

# *MaxiPAC*

## *OUTCOME 1*

### *The MaxiPAC-procedure*

Summary Report Prepared for Collaborative Universities, Policy-makers, and other Experts  
on the MaxiPAC.eu Procedure to Maximize Previously Acquired Competences  
(Degrees and experiences) of Refugees and Third-Country National Students in European Higher  
Education

Project MaxiPAC.eu  
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## Acronyms

- EAC = elsewhere acquired competences
- EAQ = elsewhere acquired qualifications
- ENIC/NARIC = The use of the ENIC (European Network of Information Centres in the European Region) and NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union) in one term refers to the network of collaboration between the national information centres on academic recognition of qualifications of in total 55 countries. The national information centres operate under the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997).
- EHEA = European Higher Education Area
- EQS = European Qualification Scan
- HEI = Higher Education Institutions (Universities & Universities of Applied Sciences)
- IOM = International Organisation for Migration
- MaxiPAC = Maximizing Previously Acquired Competences
- RPL = Recognition of Prior Learning

## General Introduction

The MaxiPAC.eu project (Maximize Previously Acquired Competences at European Universities) started on 31st of December 2019 and concludes on 31st December 2022, with co-funding from the Erasmus+ Program of the European Union. Its target group, third country national student, persons in refugee-like situations, and persons coming from non-European countries who have acquired a skill, qualification, and do not have documentary evidence such as certificates for proving their previously acquired competences for various reasons. Its partner Universities include: The University of Lapland in Finland; EKKE (The National Centre for Social Research) in Greece; AEGEE (The European Student Organisation) in Belgium; the University of Bari Aldo Moro in Italy, and the project lead Thomas More University in Belgium. To achieve the goal of the project, partners took upon Outcomes 1-5:

1. Uniform Procedure to valorize previously acquired competencies (Thomas More Kempen - Belgium)
2. Modalities and organization aspects at the University (Bari Aldo Moro - Italy)
3. How to implement the procedure in Universities? (Thomas More Kempen - Belgium)
4. How to deal with languages? (University of Lapland - Finland)
5. E-learning support (EKKE - Greece)

On the legalities and rationale for addressing the above problem, the Bologna Declaration (1999) specifies that European Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences in Europe have the autonomy to valorize the qualifications and competencies acquired elsewhere according to their standards. Further, the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) did raise the need for EU countries to develop procedures to assess whether groups as refugees and displaced persons fulfill the relevant requirements for access to higher education and places of employment, even when the qualifications cannot be proven through documentary evidence. However, despite this autonomy, the targeted migrant group and those in refugee-like situations who travel to Europe continue to experience numerous challenges. In particular, where their previously acquired competencies are not recognized in Europe making them unable to work or study. Other barriers they face include inadequate access to e-services and language support services, among others. In some cases, dealing with University program requirements, learning procedures, and employment needs can be difficult, especially where information is made available in languages other than those of the target group.

To address the above challenges, MaxiPAC has developed a **procedure** with the following contents to make it easier for persons of the targeted migrant group to access higher education. The procedure also makes available, various steps that can be adapted to the overarching admission procedures for student enrolment in degree programs at European Universities. It takes into consideration, the following:

- **Structured scan:** A means to provide reliable information about the applicant's educational qualifications, work experience, and language skills. A scan that applies to all European higher education institutions upon taking.
- **Multiple short cases:** An initial and low-cost step to measure the feasibility of the student and the chosen program.
- **A portfolio:** This includes various forms of assessments offered to the applicant as the main step of the EAC procedure.
- **Psychosocial support:** Support provided to the student throughout the application process. Such support Integration training coordinated by the student services of the relevant higher education institution with other local services that can support the refugee Integration training. This step is rather a continuous process during the procedure.

## 1. Introduction Outcome 1

The MaxiPAC.eu project aims to streamline the validation of competencies acquired elsewhere for non-European immigrants between European HEI and to develop a procedure similar to that for higher education institutions within Europe. Thus, under this unified procedure, foreigners whose diplomas are not recognized can contact a college or university to conduct an evaluation and, if necessary, follow an appropriate program to valorize competencies acquired elsewhere (diploma, study tracks, work experience, etc.).

The Bologna Declaration (1999) gave HEI autonomy in the recognition of elsewhere acquired competences (EAC) according to each institution's own standards. The Lisbon Recognition Agreement (1997) states in Article 7 "the recognition of refugees' qualifications in the absence of complete documentation" that a method should be found to verify and recognize refugees' EAC in the absence of supporting documents.

