Erasmus + Project:

Programme Evaluation for Transparency and Recognition of Skills and Qualifications (TLQAA+)

Recognition of Qualifications and Quality Assurance:
Bibliographical Study and Recommendations to the Lebanese Higher Education

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Introduction

The present document is a working document that describes the studies conducted on the recognition of qualifications in general and how it is related to quality assurance of programmes. It also describes the current state of play in the Lebanese Higher Education (LHE). The document ends up with a set of recommendations that shall be discussed with the major stakeholders in a national roundtable to be organised within the European Erasmus+ project TLQAA+.

Recognition

The General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), meeting in Paris 1993, at its twenty-seventh session approved the "Recommendation on the Recognition of Studies and Qualifications in Higher Education", and defined the recognition of a foreign qualification in higher education as following: "*its acceptance by the competent authorities of the State concerned (whether they be governmental or nongovernmental) as entitling its holder to be considered under the same conditions as those holding a comparable qualification awarded in that State and deemed comparable, for the purposes of access to or further pursuit of higher education studies, participation in research, the practice of a profession if this does not require the passing of examinations or further special preparation, or all the foregoing, according to the scope of the recognition*".

According to this definition, the recognition of qualifications in higher education is a primordial process needed to facilitate the mobility between institutions and countries. Facilitating this mobility ensures better interaction and flexible spreading of knowledge and skills. Recognition is important to: enrol in a higher education institution or programme (recognition of previous degrees and credits), seek to practice a regulated profession (recognition of a professional degree or qualification), and integrate an active sector or profession (recognition of previous degrees or qualifications and the associated knowledge, skills and competences).

The study published by Keevy and Jansen 2010, mentioned three important key terms related to recognition:

- Recognition is the formal or legal specifications that a qualification must meet in order to be accepted as fulfilling the set standards, such as are often defined for the professions. Recognition can be unilateral, mutual or based on regional/trade agreements.

- Transparency is the degree to which the value of qualifications can be identified and compared in education, training, the workplace and more.

- Comparability is the comparison of one qualification with another, based, most often, on a common format or instrument – such as comparability tables – that enables the 'face value' of a qualification to be established. (Source: Keevy and Jansen, 2010).

The previous three elements point out the different dimensions of a recognition process in general. Generally the following dimensions are considered when studying a recognition process:

- **Cross-border versus within system recognition**. The cross border recognition is about the recognition in one system of a qualification issued from a higher education institution operating in another system. This is different from the recognition of a qualification within one system, e.g. the recognition by a higher education institution of a qualification issued from a different higher education institution, or the recognition at the entry of a programme of a qualification issued from a different programme. Cross border recognition is often regulated by international conventions. The smooth execution of the recognition process under the umbrella of those conventions depends largely on the availability of information about the issuing system/institution. This might be less constraining for the within system recognition. However, within a system there exist other critical tensions related to difference in perspectives.

- **Direction of recognition**. It is very common to distinguish between incoming and outgoing mobility direction. This distinction has to be done in cross border recognition but also within one system. The direction of recognition is another sensitive dimension where balances must be considered with care. A mutual understanding of the qualifications and systems is required and the recognition process must treat each case separately.

- **Scope of the recognition**. The recognition can be at the system level, at the institution level or at the labour market level. In most of the systems, the recognition of the qualification at the system level is often necessary but not sufficient for the recognition of the same qualification by an institution or for the labour market in a country.

- **"Acceptance" versus "Equivalence"**. Acceptance is a process by which a foreign qualification is recognised without necessary having highly comparable curriculum and even if there are differences, on the condition that the curricular discrepancies cannot be defined as 'substantial difference'. Whereas, equivalence consists in comparing a qualification to an existing qualification in the recognising system and stating on the matching. The 'Acceptance' concept can be extended to the automatic recognition of all qualifications from a specific system, an institution or a programme.

