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Implementation of the Council of Europe Higher Education programme in 2024  
and priorities for the future programme 2024-27

## **Report to the Bologna Follow Up Group**

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## General political and organisational context

In May 2023, the Fourth Council of Europe Summit of the Heads of States and Government was held in Reykjavik. Through the adoption of the Reykjavik Principles of Democracy, 46 Heads of State and Government committed themselves to "invest in a DEMOCRATIC FUTURE by ensuring that everyone is able to play their part in democratic processes. Priority will be given to supporting the participation of young people in democratic life and decision-making processes, including through **education on human rights** and core democratic values such as pluralism, inclusion, non-discrimination, transparency and accountability".

The 26<sup>th</sup> session of the Council of Europe Standing Conference of Ministers of Education entitled 'The transformative power of education: universal values and civic renewal' took place in Strasbourg on 27 and 28 September 2023.

The main themes of the Ministerial Conference were the renewal of education's civic mission, education in times of emergencies and crisis, harnessing the potential of digital transformation in education. At this meeting, the Ministers also adopted the **Council of Europe 2030 Education Strategy "Learners First"**, which endorses the values of the Council of Europe.

The Strategy not only provides the vision for the Council of Europe work in the field of education but also includes a Roadmap for its Programme of Activities 2024-2027.

All documents of the Ministerial Conference can be consulted on the [dedicated website](#).

The new Education Programme 2024-2027 was adopted by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers in November 2023. At the end of 2023 the Terms of Reference of the Steering Committee for Education were adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

There have been structural changes within the Council of Europe Secretariat and a new Directorate for Democracy has been established. The Education Department is part of this new Directorate.

## The Council of Europe Higher Education Programme

The higher education programme of the Council of Europe comprises the programmes related to the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, including its Co-Secretariat, running (jointly with UNESCO) of the ENIC Network; democratic mission of higher education, Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education (ETINED), European Qualifications Passport for Refugees and the Joint EU/CoE Project 'Supporting an efficient national mechanism of recognition of refugees' qualifications in Italy'.

The work in the field of higher education is overseen by the Sub-Group on higher education policy of the Steering Committee for Education (CDEDU). The CDEDU Sub-Group reports to the Council of Europe Steering Committee for Education, which comprises representatives of public authorities responsible for education from the 46 member States of the Council of Europe, Holy See and Kazakhstan and a number of observers.

Through the adoption of its new terms of reference in October 2023, the CDEDU Sub-Group on Higher Education has been reinforced and its membership has been enlarged from 13 to 25 members, comprising representatives of Ministries, in charge of higher education, as well as academic representatives and international NGOs. To ensure better coordination of work with the Bologna Process, the Vice-Chair of the EHEA has been invited to join the Sub-Group.

The first meeting of the new CDEDU Sub-Group on Higher Education took place on the 14-15 February 2024 in Strasbourg. The Sub-Group reviewed the implementation of the projects carried out in the framework of the 2024-2027 Education Programme.

On 20-22 March the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Council of Europe Steering Committee for Education took place in Strasbourg.

## **I. Work in the field of recognition of qualifications**

### **1. Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee**

#### **Overview**

Together with UNESCO, the Council of Europe ensures the Secretariat of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC). The Lisbon Recognition Convention is one of the most ratified Conventions in the Council of Europe and it remains the only legally binding text in the European Higher Education Area.

#### **Key priorities in 2024-2027**

The Lisbon Recognition Convention Bureau started its work in 2024 and held its first meeting in January 2024 in Rome and online.

In 2024 the Bureau will pursue its work on:

- Finalising the update of the ENIC- NARIC Charter
- Updating the 'Revised Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education' (2007)

Drafting a new text on 'digital solutions', taking into account the existing 'Guidelines for national online information systems' (2019).

The work on the update of the ENIC-NARIC Charter is nearing its finalisation.

The LRC Bureau held its meeting in Strasbourg on the 25 March 2024. It started work on the Revised Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education. There is a proposal to organise a workshop on this topic in order to gather opinions and feedback from the ENICs and NARICs. The workshop will be held in the framework of the next annual ENIC-NARIC meeting, which will take place in Naples on 23-25 June 2024.