Currently, however, refugees and third-country nationals seeking to qualify in higher education with EAC face a maze of information. Not that HEI would not like it, due to the fact that there is no structure or template available. Some HEI have their own successful initiatives, but these initiatives often involve temporary projects. Moreover, there is limited expertise on the subject among front-line workers. Nevertheless, these are the services that third-country nationals often go to first.

The main output of the MaxiPAC project is a procedure, known to all stakeholders, that HEI and colleges can follow when assessing non-European diplomas. They can also use this procedure to assess whether competences acquired elsewhere fit into a specific program as a path to degree equivalence. Under the procedure, a program can be drawn up detailing what additional courses, hearings, tasks or internships the foreign national can take to obtain recognition of his diploma. Once this diploma is recognized, the foreign national can look for a job that matches their acquired competencies. In this way, they are no longer a cost to the community, but an asset. The procedure is innovative because at present each European university has its own rules and most HEI have not even provided for a particular procedure.

In section 2 we define the target groups of this study, to elaborate under heading 3 on the specific needs and challenges of both target groups. The 4th section explains the actual MaxiPAC procedure which consists of four steps. These four steps are: (1) the European Qualification Scan; (2) Multiple short cases; (3) Portfolio, assessment and additional tests; (4) as continuously flanking step: psycho-social support. We end by providing policy recommendations (part 5).

## 2. Target groups

### 2.1 Definition of both target groups

We distinguish two target groups in this project:

1. Refugees and other third-country nationals are the actual target group facing problems arising from the lack of a uniform procedure for the recognition of qualifications and competencies that matches their concerns. From now on, we will speak of "refugees"; "third-country nationals"; "students with a migration background"; et al. A whole academic discussion could follow these definitions, but actually any word to designate this target group is inappropriate. As no single term is correct and each term can be seen as a container term or not. We thus prefer not to push one term forward. We deliberately use the terms interchangeably in order to not exclude or include people in a particular restrictive definition. MaxiPAC is aimed at all immigrants from non-EU countries: refugees, newcomers, people with permanent residence permits but also people without residence permits, etc. If we were to use one term, it would seem that we would want to exclude other immigrants. We know that using different terms can be somewhat confusing, but we hope by explicitly communicating this statement, the use of the terms interchangeably does not appear confusing.
2. Higher education institutions are likewise an important target group, since HEI are required by law to provide such a procedure. We will refer to "HEI" more often in this paper -as in the other papers of this project. By 'HEI' we mean both universities and universities of applied sciences. So we mean all of the HEI in European countries, i.e. countries part of the European Higher Education Area / Bologna process.

### 2.2 A closer look at both target groups

MaxiPAC-EU focuses on the situation of refugees and other third-country nationals who have acquired (certified) qualifications and competences outside the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), but have not had this qualification recognized by ENIC/NARIC of the EU Member State concerned and therefore choose to pursue higher education in the EU using a EAC procedure.

Regardless of their socio-economic situation in the country of origin and regardless of the reason they chose to migrate to the EU, these citizens are often in a precarious situation. Recognition of qualifications and competencies from higher education would remove barriers in the process of integration into Europe. On the other hand, recognition should not be granted lightly. MaxiPAC-EU advocates a standard procedure that combines a strict assessment of the applicant's qualifications and/or competencies with a genuine commitment to his or her situation.

Due to the fact there is no standard pathway at all, potential refugees and/or third-country students are now dependent on the discretionary application of higher education institutions and the scraps of information they manage to obtain. This leads to ambiguity, frustration and often too much longer and especially unnecessary waiting times. The development of a standard pathway for EAC and EAQ recognition for third-country nationals in higher education could be an important step in solving this problem. The fact that "refugees" are given such an important mention in the Lisbon Recognition

Agreement (1997) is testament to the fact that the problem has existed for more than 20 years. Since then, the urgency regarding refugees seems to have increased rather than decreased.

