

Communication Strategy to Raise Awareness of the Automatic Recognition of Foreign Education for Higher Education Institutions



**Project SeARcH ENGINE: Strengthening Educational and AwaReness Campaign in Automatic Recognition for Higher Education Institutions - ENGAGE / INFORM / IMPLEMENT;
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The SeARcH ENGINE project was coordinated by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic in cooperation with the Czech National Agency for International Education and Research. The international partners of the project were STICHTING NUFFIC – NARIC Netherlands, Associazione CIMEA – NARIC Italy and Akadēmiskās informācijas centrs – NARIC Latvia. The project ran from 2020–2022.

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Abbreviations

AdReN – Automatic Recognition in the Adriatic Region project

AR-NET – Automatic Recognition in the Networks project

AURBELL – Automatic Recognition between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania project

ENIC – European Network of Information Centres in the European Region

EEA – European Education Area

EHEA – European Higher Education Area

HEI – Higher Education Institution

I-AR project – Implementation of Automatic Recognition in the Networks project

MEYS – Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport of the Czech Republic

NARIC – National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union

PARADIGMS – New Paradigms in Recognition project

qENTRY+ – International Database on Higher Education Entry Qualifications

Content

The **mutual recognition of academic qualifications** between European countries is one of the main objectives of the European Council in the field of higher education. In an increasingly globalised world, it is important that students are able to make the best possible use of all learning opportunities across Europe. The mutual recognition of academic qualifications is a cornerstone in creating an open and easily accessible higher education area in Europe; essentially a free learning space without borders. Mutual recognition enables student and staff mobility and thus greatly enriches higher education in Europe and beyond.

The basis for recognition policies in Europe was laid in 1997 when the Council of Europe, in cooperation with UNESCO, published the **Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region**, better known as the **Lisbon Recognition Convention**. This Convention, which promotes the fair and reasonably fast recognition of academic qualifications for students and graduates, remains the main legal framework for the recognition of qualifications in Europe twenty-five years later.

The concept of **automatic recognition** was first introduced in the **Bucharest Communiqué of the European Higher Education Area Ministers of Education** in 2012. The Ministers committed themselves to the **long-term goal of the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees**.

In 2018 the **Council Recommendation on Promoting Automatic Mutual Recognition of Higher Education and Upper Secondary Education and Training Qualifications and the Outcomes of Learning Periods Abroad** was published. With the Council Recommendation, EU Member States make a political commitment to take steps to introduce automatic recognition by 2025. The improvement of procedures for the mutual recognition of qualifications in EU Member States is a key component of establishing the new European Education Area by 2025.

The **Report** of the **EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition** of 2015 and the more recent **European Higher Education Area in 2020: Bologna Process Implementation Report**, published in November 2020, sum this up as follows: *“Automatic recognition of a degree leads to the automatic right of an applicant holding a qualification of a certain level to be considered for entry to the labour market or a programme of further study in the next level in any other EHEA-country (access).”* The crucial word here is that the recognition provides **access**; it does not guarantee admission to a study programme or selection for a position on the labour market.

The **SeARcH ENGINE project** (the abbreviation stands for Strengthening Educational and AwaReness Campaign in Automatic Recognition for Higher Education Institutions – ENGAGE / INFORM / IMPLEMENT) ran between 2020 and 2022 with the goal of sharing experience and best practice in the application of the European instruments in the field of automatic recognition of secondary and higher education qualifications and results of learning periods abroad between NARIC centers, higher education institutions and other stakeholders.

The project was co-financed by the European Commission from the Erasmus+ KA3 programme. The participants in the projects were the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, which coordinated the project in cooperation with the Czech National Agency for International Education and Research, STICHTING NUFFIC – NARIC Netherlands, Associazione CIMEA – NARIC Italy and Akadēmiskās informācijas centrs – NARIC Latvia.

By organising seminars and training courses on methods and approaches to automatic recognition in secondary and higher education, the SeARcH ENGINE project contributed to the dissemination of the information and awareness campaign to strengthen the implementation of automatic recognition in the project countries and beyond. The automatic recognition concept was also promoted by videos and publications produced as outputs of the project.

Communication strategy

1. Overall communication objectives of the project

In addition to mutual trust in each other's education systems and their learning outcomes, successful communication is the main path towards the implementation of automatic recognition. The following text introduces the communication strategy of the SeARcH ENGINE project.

The chief goal of the project was to promote the concept of the automatic recognition in Europe. It aimed to create a peer-learning platform to exchange examples of best practice and information on the application of automatic recognition as well as to address concerns and respond to questions from credential evaluators and admissions officers in higher education institutions and other relevant parties in the field of academic recognition and, more specifically, automatic recognition itself.

2. Target audience

The target audience of the SeARcH ENGINE project were mainly members of staff of the recognition (and admission) offices in higher education institutions as well as at the Ministries, regional government offices and ENIC/NARIC centres. In addition to this, the project was also aimed at the students and graduates who would benefit from automatic recognition in the first place.

A video introducing the automatic recognition concept and describing the process of admission to HEIs based on the example of the Czech Republic was created as the main project output and was intended for students and graduates. The rest of the outputs (promotion video for recognition officers, webinars, the Guidelines and Communication Strategy brochures) was designed mostly for the use of staff working in recognition and admission.

The project as originally planned was to include several face-to-face meetings with its target audiences, which would enable better exchange of best practices and discussions. Ultimately, this was not possible as, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the originally planned seminars had to be changed into webinars. Each of the five webinars was attended by 80–130 online participants.

