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COUNCIL OF RECTORS
OF LATVIA

Guidelines on improvement of course catalogues for the use in credential evaluation

2022

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The opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and should not be considered as representative of the European Commission's official position.

1 Full study and Comparative report available: <https://aic.lv/en/par-aic/projects/octra>

Abbreviations

AIC	Academic Information Centre (Latvia)
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
EHIS	Estonian Education Information System
ENIC	European National Information Centre
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher education institution
NACID	National Centre for Information and Documentation (Bulgaria)
NARIC	National Academic Recognition Information Centre
NQD	National qualifications database and register
NQF	National qualifications framework
OCTRA	Online course catalogues and databases for transparency and recognition
The Guide	ECTS User's Guide (2015)

Welcome to the OCTRA project

The **aim** of the Erasmus+ programme project “Online course catalogues and databases for transparency and recognition – OCTRA” (2020-2022) is to promote a dialogue between credential evaluators and HEIs and in doing so develop guidelines on improvement of course catalogues for the use in credential evaluation for all Bologna cycles (including short-cycle) or full higher education qualifications referenced to the EQF level 5/6-8 in the project partner countries.

The OCTRA project **partners** represent seven countries:

- Academic Information Centre – Latvian ENIC/NARIC (coordinator),
- National Centre for Information and Documentation – Bulgarian ENIC/NARIC,
- *Haridus- ja Noorteamet* – Estonian ENIC/NARIC,
- Agency of Science and Higher Education – Croatian ENIC/NARIC,
- *Narodowa Agencja Wymiany Akademickiej* – Polish ENIC/NARIC,
- Centre for Information and Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education – ENIC of Bosnia and Herzegovina,
- National Information Centre – Russian ENIC²,
- BA School of Business and Finance (Latvia),
- Council of Rectors of Latvia (Latvia).

One of the project activities was to elaborate guidelines for HEIs and competent bodies responsible for NQDs in order to foster transparency and comparability of study periods and qualifications across the borders. These guidelines were developed considering the following references:

- Results and conclusions of the study conducted during the OCTRA project;
- ECTS User’s Guide (2015)³;
- Council of Europe and UNESCO Revised Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications (2010)⁴;
- European Area for Recognition Manual (2012)⁵.

The OCTRA comparative study report is available on the project website⁶, and in the terms of the study, the project partners explored situation in their countries and prepared country reports. The country reports were prepared using the data collected through desk research of national legal framework and existing recommendations about online course catalogues; a survey of HEIs; in-depth case studies of selected online course catalogues; and interviews with credential evaluators.

The foci of OCTRA

The OCTRA project explored already existing publicly available online course catalogues in the project countries in the context of recognition of qualifications.

This project promotes dialogue with HEIs to improve their online course catalogues for the use of recognition of qualifications.

The project also analysed existing NQDs and other online information sources in the project partner countries from the perspective of credential evaluation.

2 The partner was suspended from the project after the invasion of Russian Federation in Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

3 ECTS users’ Guide (2015) // <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/da7467e6-8450-11e5-b8b7-01aa75ed71a1>

4 Revised Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications. Adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee at its fifth meeting, Sèvres. Strasbourg/Paris: 23.06.2010 // [https://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/FINAL_REVISSED_Recomm__for_Rec_Foreign_Qualif_29%2006%2010_\(PUBLISHED\)\(1\).pdf](https://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/FINAL_REVISSED_Recomm__for_Rec_Foreign_Qualif_29%2006%2010_(PUBLISHED)(1).pdf)

5 Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee and European Area for Recognition Manual (2012) // <http://ear.enic-naric.net/emanual>

6 AIC website. OCTRA project (2022) // <https://aic.lv/en/par-aic/projects/octra>

Main conclusions of the study

The OCTRA study included the following data collection methods in each of the seven project partner countries:

- Desk research about the national situation;
- Online survey of HEIs (in total 258 HEIs);
- In-depth case studies of online course catalogues (in total 28⁷ course catalogues);
- Non-structured interviews with ENIC and NARIC experts.

The gathered evidence allowed drawing the conclusions outlined below.

Exploring situation in the partner countries

The results presented in all the country reports show that legal framework in the partner countries, stipulating HEIs to elaborate publicly available course catalogues, is poorly developed. The OCTRA project did not explore the reasons why such legislation is poorly developed nor is there national level recommendations or guidelines. Important aspect in this context is keeping balance between national regulations and respecting autonomy of HEIs – although results of study suggest that HEIs need some guidance as regards elaboration of online course catalogues, this support should take into account autonomy of HEIs, but also address use of course catalogues for credential evaluation. The Guide is a useful tool considering the perspective of (prospective) students, less the document represents standpoint of credential evaluators.