Challenges and constraints are related to each of the previous dimensions. Basically, the targeted recognition system must preserve the rights of the qualification holder and protect the qualification receiving system/institution from a misunderstanding of the qualification profile. The two objectives are not contradictory but complementary with large overlap. However, the relative perspectives and context specific concepts might be misunderstood. It is worth noting that the history of the recognition process is also an important factor. For instance a recognition of a qualification at a higher level of its current status would negatively impact the

future of the recognition of this qualification, while in opposite, recognition of a qualification at a lower level will induce disappointment on the qualification holders. This is more sensitive at the first recognitions of a qualification and might appear less crucial for later recognitions. Nevertheless, it remains important to have a serious follow up of the evolution of the qualifications even previously recognised.

Based on the previous comments, the availability and transparency of information about qualifications facilitate the recognition process, preserve the qualification beholder rights and protect the incoming system/institution. It is also crucial to trust that the programme delivering a qualification assure that the beholders have really acquired what is described in the qualification. The existence and relevance of a quality assurance system serve this objective.

Several tools exist and have been normalised in different countries and regions to support the recognition process. International conventions serve regulating the cross border recognition. Networks such as ENIC-NARIC [1] provide valuable and trusted information about qualifications that feed the recognition process. National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) allow a better readability of the qualifications and facilitate the within system recognition, which includes recognition of qualifications between institutions or sectors or even lifelong learning. Overarching Qualifications Frameworks (QFs), such as the European one (EQF) extend the readability services offered by NQFs to cross-border readability (translation) of qualifications, which serves the cross-border recognition purpose. A transferrable credit system also serves the recognition of courses. Quality assurance is another crucial tool that enhances the trust among systems and institutions and therefore serves the accuracy of the recognition processes.

International legal Recognition conventions

In order to facilitate the international recognition of qualifications in higher education, since last century a broad initiative and reclamation were activated to set up recommendation and standards based on:

- Qualification frameworks (QFs)

- Quality assurance (QA)

- Guidelines of information centres

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[1] ENIC: European Network of Information Centres in the European Region
NARIC: National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union

Several conventions were established to organize and adopt transparent and precise processes for qualifications recognition based on standards and QA. Many countries have contributed to formulate these conventions. Several countries have signed and ratified these conventions. The UNESCO and the European Commission (EC) have adopted legal instruments, which set the principles and norms concerning the recognition of higher education qualifications at both the regional and interregional levels:

- Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (1974);

- International Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab and European States bordering on the Mediterranean (1976);

- Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab States (1978);

- Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in the African States (1981; known as the Arusha Recognition Convention);

- Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific (1983);

- The Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (1997; known as the Lisbon Recognition Convention);

- Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education (2011)

- Recommendation on the Recognition of Studies and Qualifications in Higher Education (1993).

- UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees concerning Higher Education in the States belonging to the Europe Region.

- A UNESCO global standard-setting instrument on the recognition of higher education qualifications.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC April 1997) forms the basis of and sets standards for recognition procedures in the European region. The LRC is a treaty between States by which the parties and the competent authorities of a party undertake to fulfil the obligations (principles and procedures) specified in the treaty with respect to other parties to the treaty. These competent authorities include higher education institutions, which take decisions on recognition, and which consequently are bound to follow the principles as formulated in the LRC.

The LRC lies down the fundamental principles of the fair recognition of qualifications and periods of study. Almost all member States of the Council of Europe as well as some countries in the UNESCO European Region have signed and/or ratified the Council of Europe/UNESCO 'Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region'.

The main principles of the LRC are:

1. Applicants have a right to fair assessment;

2. There is recognition if no substantial differences can be proven and in case of substantial differences they must be demonstrated by the recognition authority;

3. Legislation or guidelines encourage comparing learning outcomes rather than programmes' contents;

4. Applicants have the right to appeal of the recognition decision.

In the years following the adoption of the LRC, subsidiary texts were added, in order to give more detailed recommendations and to serve as guidance for institutions and credential evaluators. The main subsidiary texts are:

- Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and Explanatory Memorandum (2001, revised 2010).

- Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education and Explanatory Memorandum (2001).

- Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees and Explanatory Memorandum (2004).

- Recommendation on International Access Qualifications (1999).

- Recommendation on the use of qualifications frameworks in the recognition of foreign qualifications (2013).

At the European level, efforts have been spent to develop and facilitate the recognition. The Bologna Process, which began in 1999, has played a major role in placing the issue of recognition on the European agenda. Actually, recognition is essential for creating the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Within the Bologna Process the LRC is regarded as the main international legal text that aims to further the fair recognition of access qualifications and higher education qualifications. The Bologna Process has led to many initiatives to improve transparency and recognition of qualifications, such as supporting ECTS, Diploma Supplement (DS) and the implementation of qualifications frameworks (QFs).

Within this process, Bucharest Communiqué (2012) launched a project to explore and achieve automatic academic recognition of comparable degrees. The Communiqué recommended the use of the "European Area of Recognition manual".

The European area for recognition (EAR) is a project created by the Lifelong Learning Programme and the ENIC-NARIC to improve and harmonise the recognition practices. It produced the European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions (HEI) (revised Second edition 2016). The included recommendations provide a standard to what is considered fair recognition in the European region, and a set of guidelines for recognition of foreign qualifications and a compendium of good practices. They also encourage HEIs and quality assurance agencies to assess institutional recognition procedures in internal and external quality assurance.

The EAR HEI manual is the only European recognition manual for credential evaluators and admissions officers that present commonly agreed-upon best practice based on the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC).

Beyond the European area the LRC has been a model for other UNESCO regional conventions, such as the revised Asia Pacific Convention (Tokyo Convention 2011) and the revised Convention for the African region (Arusha Convention 2011).

Information and Transparency

The recognition process needs accurate information to run smoothly and to be fair. **Transparency** is one of the main principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC). It ensures that applicants get the most accurate, clear and reliable information on recognition and criteria applied in her/his country or host country. It is the precondition of the fair treatment of all applications

Recognition depends largely on the information available regarding the institution, the system delivering the diploma. The visible, precise and transparent information are considered as basic and essential tools for recognition process. This information includes: i/ the degree system, ii/ the qualification framework, iii/ the quality assurance (QA) system, iv/ the Credit Transfer System (CTS), v/ the Diploma supplement (DS) and vi/ other information needed sources.

The information can be required from many approved centres such as: ENIC-NARIC network and Mediterranean Recognition Information Centres (MERIC). These organizations and networks are key players in the information process in Europe and some countries in the Mediterranean region. Hereafter, some details about the ENIC and NARIC network.

The ENIC network: The Council of Europe and UNESCO established The European Network of Information Centres (ENIC) in 1994 to implement the LRC and to develop policy and practice for the recognition of qualifications through providing information on foreign qualifications, education systems, mobility schemes and recognition of foreign awards. The Network consists of the national information centres of the LRC signatory countries. It cooperates closely with the NARIC Network.

The NARIC network: The network of National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) is an initiative of the European Commission. The network was created in 1984 to imp*rove the recognition of academic diplomas and periods of study in the member States of the European Union (EU). It also includes the European Economic Area (EEA) countries and Turkey. All member countries have designated national centres, the purpose of which is to assist in promoting the mobility of students, teachers and researchers by providing advice and information concerning the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study. The main users of this service are higher education institutions, competent recognition authorities, students and their advisers, parents, teachers and prospective employers.

These national information centers in European countries have gathered enormous amounts of information and the need was felt to integrate and coordinate all the information in an international database. Established by the European Commission, the database ORTELIUS, located in Florence and operational from 1996, it provides all kinds of information on the higher education systems of the EU countries and of individual institutions. Broader in scope than the European region is the Trans Regional Academic Mobility and Credential Evaluation (TRACE) information system, coordinated by the International Association of Universities (IAU), associated with UNESCO. It also is an international information network for collecting, processing and standardizing information on higher education.

