

The European Commission

Contact persons: Stig Arne Skjerven

Our ref:

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Subject: The European Recognition Passport for Refugees
An optimal recognition solution for refugees

With reference to conversations between the Head of Sector for Erasmus+ Higher Education, Vanessa Debiais-Sainton and Mrs Natascha Sander from the European Commission and Director of Foreign Education, Stig Arne Skjerven from NOKUT, Norway at the EAIE Conference in Glasgow on 17th September 2015;

With reference to the upcoming Extraordinary ENIC-NARIC Seminar on the Recognition of Qualifications of Asylum Seekers/Refugees, organised by the European Commission on 28th October 2015;

Background – Europe’s refugee situation is one of the most pressing challenges facing the international community. Each individual tragedy affects us all, but it is also a strain both economically and socially on the host countries. Early and effective evaluation of refugees’ qualifications and skills including those without proper documentation can be a measure critical to ensuring that refugees are able to enter the labour market or pursue further studies as quickly as possible. As a result, the society and the individual can both benefit from the rapid and effective integration processes.

To support and ensure that the newly arrived refugees are able to participate in the job market or pursue further studies in Europe, NOKUT would like to propose that the European Commission establish a scheme called *The European Recognition Passport for Refugees*. Bearing in mind the legacy of the Nansen passport, first issued in 1922, it will have the effect of establishing a common framework in Europe to organise and constitute a fast-track scheme to evaluate refugees’ educational and training background while still enhancing their mobility in the European single market.

By ratifying The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (The Lisbon Recognition Convention)¹ the signatory countries have

¹ Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region
<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/165.htm>

committed themselves to establishing a system for the recognition of qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation (Article VII). In accordance with The Lisbon Convention and based on the recommendations stated in the European Area of Recognition Manual, Chapter 12: Refugees², a number of the signatories to the convention have made efforts to develop a system of recognition for this group, although there exists significant scope for more countries to progress to using this type of recognition procedure.

Since 2005, Norway has attempted to implement a special recognition procedure for this targeted group. In 2012, based on experiences gained from the pilot project led by NOKUT in cooperation with Norwegian higher education institutions, NOKUT developed a model whereby the Centre takes the responsibility for the entire recognition process, including responsibility for obtaining the necessary expertise by appointing expert committees. The advantage of such a model is that it is possible to carry out the expert assessments in a more efficient and streamlined manner. NOKUT's recognition scheme for refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation (*UVD-procedure*) is a centralised recognition procedure administered by NOKUT and financed by Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research.³

In the period since establishing the UVD-procedure in May 2013, NOKUT has received over 600 individual applications from refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation. By September 2015, nearly 250 persons – engineers, chemists, biologists, journalists, philologists, accountants, agronomists, physicists, mathematicians, historians – have received NOKUT's decision regarding general recognition based on the expert assessments. The results of surveying the first 100 applicants who had their qualifications evaluated in 2013-2014, show that nearly 50% of those who got a positive decision from NOKUT were established in the labour market or admitted to further studies at a Norwegian higher education institution within a few months. The applicants in this recognition procedure come from 18 different countries, predominantly from Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia. The number of applications for recognition of qualifications from Syria has steadily been growing in recent months.

Based on the methodology NOKUT has developed on the UVD-procedure, NOKUT plays a crucial role in a scheme under the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called *Students at Risk*. Since the development of the scheme in 2014, NOKUT has been in charge of facilitating the Higher Education Institutions in the evaluation of selected applications from persons with insufficient documentation.

NOKUT has since May 2015 been in the process of considering the development of a fast track recognition procedure, in close cooperation with the Norwegian Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi). The fast track procedure would be applicable to refugees settled in reception

² European Area of Recognition Manual http://www.eurorecognition.eu/Manual/EAR_manual_v_1.0.pdf

³ Further information about the UVD-procedure: <http://www.nokut.no/en/Foreign-education/Other-recognition-systems/Recognition-Procedure-for-Persons-without-Verifiable-Documentation/>



centres in Norway and refugee camps elsewhere. The rationale is to ensure that Norwegian immigration authorities receive the necessary information concerning refugees' educational background to be able to facilitate a suitable settlement municipality and to provide sufficient information about the refugees in order for them to start Norwegian language training with other persons at a similar educational level. We envisage a procedure that takes as little time as possible, that ensures equal treatment and gives the possibility to evaluate refugees' educational background, including those without proper documentation. The outcome will be an assessment / evaluation statement from NOKUT, which will provide necessary information for the authorities to provide them with a tool in finding a suitable settlement municipality, as one example.