Lack of national level guidelines or agreement on information layout has shown to create different approaches to information presentation and colourful design solutions for course catalogues that can and in some cases leads to inability to find necessary information in the course catalogue or HEI's website. The information provided in existing online course catalogues varies by individual HEIs, although core information on study programme or course is provided in almost all case studies analysed in the project. According to the results of survey of HEIs and in-depth case studies, the following elements of information are published online by most, but not all, HEIs:

- Title of the course,
- Short description of the course,
- ECTS (and other credits if they differ from ECTS),
- Learning outcomes,
- Field of study.

This core information is valued by credential evaluators, but the mentioned descriptions of qualifications do not cover all important aspects in recognition. The survey of HEIs showed that HEIs rarely publish information on external quality assurance and the legal status of the HEI. Almost no HEIs provide information on formal rights graduates are granted by successfully completing study programme or course. Providing information on external evaluation fosters transparency of issued credentials and promotes trust in HEI among the prospective students. Similarly, the information on formal rights provides perspective of lifelong learning pathways available in the country, hence, promoting international mobility and access to education.

The Guide provides description of the content of course catalogues, emphasising that course catalogues should be used by prospective students and students. Such approach is limiting and to some extent does not fully draw on potential of ECTS. The Guide focuses on finding and using education opportunities, less on recognition of awarded qualifications and mobility and transparency of issued credentials. These concepts and views are not mutually exclusive; in fact, this project has proven that they are mutually complimentary.

7 In addition, three course catalogues in Russia were analysed, since more specific data was not provided by the project partner, the data on Russia was not included in further analysis

The differences in the content of course catalogues could be explained by the evidence found in country reports – rather poor understanding of concept of course catalogue among HEIs may be observed, since no common definition or explanation is available. To promote the understanding of HEIs regarding course catalogues, OCTRA project working group proposed a definition of online course catalogue (see “Guidelines”).

The Guide provides insight into which elements should be included in course catalogues and points out that course catalogues “should be published on the institution’s website [...] so that all interested parties can easily access it”⁸. The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area in “Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance” under criteria “Learning resources and students support” subsection “Public Information” note that HEIs “should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible”⁹. Data collected in this project from the project partner countries point out that most HEIs already have online course catalogues, but there is still a small number of HEIs in the partner countries that has not elaborated online course catalogues¹⁰.

Data collected in the project highlights that in the opinion of credential evaluators course catalogues should follow several general principles:

1. Public availability,
2. Availability online,
3. Availability in commonly used language.

Although four of the project partners proposed making an agreement on a common template or layout, in practice a common template may be implemented only by HEIs that currently are developing or planning to design a course catalogue, while HEIs with already functional course catalogue may be reluctant to make additional investments. In the opinion of the project working group, a discussion on information that should be included in course catalogue should be arranged to improve existing course catalogues, as well as provide a guidance for HEIs that are elaborating publicly available course catalogues or to HEIs that plan to update or improve their course catalogues.

The use of language in course catalogues also is an issue that ought to be addressed. Both considering a unified terminology, as well as providing a translation into commonly used foreign language should be promoted. The application of various terminology within country leads to confusion and different interpretations. The aim of an international competitiveness of the EHEA started by Bologna Process¹¹ cannot be reached if a common language is not used. The recommendation to provide information in commonly used foreign language is also supported by the Guide: “The Course Catalogue should be published on the institution’s website, indicating the course/subject titles in the national language (or regional language, if relevant) and in English, so that all interested parties can easily access it.”¹² The language use is further emphasised by Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2022¹³ where providing an updated course catalogue for international students can be covered by an organisational support grant.

In general, the exercise of in-depth case studies of course catalogues may be very valuable because the analysis of particular examples revealed advantages and drawbacks of course catalogues that are already in use. The fiche elaborated during the project could be used by HEIs or other institutions wishing to conduct self-evaluation of their course catalogue or data sources.