### **2. Contribution to the ENIC-NARIC Networks**

#### **Overview**

Since 1994 the Council of Europe has been actively involved in running jointly with UNESCO the European Network of National Information Centres (ENIC). It is run jointly with the National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) network, which was established in 1984 with the European Commission as Secretariat.

The ENIC-NARIC networks have joint initiatives, linked to supporting exchange on qualifications-recognition information on policies and practices and providing an opportunity for capacity building activities, as well as participating in consultative processes on international normative instruments related to qualification recognition.

For the efficient functioning of both the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the ENIC and NARIC Networks the renewal process is constantly required, given new developments in the field of higher education, such as the digitization, automatic recognition, micro-credentials, recognition of non-formal and informal education and recognition of prior learning, transnational education.

### **Developments in 2024**

The current composition of the ENIC Bureau is as follows:

- Chiara Finocchietti (Italy) – ENIC President
- Dženan Omanović (Bosnia and Herzegovina) – ENIC Vice-President

The elections for the second ENIC Vice-President will be held at the next ENIC-NARIC meeting in Naples (Italy) in June 2024.

The current composition of the NARIC Advisory Board is as follows:

- Gunnar Vaht (Estonia);
- Helén Sophie Haugen (Norway);
- Gianina Chirazi (Romania).

In 2023, for the first time, the Council of Europe launched a call to support ENIC centres, which are not eligible for the NARIC call and are part of the CoE Education Programme.

As a result of the call for pilot projects, nine applications were received for funding. Out of these applications the evaluation board decided to support six projects from the following countries: Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Ukraine and United Kingdom. The projects were implemented until the end of 2023 and the projects' results will be presented at the next annual ENIC-NARIC meeting in June 2024.

The topics range from the recognition of refugees' qualifications to combatting education fraud to stepping up the capacity of the National Information Centres through enhanced training of credential evaluators.

The second call for ENIC projects was launched at the end of 2023 and four projects were selected from the following countries: Armenia (on refugee qualifications), Azerbaijan (on automatic recognition), Bosnia and Herzegovina (on automatic recognition), Ukraine (on recognition of qualifications from temporarily occupied territories and on education fraud).

### **3. Automatic Recognition**

In 2023, the Council of Europe set up an Ad Hoc Working Group on automatic recognition of qualifications. Its terms of reference were adopted by the CDEDU Bureau at its meeting in February 2023.

According to its terms of reference, the purpose of this Group is to:

- Exchange views on the current developments, related to establishing the right to automatic recognition, making good use of the trial-and-error experiences across Europe;

- Advise the Council of Europe Steering Committee on Education on different possibilities and prepare an option paper to establish a legally binding text on automatic recognition.
- The Council of Europe Ad Hoc Working Group on Automatic Recognition of Qualifications, chaired by the CDEDU Vice-Chair, had its first meeting in the beginning of May 2023 in Brussels and its second meeting in Strasbourg in September 2023.
- From November 2023 through March 2024, the Working Group organised consultations with the key stakeholders, notably students, higher education institutions and public authorities in charge of higher education.

The first consultation session with students was held in November 2023 in Tallin in the framework of the ESU General Assembly.

The second consultation session with higher education institutions, organised in cooperation with EUA and EURASHE was held online on the 15 March 2024, it attracted nearly 500 registration, with the final number of around 250 participants.

The third consultation session with public authorities in charge of higher education and other stakeholder organisations active in the field of higher education, including UNESCO and the European Commission, took place in Strasbourg (and online) on the 21 March 2024.

In line with Terms of Reference adopted by the Committee of Ministers, the Steering Committee for Education asked that the outcomes of the discussion as well as those organised with students and universities will be taken forward by the Ad Hoc WG on Automatic Recognition. A proposal on a legal text will be submitted for the Spring 2025 CDEDU Plenary session.

#### **4. Recognition of refugees' qualifications:**

There are currently two initiatives implemented in this field: the [European Qualifications Passport for Refugees \(EQPR\)](#) and the joint European Union and Council of Europe project '[Supporting an efficient national mechanism of recognition of refugees' qualifications](#)' in Italy.