Norway is regarded a pioneer in the field of recognition for refugees. The well-functioning recognition procedure for refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation is advantageous for both the receiving countries and not the least for the individual. However, a well-functioning recognition procedure developed within one country's existing legal framework, within the framework of a given educational system, and based on needs and financial and human resources available in a given country might fail if copied in another setting or country. In addition, it is important to take into consideration that establishing an appropriate recognition procedure for this group can be time consuming and labour intensive in other countries. Given the likelihood, however, that a high number of refugees will be relocated from one European country to another, it further increases the need to look for an overarching European framework on how to cope with this situation in a fair and effective fashion.

The current refugee situation in Europe demands a strong need in the Community to build and streamline fast and effective recognition procedures of qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation in the European area. NOKUT hopes that the Norwegian experience and expertise in this field can inspire and contribute to an effective development and implementation of the appropriate recognition tools at a more pan-European level.

In order to implement an effective and professional recognition procedure for this group, it is crucial to have an advanced expertise on the educational systems of the countries where refugees come from, as well as extensive experience in training / up-skilling, including training through e-Learning. In this respect, UK NARIC is a recognised leader in information provision with regards to recognition.

Goal and objectives – The overall goal is to enhance mobility, employability and access to further studies for refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation by promoting transnational cooperation and mutual learning in the European Community. To achieve this goal we envisage the following:

- Appointing a coordinating authority and information centre in charge of establishing and coordinating the pan-European recognition scheme for refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation. We suggest that the Norwegian ENIC-NARIC office – NOKUT, with the assistance of the UK NARIC office, will be responsible for the project.
- Development of an effective and fast track procedure for the centralised recognition model applicable for evaluation of qualifications of refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation irrespective of which country the refugees first arrived in. There will be one methodology for refugees with a full portfolio of educational documents and another methodology for refugees with insufficient documentation. We suggest that NOKUT will be responsible for developing the methodology, based on our solid experience and procedures.
- An assessment / evaluation statement / *The European Recognition Passport for Refugees* containing necessary information concerning refugees' educational background. The document will provide both national authorities, employers and universities with relevant assessed information on the refugees' educational background.
- The assessment will take place at national level, carried out by relevant stakeholders with a strong experience in credential evaluation. In some countries, this will be the national ENIC-NARIC office, in other countries this may be one or more universities.
- In order to secure equal treatment, and based on our vast experience in recognising qualifications from refugees, it may be rational that NOKUT will have the leading role in training the personnel involved in evaluations, organizing seminars and workshops and e-Learning activities. Since this will involve a great number of stakeholders, it is rational to develop *Train-the-Trainer* courses to ensure that we succeed in training the sufficient capacity of personnel chosen by the national states to undertake the credential evaluations.
- Establishing of a *Hotline Digital Network* for personnel involved in evaluations, which will be rational to be supervised by NOKUT in cooperation with UK NARIC.

Underlying principles – Based on the recommendations stated in the European Area of Recognition Manual⁴, the work in this project will be conducted according to the following principles:

- Accessibility – one must ensure that everyone who enters the European Community will get a real opportunity for evaluation of his or her educational background and that no applicant is prevented from seeking recognition of his or her foreign qualifications because of the costs involved;
- Information provision – one must ensure that the information will be provided to the applicant before and during the evaluation process;
- Equal treatment – there is a need to ensure equal treatment of everyone who comes within the scope of the system;

⁴ *European Area of Recognition Manual* http://www.eurorecognition.eu/Manual/EAR_manual_v_1.0.pdf

- Competent treatment - refugees, displaced persons or persons in a refugee-like situation should have a right to have their qualifications assessed by a competent recognition authority;
- Effectiveness - applications should be processed as promptly as possible, and the time of processing should not exceed four months;
- Transparency - procedures and criteria for the assessment of foreign qualifications should be transparent, coherent and reliable;
- Relevance – there is need to ensure that the final statement / result of the evaluation process can be accepted both in the labour market, in relation to further studies and other types of recognition / authorization throughout the European Community.

