



**The Higher Education
Programme**

Education for Today's
and Tomorrow's
Democratic Societies

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

THE HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMME
"Education for Today's and Tomorrow's
Democratic Societies"

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Head of the
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FOREWARD

Education is where Europe renews its commitment to human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. In an era shaped by rapid change – digital transformation, global mobility, and emerging threats to academic freedom – our shared responsibility is to ensure that every learner can grow with dignity, curiosity, and integrity.

The Council of Europe's Higher Education Programme reflects this vision. By strengthening trust in qualifications, empowering students, defending academic freedom, and building ethical and transparent systems, we help universities become engines of democratic resilience. Together, we are shaping an education landscape where every learner can contribute, belong, and thrive.

Catherine
Dolgova-Dreyer

Head of Higher and
Further Education Unit

INTRODUCTION

Our work in higher education is driven by a clear objective: to make systems fairer, more transparent, and more effective for learners, staff, and societies.

In practice, this means supporting the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, strengthening the ENIC-NARIC networks, advancing automatic recognition, promoting ethical and transparent education systems, and ensuring that refugees' qualifications and skills are valued.

*Our work is to make systems fairer,
more transparent, and more effective
for learners, staff, and societies.*

THE HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

The Higher Education Programme of the Council of Europe addresses the areas of academic freedom, artificial intelligence, ethics, transparency and integrity in education, and the recognition of qualifications, including the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC). We bring together key stakeholders from member States and international experts to develop projects and policy recommendations. Regular meetings and events serve to discuss and monitor implementation processes.

The work in the field of higher education is overseen by the Sub-Group on Higher Education Policy, which includes 25 members from education ministries in charge of higher education, as well as from academia and international NGOs.



The Sub-Group reports to the Council of Europe Steering Committee for Education (CDEDU), which is composed of representatives from public authorities responsible for education from the 46 member States of the Council of Europe, as well as the Holy See and Kazakhstan and a number of observer organisations.



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QUALIFICATIONS

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LISBON RECOGNITION CONVENTION — LRC

The Council of Europe and UNESCO form the Secretariat of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, also referred to as the “Lisbon Recognition Convention”, adopted in Lisbon in 1997. The convention is the main legal instrument for the recognition of qualifications in Europe. It promotes fair recognition of academic qualifications, and it has to date, been ratified by 57 states.

The LRC is based on a set of principles, which derive from the Council of Europe’s acquis and include clarity and accessibility, inclusivity and flexibility, co-ordination and co-operation, supportive integration and portability, and continuity.

The Convention Committees are convened at least every three years. Between sessions the Work Programme is implemented by the LRC Bureau.

The tenth session of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee took place on 22 October 2025 at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris.



THE CURRENT COMPOSITION OF THE LRC BUREAU IS:

Mr Allan Bruun Pedersen
President · Denmark

Ms Jenneke Lokhoff
1st Vice-President · the Netherlands

Mr Michael Ringuette
2nd Vice-President · Canada

Ms Elisa Petrucci
Rapporteur · Italy



The convention is the main legal instrument for the recognition of qualifications in Europe.

The Committee adopted the new Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education (TNE). TNE refers to educational programmes or services in which learners are located in a different country from the one where the awarding institution is based. The revised Code addressed emerging challenges, including education fraud, artificial intelligence ethics, and alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Looking ahead, the Bureau announced plans to develop a new text on digital and AI-enabled recognition, building on the Council of Europe’s new three-year programme on AI and recognition and aligned with both the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law.

The Committee also agreed to contribute to the drafting of new guidance under the UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, helping to clarify the relationship between global and regional legal instruments on recognition.

A forthcoming survey on national practices related to “substantial differences” will inform recommendations to promote fairer and more transparent recognition practices across the regions.



ENIC AND NARIC NETWORKS

The European Network of National Information Centres (ENIC), jointly run by the Council of Europe and UNESCO, operates in conjunction with the National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) network, established in 1984, with the European Commission as Secretariat.