Let's take a closer look at both groups

1. Third-country nationals who hold a foreign higher education diploma and want to work in the EHEA must have their diploma recognized. Member States have national sections of ENIC/NARIC that can valorize these qualifications. We often see non-Europeans receiving the response that their degree is not recognized at the European level. As a result, these non-Europeans cannot work in accordance with their qualifications and often go to work as laborers or try to study further. When ENIC/NARIC does not recognize the diploma (e.g. incomplete pathway; problem with corresponding competencies; etc.) each university uses its own program or pathway, making third-country nationals feel arbitrarily treated and discriminated against. They are often sent from pillar to post and usually give up their desire to study. Most of the highly skilled third-country nationals end up in a social welfare system or as workers in the labor market.
2. The MAXIPAC project aims to streamline the validation of competencies and qualifications acquired elsewhere for refugees and other non-European immigrants at HEI and develop a procedure that is analogous for all colleges and HEI. Our starting point is the Bologna Declaration (1999), which gives higher education institutions the autonomy to determine which competencies acquired elsewhere (diplomas, work experience, course units taken, etc.) are valorized and in what way. The Bologna meeting was followed up by conferences in various places in Europe. Specially the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) set beacons for the fair treatment of third-country nationals. They emphasize quality care and a better flow of all sections of the population into HEI education. In this quest for accessibility, they also emphasize the fact that the government must remain the initiator of quality higher education at the service of the population. This project expands on this and seeks to ensure that HEI in Europe are more accessible to refugees and third-country nationals who have already completed a higher education pathway in their home countries.



### 3. RESEARCH INTO NEEDS OF THE TWO TARGET GROUPS

#### 3.1 *The need for a uniform procedure*

Just as migrants' skills are not perfectly translatable to the labor market in European countries, qualifications and competencies acquired elsewhere are often not easily translatable to the world of education. Human capital is not always fully transferable to another sociocultural context. Consequently, capital acquired in the country of origin often provides lower returns compared to capital acquired in the host country.

From the perspective of third-country nationals, too often they receive no or vague answer to their questions. In order to obtain the necessary information, they usually turn to different institutions. There is no clarity as to whom they should turn to for the right answer, often they receive different answers to the same question, which creates a lot of confusion. Moreover, each of these institutions has its own operation and agenda. As a result, third-country nationals do not receive streamlined, but rather stultified and sometimes contradictory information. They are also repeatedly sent from pillar to post, because the welfare workers in the front-line services have limited know-how.

Third-country nationals are not always presented with all options. For example, "studying" is often not discussed. When third-country nationals then come up with this option themselves, they are often not listened to. As part of a thorough "activation policy," institutions want third-country nationals to start working immediately. As a result, this target group often does not end up in the field they specialize in, but rather goes to work in blue-collar jobs. It feels like they are forced in a certain direction, such as into a bottleneck profession. There is a need for supervisors who look at all options with them and help them move forward step by step in the direction they want with a realistic view.

From the welfare workers' perspective, they try very hard to guide newcomers with an educational perspective well. Unfortunately, they are not given enough space to do that thoroughly because the government wants to focus mainly on the short-term labor market perspective. Social services in European countries, for example, focus on job guidance to reduce the payment of social benefits. Welfare workers are aware that this situation leads to a vicious cycle of precarious employment and poverty.

Because the language spoken in the specific European host country is often not the mother tongue of third-country nationals, their other competencies are also sometimes downgraded. When recognition of a diploma is delayed, institutions in Europe tend to label third-country nationals as "low-skilled," with all the consequences this has for their future in the labor market.

But there is more however, there is no uniform procedure and that prevents front-line workers from giving adequate information to third-country nationals. For example, it is difficult to find clear and up-to-date information on refugee contact points at most European HEI.

Some HEI in Europe use exploratory interviews and/or assessments when files are incomplete. That procedure seems to work well, but could be professionalized and used much more often than it is now.

Refugees wishing to begin higher education studies must bridge the gap between their previous studies and the competencies set as admission requirements for their new studies: from brushing up on certain





things to acquiring new competencies. If refugees have completed studies in more than one country before arriving in a European country, the procedure for recognition may become more complicated because information is needed from several countries.

A more uniform procedure on a European scale would go a long way toward making higher education more accessible. Lack of evidence of EAC can be a major stumbling block to recognition of qualifications. A large proportion of third-country nationals have fled war or other pressing reasons and therefore often do not carry all the necessary documents. Requesting the missing documentation from higher education institutions in their country of origin can be problematic (for example, if the university was destroyed in the war), which can complicate and delay the procedure.

Despite the content of the "Lisbon Recognition Convention"(2012) - which states that people without documents should receive a fair assessment - there are currently no procedures for people without any documentation of their education. A relatively simple assessment, possibly combined with some exams, could do a lot for this target group.