##### **a) The European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR)-**

###### **An overview**

The European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR) is a Council of Europe initiative aiming at facilitating the recognition of refugees' qualifications even in the absence of full documentation. The EQPR and the methodology on which it is based are used by the national information centres on recognition of qualifications (ENICs/NARICs) and higher education institutions in States Parties to the Lisbon Recognition Convention to assess qualifications held by refugees that cannot be adequately documented, in accordance with Article VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the Recommendation on Recognition of Qualifications Held by Refugees, Displaced Persons and Persons in a Refugee-like Situation.

The European Qualifications Passport for Refugees, supported by twenty-two countries<sup>1</sup> and the UNHCR, is also endorsed by all countries members of the European Higher Education Area through [Rome Communiqué](#) in 2020.

The EQPR should eliminate unnecessary and repeated further assessments of the same qualifications in other European countries if and when the EQPR holder moves. The EQPR

does not constitute a formal recognition act, and it will not give access to study programs or profession with specific requirements, such as most regulated profession (typically medical doctor, dentist, lawyer, engineer), but it does set out the attainment of the individual.

The EQPR is used by local authorities, employers, higher education institutions and NGOs for better integration of refugees into their new societies through employment and access to higher education.

### **Latest developments**

The number of countries participating in the EQPR has been continuously growing. By the end of 2023 there are 22 countries actively participating in this project: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Croatia, France, Germany, Georgia, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Monaco, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Serbia, United Kingdom

By end 2023, 1,101 interviews had been conducted, from which 943 EQPRs were issued (to 571 men and 372 women). The success rate for refugees undertaking the process is therefore about 85%; similar in cases where interviews have been undertaken face-to-face and those conducted online.

More than 80 credential evaluators from 22 participating ENICs are now trained on the EQPR methodology, which increases the capacity of the project to promote the EQPR as a valid and trustful tool to assess qualifications of refugees without sufficient documentation.

The EQPR project is developing synergies and cooperates with the UNESCO Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants, which is targeting countries outside the European Region. The coordination is carried out both at the strategic level, as well as on a technical level.

#### **b) The Joint European Union/Council of Europe project ‘Supporting an efficient national mechanism of recognition of refugees’ qualifications’ in Italy.**

Italy became the first country in which the Council of Europe is upscaling the use of the EQPR methodology, through the joint European Union and Council of Europe project “[Supporting an efficient national mechanism of recognition of refugees’ qualifications](#)”. This project is co-funded by the European Union via the Technical Support Instrument and implemented by the Council of Europe in co-operation with the European Commission Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support.

The general objective of the project is to support Italian authorities in their efforts to design and foster reforms for recognising refugees’ qualifications through the development of a national coordination mechanism within public sectors, in and beyond academia.

Through tailored activities, this technical support will contribute to improving the capacity of public administration bodies to process applications for recognising refugees’ qualifications and to increasing pathways for refugees in regulated professions.

The project is implemented from 1 September 2022 through 31 August 2024

### **A standard-setting instrument on the EQPR**

In order to implement the CoE Education Strategy, in particular one of its priority themes ‘**Enhancing education’s social responsibility and responsiveness**’, it is important to

upscale the implementation of the EQPR as an important instrument for ensuring opportunities for equal access at all levels of education for all learners, including vulnerable groups, migrants and refugees.

The Council of Europe started to work on the standard-setting instrument on the use of the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees. This will take a form of a Committee of Ministers Recommendation on Valuing the Academic and Professional Skills of Refugees in Europe (provisional title), containing principles and guidelines.

The first expert background study was produced and discussed at the first meeting of the Sub-Group on Higher Education Policy in February 2024. The draft text will be presented at the next meeting of the Steering Committee for Education in October 2024.

## **II. Democratic mission of higher education**

### **Latest developments**

The work on the democratic mission of higher education is strongly linked to the fundamental values of the Council of Europe, respecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

For the last twenty years, this work has been mainly carried out through the cooperation of four pillar organisations: the Council of Europe; the International Association of Universities; the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility, and Democracy; and the Organization of American States, jointly forming the Global Cooperation for the Democratic Mission of Higher Education and organising regular Fora on the relevant topics. The proceedings of the Global Forum, which was held in Dublin in June 2022 are now published and available free of charge in the pdf version.