The ENIC-NARIC networks have joint initiatives linked to supporting exchange of information on the recognition of qualifications, policies and practices, and providing opportunities for capacity-building activities. The networks participate in consultative processes on international normative instruments related to the recognition of qualifications.

Specifically, ENIC-NARIC networks provide information on recognition to individuals wishing to study or work abroad, credential

evaluators, higher education institutions and employers.

Both networks represent a joint, unique community of practice of professionals working in the field of recognition, sharing experiences and knowledge on a daily basis. A shared language and common understanding have been built over time among the institutions that are part of the ENIC-NARIC networks.

The Joint ENIC-NARIC Charter of Activities and Services, which sets out the shared principles and quality standards for the Networks, was revised and adopted in 2025 by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee.



The governance of the Networks is carried out by the ENIC Bureau and NARIC Advisory Board.

ENIC BUREAU COMPOSITION

Ms Chiara Finocchietti
President · Italy

Mr Dzenan Omanovic
Vice-President · Bosnia and Herzegovina

Ms Hanna Reczulska
Vice-President · Poland

NARIC ADVISORY BOARD COMPOSITION

Mr Gunnar Vaht
ENIC-NARIC Estonia

Ms Helén Sophie Haugen
ENIC-NARIC Norway

Ms Gianina Chirazi
ENIC-NARIC Romania

The 32nd annual joint ENIC-NARIC meeting took place on 25-27 May 2025 in Tirana, Albania, organised with the financial support of the Council of Europe. This major event gathered together over 150 representatives from the ENIC and NARIC networks and served as a key forum for exchanging best practices and strengthening co-operation in the field of recognition of qualification. The rich and varied programme featured a plenary session and 12 parallel workshops, covering a broad spectrum of topics. This interactive format provided participants with an excellent opportunity to collaborate on shared challenges and innovative solutions in the field of recognition of qualifications.

The Council of Europe was involved in three workshops, namely “Unveiling the potential of AI in recognition – optimising benefits, mitigating risks”, “Advancing the automatic recognition of academic qualifications across Europe: way forward”, and “Spotting the fake: navigating education fraud in a digital age”.

Another parallel session highlighted the outcomes of the ENIC projects supported by the Council of Europe in 2024, with contributions from the ENIC centres of Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ukraine. The evaluation report on this project call is available here.

The 33rd annual joint ENIC-NARIC meeting will take place on 24-26 May 2026 in Athens (Greece).





AUTOMATIC RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS

Automatic recognition of Qualifications refers to the right of a qualification holder to have their degree recognised without the need for a separate recognition procedure, as in practice, procedures for the academic recognition of qualifications are often lengthy and costly and excessive administrative burdens may constitute a serious obstacle in accessing higher education.

Since 2022 the Council of Europe Ad Hoc Working Group on Automatic Recognition of Qualifications has been working, extending its membership in 2025 to include more key stakeholders, including public authorities in charge of higher education, as well as representatives of the European Commission and UNESCO. The objective of the renewed Working Group was to identify and design the necessary building blocks to ensure clarity, build trust, and establish the preconditions required for the successful implementation of automatic recognition.

The Ad Hoc Working Group assessed the feasibility of different legal approaches and proposed to start the development of a legally binding text: a Convention.

At its 8th Plenary session in September 2025, the Steering Committee for Education (CDEDU) approved the commencement of the process of drafting a new Convention on the Conditions of Transparency and Quality Assurance for Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in Europe (subject to decision by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in early 2026). A Committee of Experts on Automatic Recognition on Automatic Recognition (CE-AR) will be designated to draft the Convention.

The new legal text will build on the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and consider other existing standards, like the Multilateral Treaty on the Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications, establishing a triangular and mutually reinforcing system. Thereby it will promote mutual trust as well as transparency, enhance academic and professional mobility, and improve international co-operation in higher education and academic exchange.