It belongs to the autonomy of higher education institutions to draw up their policy in this regard. Another example concerns access to higher education if a diploma can be presented. Suppose a Syrian refugee has a bachelor's degree in education. ENIC/NARIC can investigate and then decide that the level of the diploma is recognized as a bachelor regardless of the discipline in which it was obtained. However if they want to continue studying for a master's degree, it will be the higher education institution in question that decides whether, for example, they should take a gap year before starting a persons master's degree or not, which course units they should take and which they should not, etc.

In order to give talented highly educated third-country nationals the opportunity to study, some support is necessary. There is still far too little of that, with many of these people having to figure everything out for themselves and manage on their own throughout their studies. A limited number of higher education institutions are making efforts, but in general there is still a lot to do. Some HEI provide initiatives for third-country nationals such as mentoring, coaching, and leisure activities. Various forms of psychological support exist for refugee students. Some higher education institutions have projects to counter the lack of social networks among refugee students, such as buddy projects. Refugee students can sometimes receive financial support from social services or student services of higher education institutions, depending on their individual situation and the institution. This can range from scholarships, reduced registration fees to free accommodation. Nevertheless, it appears that financial barriers, inadequate cooperation with social services and the lack of a social network evaporate many chances of success.

Last but not least, language is a major stumbling block. Is obtaining the B2 level of the national language in Europe before starting studies a good methodology? There is also a call from the welfare field to develop actions that avoid having to go through a long language course first. People also learn the language at school, by going through higher education courses. Even students who supposedly study in their native language often have a way to go to master the academic language fluently. One learns by doing.

A limited number of higher education institutions organize preparatory courses, for refugees specifically or for newcomers in general. They combine an intensive language course to achieve a B2 level with special attention to academic language use, extra explanation of higher education admission requirements and attention to the study choice process. But regrettably demand far exceeds supply.



Often these courses are also pilot projects and usually depend on uncertain funds, making it difficult to develop them for the long term.

### 3.2 *Challenges encountered by refugee students in Europe*

- No standard procedure for refugee admission
- Overly complicated and poorly communicated admission
- Inflexible administrators regarding incomplete applications and missing documents
- Difficulty in assessing the quality of foreign education
- Most refugees do not even have background knowledge to complete their studies, let alone recognized learning experiences
- Even if additional prior education requirements or preparation programs are made mandatory, refugees may have to start from scratch
- Having to retake qualifications
- Large differences in the content of curricula and education systems that really do not justify the transfer of qualifications
- Language barriers
- Lack of time
- Difficulty getting used to academic requirements
- Insufficient financial resources
- Navigating complicated, poorly documented education and admissions systems.

### 3.3 *Needs of Higher Education Institutions in Europe*

- HEI should develop processes through which the background of applicants from refugee, migrant and disadvantaged groups in general, can be better considered in application and admissions
- Recognize the needs of special groups at an early stage to facilitate access to and integration into higher education
- Adopt positive discrimination as a justified policy to ensure that all prospective students receive equal educational opportunities
- Increase knowledge of different education systems to implement RPL appropriately.



### 3.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that there is a need for more uniformity in the pathway that third-country nationals must follow when enrolling in higher education.

It is not only important that a harmonized procedure be established, but equally important that third-country nationals be sufficiently informed about this and be given the proper support and guidance. For example, third-country nationals should be promptly informed as to how they can turn to for what. Finally, financial and social barriers such as registration fees for language classes or lack of information about student life, need also be removed.

In the complete absence of a standardized pathway, prospective students now rely on "hearsay" information and the discretionary knowledge and willingness of tutors from front-line services as well as higher education institutions. This leads to ambiguity, frustration and often too much longer and especially unnecessary delays and waiting lists. The development of a standard pathway for EAC recognition in higher education represents a major step in resolving this issue.

## 4. Procedure

### *Introduction*

MaxiPAC-EU proposes a uniform procedure to valorize previously acquired competencies of third-country nationals.

Most higher education institutions in the EU use similar steps, tools and resources in their EAC procedures for national applicants (the students of the country concerned), albeit not in the same way, which can lead to ambiguities and inequalities. In most cases, a EAC procedure will consist of at least the following two steps:

- A description of the applicant's situation, for example regarding educational and socioeconomic background, the motivation for starting the EAC procedure, a check of documents proving identity and qualifications, etc.
- A set of instruments to test and prove the applicant's knowledge, skills and experience in the field of study: cases, tests, assessments, portfolio, etc.