8 ECTS users’ Guide (2015) // <https://op.europa.eu/lv/publication-detail/-/publication/da7467e6-8450-11e5-b8b7-01aa75ed71a1>

9 Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (2015) // https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf

10 The OCTRA comparative study report available on AIC website // <https://aic.lv/en/par-aic/projects/octra>

11 Bologna Process – Key documents // <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/bih-higher-education/bologna-process.html>

12 ECTS users’ Guide (2015) // <https://op.europa.eu/lv/publication-detail/-/publication/da7467e6-8450-11e5-b8b7-01aa75ed71a1>

13 Erasmus+ Programme Guide (2022) // <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/document/erasmus-programme-guide-2022>

Information valued by ENIC and NARIC experts

Several key elements were identified during the non-structured interviews with national ENIC/NARIC experts in each project partner country¹⁴ that would foster a better understanding and the use of course catalogues in credential evaluation. The main conclusion drawn was the necessity to create an open and ongoing dialogue between HEIs and national ENIC/NARIC office, which would be valuable for both sides. By having a strong dialogue, common terminology may be established and understanding of concept of a course catalogue and its role in promoting transparency of the issued qualifications may be ensured.

The list of aspects of qualifications submitted for evaluation, which are considered by ENIC and NARIC centre experts, was prepared in the OCTRA project. This list was compared to the list of elements compiled using various sources, i.e. results of previous projects managed by the project coordinator (AIC), based on Council of Europe and UNESCO Revised Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications (2010)¹⁵ and European Area for Recognition Manual (2012)¹⁶. Ten elements, which overlapped in both lists, as well as full title of the qualification, are suggested to be included in all online course catalogues for them to foster mobility and transparency of qualifications for credential evaluation (see “Guidelines”).

Five elements of information were proposed as optional for the inclusion in course catalogues:

1. Learning outcomes;
2. Grading system;
3. Education documents issued to graduates;
4. Form of studies;
5. Detailed information on awarding institution (historic information).

Both lists indicate that quite many aspects of qualification are not commonly described in existing online course catalogues explored in the OCTRA project, which hinders the use of course catalogues as reliable source of information in credential evaluation.

National qualifications databases and registers

Functional NQDs have been launched only in three project partner countries – Croatia, Latvia, and Poland. The country reports point out that the use and purpose of NQDs are different, as NQDs have different legal status. The status of databases is different, yet at core they collect and provide information on available formal education qualifications, but data on separate courses or modules is not collected.

14 The OCTRA comparative study report available on AIC website // <https://aic.lv/en/par-aic/projects/octra>

15 Revised Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications. Adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee at its fifth meeting, Sèvres. Strasbourg/Paris: 23.06.2010 // [https://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/FINAL_REVISED_Recomm__for_Rec_Foreign_Qualif_29%2006%2010_\(PUBLISHED\)\(1\).pdf](https://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/FINAL_REVISED_Recomm__for_Rec_Foreign_Qualif_29%2006%2010_(PUBLISHED)(1).pdf)

16 Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee and European Area for Recognition Manual (2012) // <http://ear.enic-naric.net/emanual>

NQDs and other national information sources in the project partner countries

Country	NQD	Alternative information sources
BiH	n.a.	n.a.
BG	n.a.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Register of Qualifications (NRQ)¹⁷ –substantial data granularity, not available publicly. Various national registers, such as: The Register of Higher Education Institutions, maintained by NACID with level of description all individually approved HE programmes ¹⁸ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bulgarian University Ranking System¹⁹
HR	Croatian Qualifications Framework Register ²⁰	The Directory of Study Programmes ²¹
EE	n.a.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Estonian Education Information System (EHIS)²² that is regulated by the Government of Estonia The Study Information System (ÕIS²³ (older) and TAHVEL²⁴ (new))
LV	Latvian Qualifications Database ²⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Education Information System (NEIS)²⁶ maintained by the Ministry of Education and Science E-platform²⁷ maintained by Quality Agency for Higher Education
PL	Integrated Qualification Register ²⁸	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RAD-on²⁹ (Reports, Analyses and Data On Higher Education and Science in Poland) Public Information Bulletin³⁰

In all the project countries, alternative information sources on higher education programmes were identified. In rare cases information on separate study courses is included in these registers or databases.

17 No link is available, as the database is not publicly available.

18 <https://rvu.nacid.bg/HomeEn/IndexEn>

19 <https://rsvu.mon.bg>

20 <https://hko.srce.hr/registar/>; <https://hko.srce.hr/registar/standardi>

21 <https://mozvag.srce.hr/preglednik/?lang=en>

22 <http://www.ehis.ee>

23 <https://ois2.ut.ee/#/dashboard>; <https://www.ois.ee>

24 <https://tahvel.edu.ee>

25 <https://www.latvijaskvalifikacijas.lv/en>

26 <https://www.viis.gov.lv>

27 <https://eplatforma.aika.lv>

28 <https://kwalifikacje.gov.pl/en>

29 <https://radon.nauka.gov.pl/dane>

30 <https://www.gov.pl/bip>

Guidelines

Based on the conclusions of the studies conducted in all the partner countries, the project working group prepared a set of guidelines about online course catalogues that would make them more valuable for credential evaluators. These guidelines are targeted for the use of HEIs and institutions maintaining national online information sources on Bologna cycle qualifications.