RECOGNITION OF REFUGEES' QUALIFICATIONS

Work on the recognition of refugees' qualifications is carried out both at the policy and at the practical level. On 9 July 2025, the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers adopted the Recommendation on qualifications and linguistic competences of refugees in Europe.

Since 2024, a dedicated Working Group developed the Recommendation under the mandate of the Steering Committee for Education (CDEDU). The Recommendation builds on ongoing Council of Europe Education projects in the field of refugee integration through education, especially on the European Passport for Refugees (EQPR) as well as the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants programme.

The Recommendation presents a promising step towards a comprehensive approach to recognising and valuing the qualifications and language skills of refugees across Member States. Recommendation aims at establishing transparent recognition procedures in the member States and, therefore, encourages the establishment of easily accessible, efficient, flexible, and transparent procedures to rapidly assess the academic qualifications including linguistic skills obtained through non-formal and informal learning. In highlighting the importance of the academic, professional, and linguistic integration, the text also honours the broader contributions of displaced persons

to their host countries. Regarding practical implementation tools, the Council of Europe has been running the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR) since 2017, an initiative aiming to facilitate the recognition of refugees' qualifications in the absence of full documentation.

Specifically, The EQPR is a standardised document that explains the qualifications a refugee is likely to have based on the available evidence. Although this document does not constitute a formal recognition act, it summarises and presents available information on the applicant's educational level, work experience and language proficiency.

The EQPR project is developing synergies and co-operates with the UNESCO Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants, which is targeting countries beyond Europe. More than 100 credential evaluators from 24 participating ENICs are now trained on the interview-based EQPR methodology. To date, over 1000 EQPRs have been issued.

In 2025 the Council of Europe conducted a survey on the use of the EQPR, gathering responses from 336 passport holders representing more than 40 nationalities. Most respondents came from Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Cameroon, representing a highly educated population: 40% hold bachelor's degrees, 29% master's, and 8% doctorates.

The survey confirmed that the EQPR is a practical and effective tool for inclusion in higher education and the labour market. According to the findings, 59% of respondents used their EQPR, most often in the country where it was issued. 65% of students said the EQPR directly helped them access higher education, while 59% of employed respondents credited it with improving their job opportunities. Over 60% now work in their original field of qualification, demonstrating the EQPR's capacity to turn academic recognition into real opportunities. Furthermore, high satisfaction rate—95% of participants would recommend the EQPR—reflect the programme's success. The survey also shows that more than 60% of EQPR users in work or study hold a language certificate at B2 level or higher, underscoring how language proficiency reinforces employability and integration.

The publication "Portrait of refugees", published on UNHCR World Refugee Day, is a collection of lived experiences of the EQPR.

Each narrative of the seven interviewed persons reveals a unique journey of continuing education and resuming professional careers in host countries. From healthcare professionals offering critical services to communities, to young students pursuing their dreams of higher education, these individuals showcase the profound impact of recognition, trust, and support. The portraits are a just a glimpse into the ways in which—and extent to which—the EQPR and other Council of Europe initiatives have benefitted those who had to leave their home countries.



By 2025, 24 countries joined the EQPR

Albania	Croatia	Ireland	Norway	San Marino
Andorra	France	Italy	Poland	Serbia
Armenia	Germany	Latvia	Portugal	Spain (joined in 2025)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Georgia	Montenegro	Republic of Moldova	the United Kingdom
Canada	Greece	the Netherlands	Romania	



COUNCIL OF EUROPE PLATFORM ON ETHICS, TRANSPARENCY AND INTEGRITY IN EDUCATION

— ETINED

The ETINED Platform, launched in 2015 by the Council of Europe, is a network of specialists appointed by member states of the Council of Europe and states parties to the European Cultural Convention. Its mission is to promote transparency, integrity, and ethical principles in education by sharing good practices, addressing corruption challenges, and building capacity across all actors and all levels of education, to ensure quality education for all.