Directions for modifying the standard procedure to make it more suitable for refugees can be found in Article 7 of the Lisbon Recognition Agreement (1997) and in the Bologna Convention (1999), as mentioned above. MaxiPAC-EU makes the following changes:

- A structured scan that provides reliable information on the applicant's educational qualifications, work experience and language skills and, once taken, is applicable in all EHEA higher education institutions.
- A multiple short case step that precedes the actual EAC procedures as an initial and inexpensive step to measure the feasibility of the student and the chosen program.
- Only after these exploratory steps is a portfolio, often combined with various types of assessments, offered to the applicant as the main step of the EAC procedure.
- Psychosocial support is provided throughout the application process, integrating the student services of the relevant HEI with other local services that can support the refugee's integration process.

This has led to a MaxiPAC procedure in four steps, of which the last one is rather a continuous process during the procedure:

- Two preparatory steps
  - Step 1 European Qualification Scan
  - Step 2 Multiple short cases
- The core of the PAC-procedure
  - Step 3 Portfolio and assessments
- A continuously flanking step
  - Step 4 Support of the psycho-social context

#### 4.1 Step 1: European Qualifications Scan (Preparatory)

##### *Background and use*

Our project is based on the European qualification passport developed by NOKUT in Norway, yet make some important changes. The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT: this is the ENIC/NARIC agency in Norway) has developed a procedure for a "European refugee qualification passport", which assesses higher education qualifications based on available documentation and a structured interview. It also includes information on the applicant's work experience and language skills. The document provides reliable information for integration and progress towards employment and admission to further studies. It is an assessment scheme developed specifically for refugees, including those who cannot fully substantiate their qualifications.

It should be noted that across Europe only 375 procedures have taken place, with 298 passports issued. For now, therefore, this is a small initiative that is still in its "pioneering" phase. Plans to transfer the EQS to other centers in the ENIC/NARIC- network are effectively on hold.

Unlike NOKUT, MaxiPAC-EU uses the term "scan" rather than "passport." We believe that the use of the term "European qualification scan" emphasizes more the correct character of the document: it is a practice-oriented document that is mainly used unembellished, but has no official value in itself. It gives a good overview of the life cycle and in particular of the qualifications and competencies acquired by the third-country national. It is a particularly useful starting point, especially if the record can be passed from one institution of higher education to another or within an institution from one department to another. It prevents the third-country national from having to repeatedly tell their story and keep all the details about graduation, etc. fresh in their mind. The 'European Qualifications Scan' gives an instant overview of qualifications, competencies, language skills, residence status, etc. It thus greatly facilitates the intake for a higher education institution and also makes it easier to transfer the file from one department/educational institution to another.

Broadly speaking, the procedure for the European Qualification Scan is as follows:

1. Application for participation by the candidate, registering place of birth and crossing countries relevant with respect to EAC, language skills, etc.
2. Detailed description of educational background based on the EAC questionnaire and relevant documents
3. Review of available documentation
4. Structured interview with the participant aimed at a correct interpretation of the EAC questionnaire
5. Issue of the authorized EAC by the evaluator to the candidate

In the MaxiPAC-EU procedure, the EQS is the central part of the intake: the first contact between the candidate and the EQS Assessor. First, the EQS assessor will explain the four steps of the MaxiPAC procedure to ensure that the candidate has the correct information about all the steps. Then, the assessor will focus on the purpose of the EQS as an effective procedure to get a first impression of the candidate's identity, competencies and experiences. Since the candidate may be a refugee and may have had negative experiences with the authorities, building trust and reliability is essential in this first step.

Prior to the intake, the candidate will be asked to send the EAC form and copies of all available relevant documents.



The actual European qualification scan consists of five elements:

- Personal data
- Language skills
- Previously acquired qualifications
- Previously acquired competences
- Computer skills

During the intake, the dialogue on each of these five elements and the documents provided by the applicant will aim at a clear understanding of the applicant's situation from the point of view of access to higher education in Europe.

As far as possible, the self-questionnaires and interviews will be conducted in one of the applicant's languages. It is desirable that the "credential evaluators" themselves be sufficiently familiar with languages and education systems, sometimes even with the subject areas in the countries of origin concerned.

The dialogue on the EAC provides a very good and quite detailed background on the professional life and obligations of a third-country national.