Context and actors – The following figure provides an overview of the main aspects, actors and the working context of the pan-European evaluation procedure for refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation.

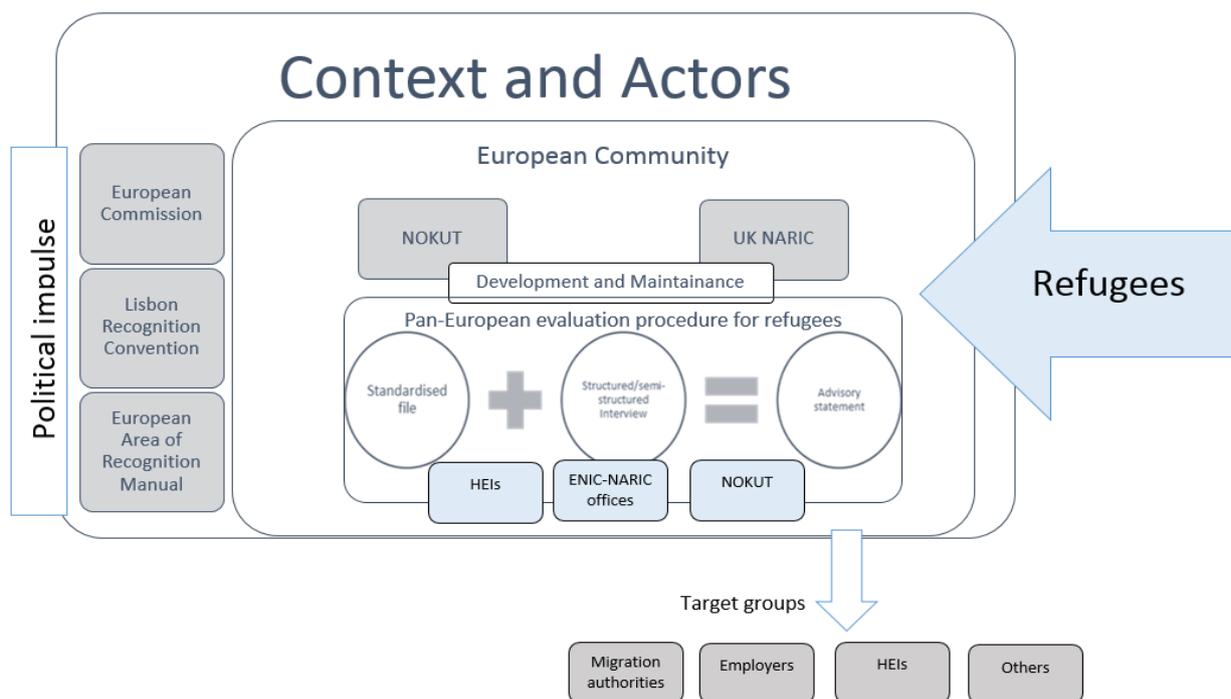


Figure 1: Working context of the pan-European evaluation procedure for refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation

Recognition model – Based on the experiences gained by NOKUT in the period since 2005, NOKUT proposes a centralized pan-European recognition model, where NOKUT and UK NARIC have the responsibility for the development, the implementation, as well as information



and training about the procedure. The result of the evaluation process is an advisory statement / *the European Recognition Passport for Refugees* containing the necessary information concerning the refugees' qualifications. The statement / passport will enable the relevant authorities in any European country to organize for the realization of the refugees' plans for the future with respect to work and education.

It is important that the *European Recognition Passport for Refugees* is valid for a limited period only. NOKUT suggests three years. This will be sufficient for the refugees to apply for recognition in the country they reside; this will neither jeopardize the national recognition schemes of the Member States.

Given the dimensions, NOKUT advises to first start with one nationality only, with the view to further expanding to other nationalities. Considering the current situation, it would be natural to start with refugees from Syria.

NOKUT, represented by the signatories of this letter will be willing, at short notice to present and further discuss these ideas with the European Commission.

Yours sincerely,

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