The information concerning course catalogues provided in the Guide is more focused on students and does not show how transparency and mobility of qualifications involve credential evaluation. Understanding the content of qualification is needed not only to select study programme for further learning, but also understanding the content of qualification is important, perhaps even more, after receiving a credential after graduation. Qualifications are valuable in education and labour market if they may be recognised. Thus, ensuring information on available and provided study programmes for the use of credential evaluators can benefit both HEIs and students, as issued credentials would be easier recognised and transferred.

Online course catalogues

In the context of the OCTRA project and credential evaluation, publishing information on the website should be understood as providing publicly accessible online information that can be used at any time by anyone (both students and credential evaluators). Therefore, OCTRA project working group proposes the following **definition**:

Online course catalogue is a publicly available data system developed and maintained by a higher education institution, which includes organised, detailed and descriptive information on the higher education institution and study components that form study programmes offered by the higher education institution.

Course catalogues may include information on various conceptual layers – institutional, study programme and course/module layer. The type and detail of provided information varies by the conceptual layers. These conceptual layers should be interlinked when possible.

Course catalogue for the purpose of credential evaluation should include at least these elements of information on study programmes to ensure transparency:

1. Full title of the awarded qualification.
2. Level of the study programme and the study course (Bologna cycle, NQF/EQF level).
3. Workload.
4. Nominal length of the full-time programme.
5. The composition of the study programme.
6. Profile – speciality or field of study.
7. General access requirement to the programme.
8. Graduation requirements.
9. Function of the qualification (formal rights the qualification gives to the holder for further studies and labour market).
10. The status of awarding institution and recognition of the awarding institution in home country.
11. Information on external quality assurance of institution and study programme and/or programme group.

Course catalogue for the purpose of credential evaluation should include at least these elements of information on study courses/modules to ensure transparency:

1. Title of the study course/module.
2. Level of the study course/module (Bologna cycle, NQF/EQF level).
3. Description of study course/module (including learning outcomes, recommended literature).
4. Workload.
5. Course/module design.
6. Profile – speciality or field of study.
7. Course prerequisites.
8. Evaluation and assessment.
9. Function of study course/module (formal rights the study course/module gives to the holder for further studies and labour market).

National guidelines or recommendations should be provided by a competent institution for HEIs on the development of course catalogues – layout, content and template. The project working group proposes for countries adopting the OCTRA project guidelines to the national requirements and context, which would promote international comparability of qualifications.

Providing information is only the first step, there are several questions to be considered when developing a course catalogue:

- Can the information be found?
- Can the information in terms of terminology be understood nationally?
- Can the information in terms of terminology be understood internationally?

The OCTRA project working group recommends that course catalogues should:

- be easy to find on HEIs main website,
- be easy to navigate (interlinked),
- provide information in commonly used terminology,
- available in commonly used international language.

The HEIs or other institutions wishing to improve their course catalogues or information sources could take **several steps**:

1. Self-evaluation of the course catalogue – the information or aspects (layout, design, language) that are important for the staff of HEI or are required by law/recommendations should be considered publishing in the course catalogue. HEI may create a checklist including essential features of course catalogue and then conduct an in-depth study of the existing database. OCTRA project team proposes to refer to the fiche elaborated during the project (see Annex 1).
2. Users' survey – understanding the needs of users and the purpose of database is crucial to make the source "user-friendly"; HEIs may develop a short online questionnaire (posted on their course catalogue or website) to gather opinion of frequent users. HEIs may also use the questionnaire or topics included in the OCTRA report for this exercise (see Annex 2).
3. Analysis of gathered data.
4. Practical measures to improve the course catalogue.

Proposals regarding ECTS User's Guide

The OCTRA project working group suggests – the Guide should explicitly show that course catalogues are fully publicly available and online.

Online information sources and NQDs

NQDs are examples of good practices of comparing qualifications; therefore, countries, which have not developed such national data sources, are encouraged to consider possibility to develop new database or revise existing data sources.