Quality Assurance and the Recognition of Qualifications and Accreditation

The recognition of qualifications and the quality assurance are interrelated in both directions. The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions by EAR states that clearly. At one side, the internal and external quality assurance of programmes must evaluate the recognition procedures and criteria used in the programme. At the other side, the recognition processes often consider the quality assurance used in the qualification issuing programme.

Evaluation of Implemented Recognition Procedures

The Bucharest Communiqué 2012 calls clearly for the evaluation of implemented recognition processes. It states:

"Fair academic and professional recognition, including recognition of non formal and informal learning, is at the core of the EHEA…. **We welcome the European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual and recommend its use as a set of guidelines for recognition**

of foreign qualifications and a compendium of good practices, as well as **encourage higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies to assess institutional recognition procedures in internal and external quality assurance**."

The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG, 2015) has responded to the Bucharest Communiqué in the Standard 1.4.

> **Standard 1.4:** Student admission, progression, **recognition** and certification
>
> *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.*

Quality Assurance and Trust for Recognition

The application of an appropriate quality assurance system to a programme complements the existence of transparent information and supports the trust in the issued qualifications. Yet, sufficient information about the quality assurance processes in place must be available. Most often, formal agreements on the recognition of foreign qualifications imply the implicit or explicit mutual recognition of quality assurance and accreditation systems.

The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG, 2015) states clearly:

"*Engagement with quality assurance processes, particularly the external ones, allows European higher education systems to demonstrate quality and increase transparency, thus helping to build mutual trust and better recognition of their qualifications, programmes and other provision.*"

The purposes of the ESG includes:

"***They support mutual trust**, thus facilitating recognition and mobility within and across national borders;*"

The existing of clear and highly reputed quality assurance systems and procedures enhances the climate of trust and therefore facilitates the recognition of qualifications. Reciprocally, the non existence of a quality assurance system, or simply the non availability of information about such system, can lead to mistrust and make it difficult to recognise the corresponding qualifications. A survey was conducted by the ENIC/NARIC network, indicated that difficulties in accessing information on the quality of higher education institutions programmes constituted the major obstacles to the recognition of qualifications. Campbell & Van der Wende (2000) state that lack of information with national quality assurance developments is responsible for conservative attitudes towards the assessment of new degrees. On the other side, there are also indications that decisions taken regarding recognition of

academic qualifications in the Lisbon are influenced positively by trust in the national quality assurance and accreditation systems. Thus, developments in the field of recognition of qualifications could also foster the implicit or explicit recognition of quality assurance systems. In this direction, the European Union has made a step forward in two directions:

- by defining a common set of standards and guidelines, the ESG, and defining procedures to validate if they are respected in a given quality assurance system. This yields a harmonisation of the QA systems and a mutual understanding.

- by creating the register of QA agencies. This register facilitates transnational evaluation but also nurture the trust among QA agencies and between them and the various higher education systems and institutions.

Most countries, including the US, still apply very detailed and complicated procedures based on equivalency tests and refuse automatic recognition of foreign degrees and qualifications. These procedures encompass detailed analyses of course and curriculum structure, contents, examination systems, etc. However, also in this context clear links to quality assurance and accreditation exist. In its equivalency decision taking processes the US Department of Education takes into account the existence of accreditation systems in foreign countries that are considered to apply standards comparable to those used by US accreditors. In fact, this defines a kind of formal recognition of foreign accreditation systems by the US. However, the lack of comparability between national quality assurance and accreditation systems prevents progress in this field. In some fields, the US is enforcing the existence and compatibility of accreditation and quality assurance system. Typically, in medicine, it will be required, starting 2020, that foreign programmes have gone accreditation by a certified agency in order to have their issued qualifications recognised.