As a result of this first step in the MaxiPAC-EU procedure, an authorized version of the candidate's EQS will be provided to the candidate by the evaluator. This authorized EQS provides refugees and other third-country nationals with at least two options:

- The candidate can more easily be referred to a targeted assessment. The content of the assessments themselves - at least as far as continuing studies are concerned - is determined by the educational counts.
- The recognized EAC must be accepted by all higher education institutions in the EHEA, so a candidate is no longer required to repeat the procedure when applying to another higher education institution in the EHEA.



*Template/Document European Qualification Scan*

## European Qualification Scan

### 1. Personal information

Surname:

Name:

Street:

Nr.:

Town:

Zip code:

Phone/Mobile:

E-mail:

Gender:

Date of birth:

Place of birth:

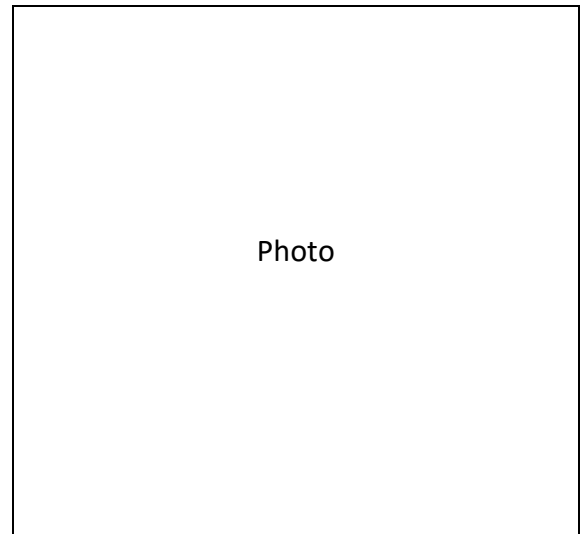
Country of birth:

Nationality:

Marital status:

Sequences of residences:

National registration number (if not available, other identification):





Status (according to Geneva convention): .....

➔ Preferably use one of the following:

- Unlimited right of residence
  - Recognized refugee
  - Subsidiary protection
  - protection for humanitarian reasons
  - stateless with right of residence
  
- In procedure -> stipulate which procedure:
  - Asylum seeker
  - Family reunion application
  - Stateless without right of residence
  
- Without legal residence
  
- Other: .....

Additional notes:

Date of Registration:

Date EQS awarded:





2. Additional information

Program of study/field of interest:

- 1) .....
- 2) .....
- 3) .....

Level of study you wish to apply for: Associate degree/ Bachelor degree/ Master degree/Doctoral degree

Preferably:.....

Otherwise:.....

Persons we can contact regarding your application:

Name	Phone/Mobile	E-mail	Relationship



### 3. Language skills

	Not	Insufficient	Sufficient	Moderate	Good	Very Good
Dutch	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
French	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
English	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other languages						

My level of the language of the receiving country (e.g. Dutch) is certificated as A1; A2; B1; B2; C1: .....

My level of English is certificated as A1; A2; B1; B2; C1: .....

My native language (C2) is .....

I master the following languages (not on the table) as well:.....



#### 4. Overview of Qualifications

##### Degrees

Country	Official diploma Degree Title	Name of educational institution	From .../... till .../...	Diploma obtained? Yes/No	Recognized by ENIC/NARIC- ENIC/NARIC/NARIC? Yes/No



Country	Official diploma Degree Title	Name of educational institution	From .../... till .../...	Diploma obtained? Yes/No	Recognized by ENIC/NARIC- ENIC/NARIC/NARIC? Yes/No

Decision by ENIC/NARIC -> remarks:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....



5. Overview of relevant experience

Work Experience

Country	Profession	Name and description of organization	From .../... till .../...	Work and Responsibilities (what did you do?)



## 6. Volunteering Experiences

Country	Description of skill/competency	From .../... till .../...	Describe where and how you acquired this competency



## 7. Computer Skills

	Yes	No
I can work adequately with MS Word	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can type in Word	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can make headings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can create an automatic table of contents	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can work adequately with PowerPoint	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can make a presentation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can format slides to my choice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can use animations in my presentation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I possess the basic skills for using e-mail	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can create and send an e-mail	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can answer an e-mail	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can add an attachment to my e-mail	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can work with Excel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can put information in the right frames	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can create a table	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can insert mathematical calculations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can work with a computer sufficiently for higher education	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think I need additional support in computer skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



#### 4.2 Step 2: Multiple Short Cases (Preparatory)

Multiple short cases consist of multiple short written cases in the program in question, i.e., the program for which the third-country national is applying for exemption or an abbreviated pathway.

