academic recognition issues in their external quality assurance (EQA) processes. ENQA has taken up the challenge of exploring the current and potential role of QA agencies in improving institutional recognition practices as well as developing suitable strategies to support QA agencies in this task.

2. The ENQA working group on quality assurance and recognition

In line with ENQA's 2016-2020 strategic plan [5], which envisions "a European Higher Education Area where students have access to high quality education and can achieve qualifications that are respected worldwide", and aware of the new responsibilities for the quality assurance sector as outlined in the ESG 2015, ENQA established a working group on quality assurance and recognition in July 2015.

The working group was composed of the following members: Carme Edo Ros (AQU Catalunya, Spain), Eva Fernández de Labastida (Unibasq, Spain), Marie-Jo Goedert (CTI, France), Kyrre Goksøyr (NOKUT, Norway), Esther Huertas (AQU Catalunya, Spain), Maria Kelo (ENQA, Europe), Niamh Lenehan (QQI, Ireland), Rafael Llavori de Micheo (ANECA, Spain), Teresa Sánchez Chaparro, (CTI, France), and Aurelija Valeikienė (SKVC, Lithuania). The working group worked under the coordination of Lindsey Kerber from the ENQA Secretariat and was chaired by Teresa Sánchez Chaparro.

In September 2016, the working group conducted an *exploratory survey to QA agencies* with the following main objectives:
- ✓ To map current practices on EQA of academic recognition policies and practices (the way QA agencies are currently responding to ESG 1.4).
- ✓ To explore the links between QA agencies and other bodies or authorities involved in recognition, particularly ENIC-NARIC centres.

This paper provides a synthesis of the main results and conclusions of this survey. More information on the activities of the working group can be found on ENQA's website (www.enqa.eu).

3. Number and profile of QA agencies that participated in the survey

Thirty-six ENQA members out of 51 (71% of members) and 12 affiliates[1] out of 50 (24% of affiliates) responded to the survey. Respondent agencies form a diverse group in terms of focus of EQA processes:

- Ten percent operate at institutional level, 16 percent at programme level, and 66 percent at both levels. Eight percent indicated they have an additional or alternative focus, such as evaluation of research, programmes, services, consultancy, etc.
- Eighty-two percent are generalist agencies and 12 percent subject-specific agencies.

In terms of geographical diversity, 33 countries in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) were represented in this study: Albania, Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, the Holy See, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Moldova, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

Twenty-three percent of respondents declared to conduct quality assurance processes outside their boundaries. Two agencies are not linked to a specific national jurisdiction but declare to be operating at the international or European level.

Thirteen agencies (25%) have an official mandate regarding recognition, and in 18 percent of cases (nine agencies) the QA agency and the ENIC-NARIC centre are part of the same organisation.

A significant number of agencies (37%) wished to remain anonymous in the final report, which is probably an indication that the topic is still under development in many agencies.

4. External quality assurance of institutional recognition practices

Most agencies in this study declared to be covering the supervision and improvement of recognition practices conducted by HEIs to some extent. Seventy-two percent of respondents declared to fully or partially cover recognition of qualifications and study periods in their current EQA processes, and recognition of prior learning is fully or partially covered by 69 percent of respondents. However, upon further exploration, these statements are translated into very different practical approaches. Agencies can be roughly divided into three groups with regard to the way in which they cover institutional recognition practices in their EQA processes; the characteristics of these groups are explained in the following sections.

4.1. Agencies without an explicit focus on recognition

A first group of agencies (31 agencies or 65% of respondents) do not have explicit criteria covering institutional recognition practices. These agencies frequently replied that recognition is implicitly included in their guidelines and processes, under a more general section devoted to "admission" or "selection". Through the various comments of these agencies, it is clear that institutional recognition practices are not central when conducting EQA processes; they are not generally part of the discussion during the site visit, nor are they explicitly covered in the reports.

Many of these agencies do not have specific plans, nor do they see a clear reason, to change the way in which they handle recognition issues in the short term. The context of the agency could justify this lack of focus in certain cases (for example, if another quality assurance body operates in the country with a specific mandate towards recognition or if HEIs in that country are not autonomous with regard to making recognition decisions).

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[1] Affiliates are bodies worldwide that have a demonstrable interest in the quality assurance of higher education but, as opposed to ENQA members, are not required to demonstrate compliance with the ESG.

One-third of the agencies in this group declared to be in transition due to different internal or external drivers, such as an important regulatory change at the national level (for example, one country was currently in the process of changing the legislation to incorporate the principles of the LRC), a change in the governance of the agency, or a debate on certain recognition issues at the national level (the problem of bogus qualifications and diploma mills, the increasing importance of prior learning at the national level, etc.). Four of these agencies explicitly mentioned the ESG 2015 as the main reason for this transition.