Although no universal recommendations were found for the improvement of NQDs in the project, list of information valued by credential evaluators was prepared. The information (listed above in the definition) could also be considered as the minimal data to be provided on qualifications for NQDs to be successfully used by credential evaluators.

For a NQD to become a platform providing wide information for the use of credential evaluators, the following other aspects should be considered to be included:

- education system in the country,
- external quality assurance practices in the country,
- correlation of NQF with EQF and Bologna cycles,
- transference system of national credits to ECTS,
- links and description of reliable national information sources on HE;
- glossary of frequently used terms on a national level.

The NQDs and other sources in a country should apply principle of consistency as regards terminology in English (as a foreign language) for both the titles of fields (grid of information) and their content.

Annex 1. Fiche of course catalogues

Higher education institution: _____

Study programme: _____

General information on course catalogue

Evaluation of course catalogues		Yes / No	Description
Overall availability of information	Information is presented with links and additional information is easily accessible		
	Information is presented and some additional information is provided		
	Only title and short description of the course is available		
Course catalogue can be found	Link available on main page		
	Links available on faculty/ study field page		
	Links are hard to find		
Languages	National language		
	English		
	Other		

Information on institution

Content	Yes / No	Description
Name and address		
List of programmes offered		
Admission requirements, including language requirements, and registration procedures		
Arrangement of validation of prior learning (formal, informal and non-formal), and credit transfer		
Arrangements for available academic guidance		
Practical information for incoming mobile students		
Other		

Information on study programmes / study fields

Content	Yes / No	Description
Qualification awarded (and professional qualification if applies)		
Workload in ECTS / other credit points		
Level of qualification (NQF, EQF or/and Bologna cycle)		
Field(s) of study (main field)		
Type of study (academic or professional study programme)		
Quality assurance or accreditation		
Admission requirements		
Information on validation of prior learning		
Graduation requirements		
Learning outcomes		
Matrix of learning outcomes		
Programme structure diagram with credits (ECTS or other)		
List of compulsory courses		
Mode of study (full-time/part time/e-learning etc.)		
Mode of teaching		
Examination regulations and grading scale		
Obligatory or optional mobility windows		
Obligatory or optional course windows		
Work placement(s)		
Work-based learning		
Programme coordinator (name, contact information)		
Occupational profiles of graduates		
Length of study programme (minimum time required to receive qualification)		
Other...		

Information on study courses

Content	Yes / No	Description
Course title		
Study programme the course is included		
Field(s) of study (area/branch)		
Level of programme (Bologna cycle or EQF level)		
Workload in ECTS or other credits		
Language of instruction		
Aim of the course		
Course contents (description)		
Learning outcomes		
Requirements to pass the course (tests, essays, attendance etc.)		
Assessment methods		
Assessment criteria		
Includes information on validation of prior learning		
Course interconnectivity (information on other courses that further explore the same route of study/ speciality)		
Visibility of course interconnectivity (information on study programmes that can include particular course)		
Other		

Other information

Other important elements for recognition (if any)	Description

Annex 2. Questionnaire of users

This questionnaire was designed in terms of Erasmus+ project “Online course catalogues and databases for transparency and recognition” (2020-2022) to support higher education institutions and other institutions developing and/or maintaining course catalogues for them to explore the needs of users.

1. What is your role?
 - a. Student
 - b. Potential student
 - c. Teaching staff of HEI
 - d. Administrative staff of HEI
 - e. Credential evaluator
 - f. Other. Please specify:
2. Why do you use this database/course catalogue?
 - a. Education opportunities (looking for a programme/course to apply)
 - b. Studies (looking for information necessary for my present studies)
 - c. Research
 - d. Other. Please specify:
3. How often do you use this database/course catalogue?
 - a. Every day
 - b. Every week
 - c. Every month
 - d. Few times a year
 - e. Once a year
4. Can you find the information you need on the database/course catalogue?
 - a. Yes
 - b. Sometimes
 - c. No
5. Please evaluate from 1-4 points (1 – strongly agree, 4 – strongly disagree) the following statements:
 - a. Information on the database/course catalogue is clear
 - b. Provided information on the database/course catalogue is consistent
 - c. Layout of database/course catalogue is visually attractive
 - d. The database/course catalogue is easy to navigate
 - e. The database/course catalogue is interlinked with other information sources
6. What aspects should be improved in the database/course catalogue?
7. What are the advantages of the database/course catalogue?

Online course catalogues and databases for transparency and recognition – OCTRA