The multiple short case step provides an orientation to determine whether continuation of the MaxiPAC procedure is appropriate. This involves asking three questions focusing on the third-country national's knowledge. If all three questions are answered correctly, it can be assumed that the third-country national can receive a package of exemptions based on his or her EAC. MaxiPAC-EU proposes a maximum of 2 pages for each question: this stage should be short and easy to assess, so that this stage of the procedure takes as little time as possible for both the third-country national and the higher education institution concerned.

However, these "multiple short cases" should be prepared for each program. They are obviously very program-related and thus should be prepared by the programs concerned themselves. They are preferably multiple-choice questions because they can be assessed quickly. In that case, of course, a program must have a battery of questions so that memorization of the correct answers is avoided. They may also be free answer questions, for example, if required by the specific nature of the program.



### 4.3 Step 3: Portfolio, assessment and additional tests

#### *Portfolio and additional tests*

If the third-country national wishes to continue the procedure, they put together a portfolio and, depending on the application file, are offered additional assessments.

This part of the procedure is somewhat similar to most existing EAC procedures used for EU nationals: a portfolio contains evidence and demonstrations of previously acquired competencies: the knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes that cannot be confirmed by a study certificate from a formal learning pathway. Although partially similar, the MaxiPAC procedure for refugees and other third-country nationals also includes qualifications acquired elsewhere (EAC). Consequently, the third-country national with one portfolio can submit both EAC for exemptions or to apply for an abbreviated learning pathway.

Before delving further into the specifics of the MaxiPAC portfolio, let us first highlight the differences from the existing EAC portfolio:

1. Previously acquired competencies and qualifications acquired elsewhere are combined and demonstrated in one portfolio.
2. Flexible interpretation is needed, as competency profiles vary widely worldwide
3. A portfolio written in a language other than the national one (e.g. English) can be accepted.
4. In addition to the supervising assessor, we advocate a "buddy" with higher education experience in the host country to assist in compiling the portfolio.

In addition to the portfolio, relevant competencies can be evaluated using an assessment center procedure: a number of tests, simulations, cases, interviews, etc. All competencies and qualifications brought in by the third-country national will eventually be recognized or not after going through the MaxiPAC procedure.

The MaxiPAC procedure compares the competencies of the third-country national with the domain-specific learning outcomes of the program in question and may lead to a go/no go decision and additional advice for the applicant. The granting of exemptions is entirely in the hands of the relevant HEI. Thus, that, for example, partial exemptions are granted may vary from institution to institution.

The refugee or third-country national puts together a portfolio with, for example, the following contents: experiences in organizations, known computer programs, a report from the former employer showing that the third-country national is competent in certain areas, courses taken, diplomas obtained elsewhere (whether or not recognized by ENIC/NARIC) or documents of degrees, etc.

All evidence in the portfolio will be sorted according to the required competencies of the program in question. Because competencies will likely be assessed against the standards and domain-specific learning outcomes of the program, this means that the Higher Education Institutions (HEI) will classify all documents and evidence according to that same structure.



Domain-specific learning outcomes are jointly determined by the HEI offering a particular program. The national accreditation organization (e.g. the NVAO in Flanders and the Netherlands) validates the learning outcomes established by the Council for HEI and Colleges or their representatives in an umbrella structure. All domain-specific learning outcomes are automatically ranked by level in the national qualification structure, included in the NVAO's qualifications database and published on the website of the Accreditation Body. In short, the competencies expected as a result of a completed program are reflected in the learning outcomes of that program.

It is not easy for third-country nationals to see the forest for the trees. Therefore, the MaxiPAC procedure suggests the involvement of trained assessors and buddies to coach the process of compiling the portfolio. More and more assessors working in HEIs are trained to help people with their demand for a EAC portfolio. We suggest additional training for some of these assessors to specifically assist refugees and third-country nationals in compiling their portfolio according to the standards of the HEI. An additional "buddy" can facilitate the refugee's integration process into the HEI community.

The full framework of learning outcomes of the chosen program of study is made available to the third-country national by the assessor concerned. The ultimate goal is to compare the third-country national's personal profile with the required learning outcomes framework. To begin with, the assessor's task is to check with the third-country national:

- Is the EAC procedure the most appropriate method?
- Has the candidate received a manual and portfolio assignment and explanation?
- For which program of study (e.g., thesis; major; etc.) will the candidate enroll?
- Are the candidate's competencies clearly formulated and related to course units?