4.2. Agencies that focus on outcomes and metrics related to recognition

A second group of agencies (6 agencies or 12% of respondents) show a strong focus on controlling the outcomes of recognition or, more generally, the admission process. As one of the respondents stated, the mission of the agency is to "detect and eliminate from the system bad practices regarding academic recognition, either inappropriately restrictive or inappropriately lenient." Some agencies declared to focus on ensuring that HEIs "remain vigilant" regarding the quality of their international partnerships (foreign institutions to which they send Erasmus students or with which they establish double or joint degrees, for example).

Agencies within this group referred to some instances in which recognition issues were explicitly covered during the site visits and reflected in the final report. Several agencies mentioned that they focus on the matter "only if problems are detected", suggesting the application of some sort of risk-based approach through the monitoring of certain metrics at the institutional and system level.

It is clear that, compared to the previous group, recognition is a more prominent issue for this group of agencies. Two of them even referred to recognition as being a "growing concern". However, the answers suggest that their EQA processes do not necessarily focus on the aspects that would be more relevant within the context of ESG 1.4, such as the general organisation of the recognition process within the institution, the use of European Area of Recognition (EAR) tools [6, 7] and other information resources, the transparency of the process, and the main guiding principles (recognition unless substantial difference is found or the right to appeal, for example). In short, these agencies do not seem to explicitly consider recognition practices as part of the IQA system within the HEIs, nor do they analyse whether they are in line with the LRC principles.

4.3. Agencies with an explicit focus on EQA of recognition

Finally, a third group of agencies' (11 agencies or 23% of respondents) EQA processes are well aligned with ESG 1.4. Their answers indicate a more systematic coverage of institutional practices and explicitly refer to the LRC principles and their associated tools.

Comments from this group reveal a number of specific challenges associated with the internal and external quality assurance of institutional recognition practices. Indeed, several agencies refer to the fact that even though institutions might have formal "regulations" or IQA procedures covering the LRC principles, interpretation and proper use are in fact challenging for practitioners. Indeed, a central LRC concept such as determining "substantial difference" between qualifications is in fact mostly a matter of interpretation. Additional challenges for HEIs are difficulty in finding the right organisation of the recognition process within the HEI and ensuring an appropriate capacity for all practitioners involved.

Many agencies in this group stated that there could be room for improvement regarding the way in which their EQA processes address academic recognition issues; some mentioned that they should probably focus less on "formal compliance" and more on "implementation"; one of them stated that they would like to "include recognition in a more comprehensive way". However, some agencies expressed their doubts as to the feasibility of adopting a more thorough approach. As one of the respondents eloquently stated:

Recognition is a separate topic and criterion, requiring specific knowledge. It is really a challenge how to best address recognition matters via external quality assurance procedures, since recognition is a vast issue, and EQA are very condensed in time, a challenge of integration.

5. Relationship between the QA agency and the ENIC-NARIC

In 18% of cases (9 agencies), the QA agency and the ENIC-NARIC centre are part of the same organisation. However, as many of these respondents claimed, being under the same roof does not necessarily translate to effective communication and mutual learning. As several agencies in this situation stated, relationships are often informal, and there is a need to evolve towards more structured and fruitful ways of communication.

Respondents mentioned some contexts in which cooperation or an exchange of information is established between the ENIC-NARIC centre and the QA agency. One of the most natural contexts for exchanges, as was mentioned by several agencies, seems to be the EQA of cross-border higher education and/or cross-border quality assurance. In this sense, QA agencies mentioned that they exchange information with ENIC-NARIC centres concerning foreign HEIs and qualifications which request EQA processes from the agency. Exchanges of information also occur when the QA agency organises assessments of joint programmes where at least one of the partners is based outside the country. Employability, vocational education, transnational education, and joint programmes are mentioned as the main common areas of interest.

ENIC-NARIC centres would be a natural source of information for understanding the extent to which domestic qualifications are recognised abroad. This information could be one of the key indicators agencies might want to monitor regarding their higher education system (together with employability rates or student satisfaction, for example). However, only one respondent indicated that their agency was regularly using information provided by the ENIC-NARIC centre concerning the problems of recognition of certain national qualifications when making accreditation decisions.

Finally, a few respondents referred to exchanges or joint initiatives directly related to ESG 1.4 (internal or external quality assurance of institutional recognition practices):
- Participation of the ENIC-NARIC centre in the preparation of the sections regarding institutional recognition and admission processes in the self-evaluation guidelines provided by the agency to HEIs.
- Organisation of events or seminars addressed to HEIs in order to build awareness of the LRC and issues concerning its implementation.
- Building of common databases or information systems.