In some European countries, the quality assurance mechanisms are considered as functionally equivalent in the standards used. The formal recognition of national quality assurance and accreditation systems contributed to make the issue of recognition of foreign qualifications less problematic and bureaucratic.

Another example of mutual recognition of quality assurance and accreditation systems can be found in the domain of mobility programmes and credit-transfer programmes, (ERASMUS / SOCRATES programme started in 1989). However, some questions can be raised concerning the lack of formal quality checks in the ERASMUS-programme (Van Damme, 2001a). ERASMUS and ECTS are based on a maximalist reading of the concept of 'acceptance' or 'recognition' by asking an a priori acceptance of foreign credits by the home institution, without any prior check of contents, teaching methods, workload, student assessment procedures, etc. without any reference to quality. Recently, quality assurance questions have been taken up within the European programmes.

In the UMAP (University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific) programme the quality issues involved in student mobility are explicitly addressed. The first principle in the UMAP constitution goes as follows: **"**UMAP programmes operate between individual accredited higher education institutions, or consortiums of institutions, on the basis of mutual acceptance of the appropriateness of national accreditation determinations." All public or private higher education institutions located in countries or territories participating in UMAP, and recognized in the participating home country as nationally accredited, are eligible to participate in UMAP programmes. This is implying a formal mutual recognition of national accreditation systems and their accreditation decisions within the whole UMAP region.

Harman (1998a) mentioned that the quality assurance has become particularly important in higher education systems adopting a more self-regulation-oriented approach to relationships between government and institutions, as is the case in most Western European countries. In learning from international experiences on quality assurance it is important to select elements which can be integrated in the national culture and characteristics of the national academic system (Harman, 1998b). In this perspective, there is a lot of concern in the higher education and quality assurance communities for cultural diversity in quality assurance systems and also some anxiety that globalization would result in the imposition of a uniform model of accreditation.

Transnational education in higher education services increasingly affects the international approaches in academic recognition. Although the Lisbon Convention does not deal specifically with the specific recognition issues, which are emerging as a result of the rapid development of transnational education, the principles underlying it are seen as powerful enough to remain the normative framework for dealing with those developments (Wilson & Vlasceanu, 2000).

In definitive, the transparency and the international convergence in quality assurance processes certainly would foster mutual recognition and acceptance of qualifications, thus decreasing the bureaucracy of recognition.

Impact of the Bologna process

As it was indicated, the Bologna reforms aim to bring about comparability, compatibility and comprehensibility between the multiple HE systems in Europe, by enhancing transparency, quality assurance, and defining points of convergence that constitute a shared reference context. e.g. duration of cycles, level indicators, credit-point semantics etc.

In addition of traditional academic learning outcomes based on knowledge acquisition and research training, the direct linkage of HE with the advancement of economy (Lisbon objective) is one reason for inclusion of transferable (work-market-based) skills in the learning outcomes.

The shared understanding emanating to unification of qualifications and learning outcomes of HE in Europe promotes mutual trust, which further has been enhanced and consolidated through the application of common and transparent criteria and procedures for internal and external quality assurance. These also clarify the mutual recognition of periods of study and quality of qualifications, not only within European countries, but also with other regions such as Asia and Middle East region.

This globalization of academic learning in higher education increases the academic professional mobility and the demand of mutual qualifications recognition based on quality assurance according the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

In Europe and Asia recognition bodies are being established, e. g (Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), SEAMEO Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development, the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN). The establishment of joint recognition strategies between ASEM countries enhanced the cooperation between Higher Education Institutions in Asia and Europe, also promoted the mobility of students, academics, and researchers which leaded to the implantation of a multicultural dialogue, the exchange of experiences and good practices between the collaborated regions.

In this stage, the quality is considered as the essential subject for achieving mutual trust between institutions; it must be seriously analyzed and convincingly addressed. The development of a continuous Internal and external quality management of the qualifications is an integral aspect of the Bologna reforms.