This cooperation will continue and the next Global Forum will take place in 2025.

In 2023, the Council of Europe developed a new project on this topic entitled “Academic Freedom in Action”, which will run from 2024 through 2027.

The project consists of three main strands:

### **Theme 1: Academic Freedom in action**

Design the methodology of a mapping of a level of protection of academic freedom in member states, in line with the CM/Rec (2012)7 and in order to formulate recommendation for public authorities in charge of higher education policies;

Draw up an action plan on policy advice and awareness raising in order to harmonise the contrasting policies pursued by countries and individual institutions in the name of academic freedom; Develop guidelines for public authorities and higher education institutions.

### **Theme 2: Democratisation of science and the local mission of higher education**

The democratisation of science refers to efforts aimed at increasing public access, participation and understanding of scientific knowledge and processes. It encompasses various aspects, including making scientific information more accessible, promoting scientific literacy, engaging diverse communities in scientific endeavours, and fostering public involvement in scientific decision-making.

**Theme 3: Digital/AI challenges in Higher Education** with two sub-topics “ Academic Freedom in the advent of the digital society” and “Algorithmic Discrimination in Higher Education’.

To implement this project the call for experts was launched at the end of 2023 and eight academic experts were selected.

The Working Group will hold its first meeting in Paris on the 28 March 2024.

At its last meeting the Steering Committee for Education stressed the importance of maintaining the best traditions developed in the organisation of the Global fora, at the same time addressing such new topics for the Council of Europe, as the democratisation of science. The CDEDU also highlighted that academic freedom also applies to the whole academic community, including students.

### **III. The Pan-European Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education(ETINED)**

#### **An overview and main developments**

The ETINED Platform is a network of specialists appointed by member States of the Council of Europe and of States Parties to the European Cultural Convention. Its mission is to:

- Share information and good practices in the field of transparency and integrity in education;
- Contribute to the development of adequate answers to challenges that corruption poses to the sector of education and higher education;
- Create a virtuous cycle in education, whereby all actors commit to fundamental positive ethical principles;
- Develop capacity-building for all actors.

Since its launch in 2015, the [Platform](#) has produced guidelines for ensuring a culture of ethics in the teaching profession. It has developed targeted recommendations on academic integrity following assessments and exchanges with the actors on the ground. f On 13 July 2022, the Committee of Ministers [Recommendation](#) CM/Rec (2022) 18 on countering education fraud was adopted.

Following the Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec (2022) 18, the ETINED Platform identified three priority areas for the further development of activities. They touch respectively upon the areas of raising awareness (i.e. through a publication of research studies based on a baseline questionnaire submitted to the ETINED delegates; drafting of a glossary on education fraud; holding moderated online discussions with renowned speakers on emerging topics related to education fraud); prevention, and monitoring of education fraud.

The 7<sup>th</sup> ETINED Plenary session took place on 14 and 15 November 2023 in Paris.

Among other items, main discussion in the Plenary focussed on :

- Setting up an Observatory on Countering Fraud in Education;



- Expanding the project FraudS+ “Student Awareness on Fraud in Education” to enlarge the scope of participating Council of Europe member States;
- Approving a Glossary based on the Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec (2022) 18 on countering education fraud.

The items was presented to the 1<sup>st</sup> meeting of the Sub-Group on Higher Education Policy (14-15 February 2024) and the Plenary session of the Steering Committee for Education (20-22 March 2024).

The Steering Committee for Education recognised establishing the Observatory on Preventing and Countering Education Fraud as a key initiative and positive development and asked the ETINED Bureau follow up this work.

The Steering Committee for Education took note of the strong support received from the Italian delegation to the CDEDU, which indicated, on behalf of the Minister of Universities and Research of Italy, that the country was also prepared to offer logistical support, including hosting the structure of the future observatory in its territory.

The Committee took note of the extension of the Fraud S project and the draft survey on “Student awareness on fraud in education”. The delegates endorsed the project, advising to carry it out in several phases with continual adaptability, first starting with higher education institutions.