There seems to be considerable room for improvement regarding collaboration between QA agencies and ENIC-NARIC centres. Sixty percent of respondents claimed to have only occasional or no contact whatsoever with the ENIC-NARIC centre, yet 56 percent of respondents claimed that their relationship with the ENIC-NARIC centre is likely to evolve towards more frequent exchange and collaboration. In particular, they found a need for more cooperation between QA agencies and ENIC-NARIC centres owing to the new formulation of ESG 1.4 and increased internationalisation of higher education.

6. Conclusions and future steps

The study conducted by the ENQA working group on quality assurance and recognition has provided some introductory conclusions with regard to the survey's main objectives (investigate the links between QA agencies and ENIC-NARIC centres; map current practices of EQA of institutional recognition practices among QA agencies). Additionally, it has identified some central issues and challenges.

With regard to collaboration between QA agencies and ENIC-NARIC centres, there seems to be considerable room for improvement despite agencies reporting several on-going initiatives. In particular,

collaboration within the context of ESG 1.4 (internal or external quality assurance of institutional recognition practices) seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

With regard to the role of QA agencies and EQA (ESG 1.4), it is clear that collaboration is essential as a support to the development of suitable IQA strategies within HEIs and also as a facilitator for the dissemination of good practices. QA agencies could also greatly contribute to the establishment of IQA and EQA practices within the ENIC-NARIC community and could act as a link among all actors involved in recognition, in a way that could facilitate general consistency of recognition practices.

However, some work is needed before the quality assurance community is ready to take up this challenge. There is considerable variability among QA agencies with regard to the level of awareness and approaches applied when seeking to fulfil ESG 1.4, but overall, the results of the investigation conducted by the ENQA working group suggest that recognition is not a priority for many QA agencies. At the same time, the development of suitable EQA strategies applied to institutional recognition practices poses significant challenges and questions. The best approach for addressing institutional recognition practices without compromising existing EQA processes is still under discussion.

A clear message for ENQA is that more work is needed in order to raise awareness and propose suitable strategies for the quality assurance community. The results of the working group's study indicate that a set of guidelines covering IQA and EQA of institutional recognition practices would be highly appreciated. These guidelines should be established through cooperation between the communities comprising QA agencies, HEIs, and ENIC-NARIC centres.

ENQA has taken up this challenge under the framework of the LIREQA initiative (Linking Academic Recognition and Quality Assurance), a recently launched Erasmus+ project led by the Lithuanian QA agency and ENIC-NARIC centre, SKVC. The project, which started in December 2016, brings together ENIC/NARIC centres, QA agencies and their association, ENQA, as well as HEIs. The recommendations of the LIREQA consortium are expected to be disseminated by the end of 2018.

We hope that our efforts will contribute to realising ENQA's vision of "a European Higher Education Area where students have access to high quality education and can achieve qualifications that are respected worldwide".

References:

[1] EU (1997), Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region; available at: http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/165.htm

[2] The European Higher Education Area in 2015: Implementation Report, available at http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/182EN.pdf.
[3] Erasmus Student Network (2012), Problems of recognition in making Erasmus- PRIME 2012; available at: http://issuu.com/esnint/docs/prime_report_2010/5?e=1978080/3210526

[4] Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), available at: http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/home/esg/.

[5] ENQA strategic plan 2016-2020, available at: http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/about-enqa/strategic-plan-2016-2020/
[6] ENIC-NARIC Network (2012), European Area of Recognition Manual; available at: http://www.eurorecognition.eu/manual/ear_manual_v_1.0.pdf
 [7] ENIC-NARIC Network and EUA (2013), The European Recognition Manual for HEIs; available at: http://eurorecognition.eu/Manual/EAR%20HEI.pdf

Discussion questions:

The discussion questions related to this paper can be formulated from three perspectives.
From an IQA-HEI perspective:
- What is the best organisational setting so as to ensure a consistent recognition practice within the institution?
- What are the most effective IQA strategies and tools?

From an EQA-QA agency perspective:
- How to make recognition issues a priority, how to raise the general level of awareness among the quality assurance community, without overloading already long, thorough EQA processes?
- Taking into account the complexity of recognition and the variety of institutional practices, what is the best approach to address recognition in EQA processes? (Programme vs institutional approach, control vs enhancement-oriented processes, etc.)

Finally, from the ENIC-NARIC perspective:
- How to better cooperate with other bodies regarding recognition (QA agencies, professional bodies, HEIs)?
- How to overcome the lack of information and trust (especially outside the EHEA) about certain foreign qualifications or HEI systems?