The internal quality management mechanisms of an organization, if adequate, could guarantee a positive outcome for the external quality evaluations; the provision of education programmes and the conducting of research can be viewed as interactive processes to increase the learning outcomes and competencies.

National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs), Recognition and Quality Assurance

The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions enumerates five elements as required to define a qualification. These elements are:

1. Level of a Qualification
2. Workload
3. Quality
4. Profile
5. Learning Outcomes

The definition of these five key elements shows that recognition, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance are strongly interrelated. QFs are tools that permit better readability of degrees and qualifications but also allow a good translation of the qualifications profiles from one system into another. QFs promote dialogue between the different stakeholders and are concerned with the relevance of qualifications. In a complementary way, quality assurance

tackles the fitness for purpose of the learning processes and the various related academic activities. Both of them facilitate a fair and transparent recognition of qualifications.

As for quality assurance mutual understanding of the qualifications frameworks is also required for a fair recognition. The choice adopted here was to define an overarching QF to which all national QFs are translated. This overarching QF is a sort of meta QF. At least two such QFs have been defined. At Berlin Conference a set of common references and criteria were established to enhance the compatibility of the various NQFs in EHEA. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) has been developed and adopted in 2005.

The development of an overarching framework for qualifications for the EHEA helped to elaborate the national qualifications framework, and promoted the mutual understanding of national qualifications and facilitated the mutual recognition.

The existence of a QF permits to uniquely define the level of a qualification (the first of the previously mentioned 5 elements). It also provides important hints about the workload and the profile of a qualification. By translating these levels from one system to another, the recognition process is facilitated.

Recognition in Higher Education in Lebanon

Current situation

The Ministry of Education has the overall responsibility for higher education in Lebanon. It is one of the oldest in the region, it includes about 200 000 students, enrolled in one public university, the Lebanese University, (40% of the students), and about 50 private HEIs. These institutions adopt a wide diversity of academic systems, with traditional modes of teaching.

Since 1957 a decree established a committee for the equivalence and recognition of diplomas. The equivalence committee operates under the umbrella of the ministry of higher education and is managed by the director general of higher education. The committee adopts a transparent process and has several good practices. More than 10 000 recognition/equivalence requests are treated per year.

The recognition/equivalence of qualifications is done in two directions: Lebanese degrees mainly for Lebanese and foreign students to be recognised abroad and, foreign degrees for Lebanese students (40% of Lebanese emigrants hold a higher education degree) and foreign students to be recognised in Lebanon. In the recent years and due to the Syrian immigration crisis, the equivalence committee has to face the challenge of the recognition of Syrian qualifications, with some particular cases related to the lack of official documents.

Statistics collected in 2009 showed that 65% of the equivalence decisions are within the system, i.e. the equivalence of private universities qualifications. The incoming qualifications from a foreign system subject to recognition are mostly for Lebanese citizens (88%). Roughly half of the equivalences are at the level of BSc, and a quarter for each of the MSc and PhD

levels. These proportions change drastically when separating the recognition into two classes: Lebanese degrees and non Lebanese degrees. Around 80% of the Lebanese degrees recognised are at the BSc level and 15% are at the MSc level. In comparison, more than 60% of recognised non Lebanese degrees are at PhD level and a little less than a quarter of them are at the MSc level. Half of recognised Lebanese degrees are in the domain of business and economy and around 40% are in social sciences and sciences. A third of non Lebanese degrees recognised are in the domain of sciences and a little more than 15% for each of the domains of engineering, medicine, health sciences and social sciences.

The most recent law regulating the higher education maintained the equivalence committee. It alleviates the task of recognition within the Lebanese system that becomes nearly automatic, and extended its mission to the recognition of:

- Qualifications with no equivalence in the Lebanese system

- Credits acquired in a non-Lebanese institution without a final degree

However, no decrees have been issued to put in practice the general regulations in the law. Moreover, there is a need to update the tools used in the recognition process (equivalence).