The ETINED Platform has produced a series of publications (volumes on ethics, academic integrity, codes of conduct, glossary), recommendations (on teaching ethics and countering education fraud), and regional projects, while also organising plenary sessions and best-practice programmes to promote ethics, transparency and integrity in education.

In 2025, a report on “Student Perceptions and Awareness of Education Fraud” was published. Based on a Europe-wide survey of over 5,000 higher education students across 40 countries, the report – developed in partnership with CIMEA (Information Centre on Academic Mobility and Equivalence) and

the ETINED Platform – sheds light on how students perceive, experience, and understand education fraud. The findings underscore the urgent need for co-ordinated action to raise awareness, strengthen protections, and build a culture of academic integrity. As part of the broader efforts under the Council of Europe’s Education Strategy 2024-2030 “Learners First”, the report calls for empowering students as active partners in preventing education fraud and ensuring transparency and trust in higher education.



The findings underscore the urgent need for co-ordinated action to raise awareness, strengthen protections, and build a culture of academic integrity. ”

In collaboration with UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP-UNESCO), the report “Open school data in European education systems” was published. It explores how open school data (OSD) is developed and implemented across states parties to the European Cultural Convention. It builds on prior IIEP-UNESCO research to promote transparency, accountability, and the fight against corruption in education. Aimed at policymakers, education officials, civil society, and international partners, the report reviews types of public data, governance models, impacts, best practices, and barriers to OSD. Findings draw from a comprehensive desk review, an online survey sent to all states parties, and in-depth interviews with selected countries leading in OSD. These insights offer guidance for effective, sustainable open school data policies in Europe.



A flagship initiative is underway to establish a Centre for Preventing and Countering Education Fraud. The Centre will serve as a shared operational mechanism open to all Council of Europe member states, addressing a wide range of fraudulent practices including diploma mills, forged qualifications, and academic misconduct. It will also provide guidance tools, data analysis, and technical support to national authorities and education stakeholders. Anchored in the Council of Europe’s Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)18 on countering education fraud, the Centre will contribute to the implementation of the Education Strategy 2024–2030 “Learners First”, with a focus on integrity, trust, and quality assurance in European education systems.



Following an ETINED EduTalk@CoE in April 2025 on “Ensuring Quality and Integrity in Transnational Education”, (TNE) a co-authored article titled “In addressing TNE governance



challenges, students are key” featuring contributions from UNESCO, ENQA, CIMEA, TNE Hub and the Council of Europe, was published in University World News, highlighting the need for robust quality assurance, cross-border co-operation, and the protection of student interests. To complement the article, a series of short expert video clips have been published on the Education Department’s dedicated LinkedIn page, addressing key questions about TNE, including its risks, opportunities, and governance challenges.



On 5-6 November 2025, the ETINED Platform held its 9th Plenary session, spotlighting open school data initiatives and gathering insights to support the work of the Centre for Preventing and Countering Education Fraud. The 2026 roadmap was defined, reinforcing ETINED’s role as a platform for co-operation, knowledge-sharing, and the promotion of trust and integrity in education, with a stronger and continued focus on transparency.



THE DEMOCRATIC MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION



THE DEMOCRATIC

The Education Department's work on the democratic mission of higher education is strongly linked to the fundamental principles of the Council of Europe, namely human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

In November 2024, a new project called "Academic Freedom in Action" was launched in Strasbourg. The project sets out to strengthen the protection and promotion of academic freedom, the premises of which were given in the Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the responsibility of public authorities for academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

In a global context marked by increasing threats to democracy, the 2025 Global Forum on Higher Education, held on 3-4 June at Charles University in Prague, served as an urgent call to reaffirm the democratic and civic mission of higher education. Organised by the Council of Europe and the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy, in partnership with the Organization of American States (OAS) and the International Association of Universities (IAU), and hosted by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, this eighth edition of the Forum brought together over 100 higher education leaders, public authorities, students, and civil society actors from around the world.