3. Key messages

The SeARCh ENGINE project's main aim was to *raise awareness* of the concept of the automatic recognition in the participating countries and Europe. As the title of the project suggests, the project was to *engage* and *inform* the relevant stakeholders and their staff as well as *implement* the automatic recognition procedure – or encourage them to take the first steps towards it.

The project and its outputs provided background information on European policies regarding automatic recognition, such as the EHEA Communiqués, starting with the Bucharest Communiqué of 2012, and the Recommendation of the Council of the EU of 2018, in which automatic recognition is stated as one of the main goals on the path towards a European Education Area in 2025.

Updates were given on the automatic recognition treaties that had been signed in the EHEA between the Benelux and Baltic states and information was shared about the requirements that must be met by other countries in order to join the treaties, if interested.

The project provided general information and background on the concept of automatic recognition. It summed up what the concept involved and which different types of automatic recognition already existed, and pointed out the advantages of AR, such as increased transparency, mutual trust and furthering of the creation of the EEA as well as the shorter recognition procedure at HEIs and ENIC-NARIC centres.

A further goal of the SeARCh ENGINE project was to identify any obstacles in the implementation of automatic recognition that are experienced by relevant parties, such as admission officers in higher education. For example, in the Baltic and Benelux regions, where the countries reached agreement on the mutual automatic recognition of qualifications and signed a Treaty in 2021, some HEIs are concerned that AR deprives them of their autonomy to admit students and feel that, based on the Treaty, they would be compelled to admit students whom they did not deem suitable, such as students with a professional bachelor's qualification who wished to be admitted to a master's research course.

SeARCh ENGINE also provided information about other projects in the field of automatic recognition, such as the PARADIGMS project, which produced the *A short path to automatic recognition – 4 models* brochure, and the AR-NET project with the publication *The Triangle of Automatic Recognition. Guidelines for the application of de facto automatic recognition*. Also worthy of note was the I-AR project (2020–2022), in which a chapter on automatic recognition will be written for inclusion in the EAR Manual, and qualification tables on system level will be drafted per country in the EHEA. Results of the qENTRY+ project are published in the *Automatic recognition in practice – examples and tools* booklet.

The project partners also committed to automatic recognition in projects that concentrated more on regional aspects, such as the AdReN project, which aspires to support the fulfilment of the objectives of the European Higher Education Area by implementing automatic recognition in the Adriatic region. Another Automatic Recognition project, this time addressing recognition between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania was called AURBELL (2014–2016).

4. Communication tools and methods

The SeARCh ENGINE project had numerous communications tools at its disposal. A project website was created as a subsection of the website of the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MEYS) (<https://www.msmt.cz/areas-of-work/tertiary-education/project-search-engine-strengthening-educational-and>). The web presentation includes basic information on the project as well as details of its outputs. These can be downloaded from the website.

During the project period several **webinars** were organised to promote the concept of automatic recognition and share best practice. In 2021 two webinars were offered to Czech audiences by MEYS, with contributions from the international partners of the project, universities, ENIC/NARIC centres and other relevant speakers. These were followed by regional webinars in all three other partner countries (the Netherlands, Italy and Latvia), at the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022. The recordings of the webinars organised by MEYS can be accessed through the project website.

The findings and recommendations of the SeARCh ENGINE project are summed up in the jointly created publication **Guidelines on the Automatic Recognition for Higher Education Institutions**. The brochure provides information on the background of the automatic recognition concept and the tools enabling it. It also shares examples of best practice, such as the Baltic–Benelux Treaty on the Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications and gives recommendations on the successful implementation of automatic recognition.

Two **promotional videos** were created as part of the SeARCh ENGINE project. One is aimed at recognition and admission officers, and the other at students who are planning to study abroad. The video for recognition and admission officers highlights the benefits of automatic recognition in comparison to the standard academic recognition procedure and later explains the evolution of the academic recognition processes in the EU. The next milestone in this process is the successful implementation of mutual automatic recognition in the whole of the European Educational Area by 2025.

The other video uses the Czech Republic as example to show how the students can apply for recognition of their previous academic qualifications – while also pointing out the benefits of the automatic recognition procedure.

The results of the project were also published in the relevant social media used by the project partners (Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook).

Information resources

EHEA – European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process (link: <http://www.ehea.info>)

EHEA Ministerial Declarations and Communiqués
(link: <http://www.ehea.info/page-ministerial-declarations-and-communiques>)

ENIC/NARIC network (link: <https://www.enic-naric.net/>)

ENIC/NARIC – Recognition tools and projects
(link: <https://www.enic-naric.net/page-recognition-tools-projects>)

European Commission – European Educational Area and Automatic Recognition
(link: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/automatic-recognition-of-qualifications>)

The Lisbon Recognition Convention or The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, 1997 (link: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treatynum=165>)

SeARcH ENGINE project (link: <https://www.msmt.cz/areas-of-work/tertiary-education/project-search-engine-strengthening-educational-and>)

Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad (link: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32018H1210\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32018H1210(01)))

Project Partners

Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic (link: <https://www.msmt.cz/>)

STICHTING NUFFIC – NARIC Netherlands (link: <https://www.nuffic.nl/en>)

Associazione CIMEA – NARIC Italy (link: <https://www.cimea.it/EN/>)

Akadēmiskās informācijas centrs – NARIC Latvia (link: <https://aic.lv/>)

Czech National Agency for International Education and Research
(link: <https://www.dzs.cz/en>)