Challenges in the Lebanese Higher Education

In general, the Lebanese higher education institutions in cooperation with the ministry of higher education have the responsibility to:

- Harmonize the interaction and the exchange of knowledge among the numerous higher education institutions in Lebanon, in order to easy recognize each other's programmes.

- Ensure equitable and easy access for all students.

- Recover the lack of qualified faculty staff in all domains.

- Increase the experience in the quality assurance processes.

- Exceed the limited research expertise.

Several challenges are facing the Lebanese Higher Education sector. Some of those are specific to the recognition process. Hereafter, some important challenges related to the recognition are enumerated.

Load on the Equivalence Committee

The within system recognition defines a huge load on the Equivalence Committee. It is mentioned above that around two thirds of the recognitions are relative to the equivalence to the Lebanese University degrees of qualifications delivered by private higher education

Institutions. The new law (n.285, April 2014) calls for the simplification of these equivalence procedures towards more acceptance. Decrees and regulations are still lacking in this regard.

Lack of Transparent Information

There is nothing similar to the ENIC-NARIC centers in Lebanon. The Information about the higher education institutions and programmes are either obtained from the web site of the institutions or from the web site of the Directorate General of Higher Education in the Ministry. There is a need for:

- A central information system that provides precise, harmonised and transparent information about the qualifications delivered in Lebanon which will serve the recognition of the Lebanese issued qualifications. This is a challenging task for different reasons among them the diversity in the systems adopted in the LHE and, the large number of qualifications delivered in the country. The ENIC-NARIC experience is rich and inspiring in this regard.

- A normalised way of using existing information for the recognition of incoming qualifications, like the information provided by the ENIC-NARIC centers. The procedures and the forms currently in use need to be updated.

Lack of National Qualifications Framework and Quality Assurance System

Although the draft law for the establishment of a national QA agency in Lebanon has been for several years in the Parliament, it has not been voted yet. There is no proper QA system in Lebanon. This has been compensated and replaced by actions from several institutions that have accredited their systems and programmes by international agencies. While the accreditation by international agencies fills in a good way the absence of a national system but trust in the system can be largely improved by the existence of a relevant and rigorous system. Moreover, and due to the lack of a national QA system, it is difficult to verify that the recognition procedures used inside the institutions look at the details of the QA procedures relative to the incoming qualifications.

The Lebanese Qualifications Framework (LQF) is the other major lacking tool. Although an LQF has been suggested and experimented in an ETF project, no real actions have been taken so far to generalise the usage this LQF. This makes it difficult to identify precisely the level of a qualification and harms the recognition process.

The absence of these two major components in the system impacts the dialogue between higher education and socio-economic partners, a dialogue that remains weak and non systematic. This being said, several initiatives are being taken by the HEIs in order to reinforce such dialogue. But these initiatives remain individual and need to be further structured and developed.

Lack of Supporting Tools

Several tools of great benefit to the recognition processes are lacking in the system. There is no unique credit system adopted but rather different systems are coexisting: mainly American credits and ECTS. Moreover, Diploma Supplement is not adopted largely. Some institutions often provide the students with a transcript or an attestation of studies.

Recommendations

Based on the previous study several recommendations can be drawn and submitted to the different stakeholders of the Lebanese Higher Education. These recommendations can be separated into two subsets; a general subset and a subset specific to quality assurance.

General Recommendations

1. Develop a set of decrees, procedures and guidelines to complete the law regulating the Lebanese higher education (n. 285, April 2014):

    a. Alleviate the task of the Equivalence Committee by adopting acceptance procedures within system for the Lebanese qualifications

    b. Define rules and regulations to recognise qualifications with no equivalence in the Lebanese HE

    c. Define rules and regulations for the recognition of credits and lifelong learning

2. Build an information center that:

    a. Capitalise on existing experience of the Equivalence Committee by grouping in a database what has been recognised and not and why

    b. provides precise and transparent information about Lebanese qualifications

    The functions of this center and its procedures shall be inspired from the ENIC-NARIC centers.