The theme of this year's Forum, "Renewing the Democratic and Civic Mission", reflected a growing awareness that universities cannot remain neutral in times of democratic backsliding. They are key actors in defending academic freedom and fundamental values of higher education, rebuilding trust in institutions, and educating the active democratic participation. The Forum provided a space for exchange, reflection, and joint commitment to shaping the future of democratic societies and of the higher education's role.

MISSION OF



HIGHER EDUCATION

“Universities cannot remain neutral in times of democratic backsliding”

Another big event in 2025 – the Academic Freedom in Action 2025 Conference brought together parliamentarians, state representatives, academics, civil society actors, international organisations, and legal experts to take stock of the current situation, share innovative practices, and explore avenues for co-ordinated action. Organised by the Council of Europe Education Department, this event helped to shape the collective response to increasing threats, and it marked the launch of the Council of Europe's first Report on the Erosion of Academic Freedom and the Academic Freedom Insights.

These documents provide evidence-based insights into threats, recommend actions for universities, governments, and international partners, while also providing a basis for the continued action and policy development under the Council of Europe's initiative.

Through targeted initiatives, the project seeks to safeguard academic freedom from political, legal, technological, and other threats, and ensures that universities contribute to inclusive and sustainable societal change and strengthen institutional autonomy as a foundation for democracy.

By promoting collaboration between public authorities, universities, and international bodies, the project will produce actionable recommendations, guidelines, and tools to strengthen the democratic transformation of higher education institutions in line with the Council of Europe Education Strategy 2024-2030.



CONTRIBUTION — EHEA TO THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

The Council of Europe is a consultative member of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and is actively participating in the EHEA steering bodies (Bologna Follow-Up Group and Bologna Board) and selected Working Groups.

01 The Council of Europe's work on the recognition of qualifications, in particular through the ENIC network (in collaboration with UNESCO) and the Lisbon Recognition Convention, as well as in the area of recognition of refugees' qualifications through the European Qualifications Passport of Refugees, as well as qualifications frameworks.



02 Active participation in the steering bodies (Bologna Follow Up Group and Bologna Board).



03 Its work on the the fundamental values of higher education through its Higher Education Programme and the participation in the EHEA working groups.



STUDENTS' RIGHTS CHARTER

The Council of Europe Education strategy 2030 “Learners First” outlines a vision for education systems across Europe that are inclusive, equitable and student-centred. It emphasises the importance of providing high-quality education to all students and fostering an environment where students are empowered to participate in democratic processes.

Increased student mobility, the digital transformation, and varying emphasis on the social dimension of higher education are creating new opportunities and challenges for students, making it essential to develop a European framework that supports students in these changing environments.

The Students’ Rights Charter is being developed to promote and protect key student rights, including non-discriminatory access to education, privacy, freedom of expression, and social support.

The Council of Europe set up a dedicated Working Group to guide this process, ensuring broad representation and expertise. In close co-operation with the European Students’ Union, the Charter will be shaped through an inclusive and participatory approach.

The work on the Council of Europe Students’ Rights Charter started in 2025 and will continue in 2026.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS 2025-2027



A new three-year programme on Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Recognition of Qualifications has been established, aimed at understanding and addressing the intersection of AI with higher education credential evaluation.

A new dedicated Working Group has been established to address how AI can support credential evaluation, expand access to education, and safeguard educational integrity while taking into account the values enshrined in the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and other relevant legal instruments.

The programme will equip stakeholders with tools and knowledge to integrate AI systems responsibly; set global standards for AI in qualification recognition aligned with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and foster collaboration across sectors to address the ethical, technical and social dimensions of AI in education.

This work started in autumn 2025 and will continue throughout 2026 and 2027.



PERSONAL NOTES



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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

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