3. Ratify the Lisbon Convention. Although the Equivalence Committee is considering this convention in its regular operations, it is recommended to have this convention ratified at the Parliament to enforce its application.

4. Promote the usage of different harmonised supporting tools:

    a. A common credit system. ECTS is an excellent candidate since it is student centered and it reflects the workload of the students

    b. The Diploma Supplement

Quality Assurance specific Recommendations

1. Establish and promote the usage of the Lebanese Qualifications Framework. The one developed in the ETF project forms a solid starting basis and needs to be further developed and to see its usage expanded. The LQF shall include:

    a. Equivalence: looking into admission and assessment requirements and duration of programmes.

    b. Other qualifications apart from those corresponding to the three cycles advocated in the Bologna process, e.g. a qualification between a 1st and a 2nd cycle degree.

    c. Vocational education and training, and qualifications for lifelong learning in general.

    The adoption of the LQFs will provide to the recognition processes precious information in uniform, comprehensive and explicit way. Connecting it to the EQF shall ease the translation of the qualifications or at least a clear understanding of their levels. The LQF shall also be a tool for dialogue between the different stakeholders which will impact positively the readability and thus the recognition of qualifications by the socio economic actors.

2. Establish the Lebanese QA agency and system with the following:

    a. Include into the core standards and criteria the evaluation of the recognition procedures adopted in the HEIs

    b. Provide transparent information about the QA standards, guidelines and regulations which will improve the trust in the QA processes adopted in Lebanon

    c. Connect the Lebanese QA system to international networks (ENQA) which will permit a mutual understanding of the processes and procedures.

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Annex A. TLQAA+ Project

A-1. Objectives

TLQAA+ is a structural capacity building Erasmus+ project aiming at developing the necessary structure for the evaluation and continuous improvement of the Lebanese higher education programmes. The main objectives of the project are:

- Develop a national qualifications framework (NQF) and match the different programmes against it to increase the transparency and recognition of skills and certifications.

- Study the relations between recognition and quality assurance (QA).

- Suggest recommendations regarding the QA for new delivery modes of courses and programmes.

- Establish a set of descriptive rules to build a unit of QA within the universities.

- Develop necessary standards and procedures for programmes' evaluation making use of the NQF.

- Shape the standards and procedures to three main fields; i/ Human Sciences, ii/ Health Sciences and, iii/ Engineering and Hard Sciences.

- Train experts and produce a short course about internal and external QA skills.

- Use the developed standards to do internal self-evaluation of selected university programmes in the three main fields (Human Sciences, Public Health, and Engineering).

- Conduct external evaluation of few selected programmes.

A-2. Structure

The project is formed of 13 work packages (WPs). The Lebanese University (UL for Lebanese University) is involved in most of these WPs, and responsible to develop WP3, entitled Recognition, NQF and QA. The Centre International d'Etudes Pédagogiques (CIEP) is the co-manager of WP3.

The following table summarises the TLQAA+ management information for WP3:

Title:	Recognition, NQF and QA
Managers:	Zeinab SAAD (contact point) (UL), Bruno Curvale (CIEP)
Members:	UL, ENQA, DGHE, USEK, ALI, UOB
Start date:	15/10/2016
End Date:	15/12/2017

Tasks:	Perform a bibliographical study of the quality issues related recognition and the role of QFs Prepare a first set of recommendations Finalize the recommendations after feedback to be collected durin the first national roundtable
Deliverables:	Bibliographical Study on QA, Recognition and QFs 15/06/2017 QA, Recognition and QFs 15/12/2017
Supporting document and facts:	- Bibliographical references - Results from other EU projects - Roundtable
Comments:	