In any case, the assessor explains the MaxiPAC procedure and helps determine whether a EAC procedure is possible. He provides information on all parts of the procedure, including admission tests if necessary, and gives advice on the composition of the portfolio.

The portfolio of third-country nationals consists of at least the following:

- The European qualification scan
- The results of the multiple short test
- Curriculum Vitae
- Supporting documents
- General consideration and interpretation of the supporting documents provided
- Personal statement of reasons
- Copy of identity document or Annexes 25 and 26 (asylum application) or formal registration certificate of admissibility of asylum application by the government

As soon as the portfolio has been created or in development, the assessor notes the questions and elements for which they wish an oral explanation. It is possible that the assessor determines that certain competencies can only be demonstrated through, for example, an additional skills test or a knowledge test, in which case the assessor will discuss this with the third party in a timely manner.

The following criteria are used in assessing evidence in a portfolio:

- The evidence must be authentic and reliable. If the evidence is prepared by a third party (as in the case of testimony or an evaluation of certain aspects of the candidate's work), it is important that the document is signed and stamped.
- The evidence must be clearly related to the competency the candidate wishes to demonstrate.



- The evidence must be sufficiently current.
- The evidence should show that sufficient time has been spent in the area of experience and should cover the breadth and depth of the required experience to make the scope of experience more concrete. A one-time "hit" is not quantitatively sufficient.
- Evidence should not come from only one side.

It is important that the evaluator work with the third-country national to carefully consider the learning outcomes (expected competencies) and how the third-country national can demonstrate mastery of them. Appendix 1 contains an example of this. If the third-country national has mastered certain competencies/learning outcomes but does not have sufficient evidence, the choice may be made to request additional examination, for example, a competency interview, a mastery test, a simulation assignment, a case study or a knowledge test.

By language, the following requirements generally apply: knowledge level B1 in the language in which the program is taught is required. We advocate knowledge level B1, although for the EAC procedure it is generally stated that B2 is required. However, many third-country nationals will not meet the B2 knowledge level, although they have previous academic training that allows them to quickly speak the academic language in another language. It should also be kept in mind that third-country nationals often come from afar in terms of language and often reach the B1 level in a few years. By "come from afar in terms of language" we mean: a completely different language family than the one in the host country, a different alphabet, different sentence structures, and so on.

The level of language knowledge need not be taken into account if:

- can be shown that the third-country national has completed at least one academic year in secondary education using the local language;
- can be shown that the third-country national has obtained at least 30 credits for local (or e.g. English-language) program components in higher education.



A final report is made of the assessment and final decision, which is signed by all experts involved. In addition to naming the recognized competencies, there is a clear motivation for the unrecognized competencies. The final result is positive or negative.

The assessment committee hands the decision in writing and signed to the candidate. Appeals should be possible in the process after the decision is communicated to the candidate.

After the portfolio has been presented and the assessment has taken place, the final assessment is carried out by a team of experts (about three assessors) appointed by the institution. It is important that the final conclusion is made on the basis of predetermined criteria. The experts work independently of each other. At the end of the assessment, the experts discuss which competencies are recognized. In case of disagreement, the majority vote is decisive.

### *Go - No go with advice and timing*

After the assessment, the jury will hand over a final conclusion that clarifies which program components the student still needs to take and which program components the student is exempt from. This can range from still having to take a few courses to still having to take the entire program. In extremis, it is even possible for the student to be completely exempt from all tasks and thus receive the diploma based on the assessment.

In the end, the final result will be either positive ('Go') or negative ('No Go').

- 'Go': the portfolio shows that you are suitable to be admitted to the program in a shortened trajectory at our institution.
- 'No Go': the portfolio does not sufficiently demonstrate your suitability to be admitted to the program in a shortened trajectory at our institution.



#### 4.4 Step 4: Psycho-social support (a continuously flanking step)

Once the student knows which program components he/she still needs to take and which he/she is exempt from, he/she can start planning their studies. However, this is a very difficult task for a third-country national: on the one hand, the refugee/immigrant does not know the education system of the European country, and on the other hand, the person may have faced traumatizing experiences in the home country or during the trip to Europe.

Therefore, the MaxiPAC procedure explicitly takes into account the applicant's situation. This step "Psycho-social support" starts at the first contact and is present in all steps of the procedure. The following points are taken into account in terms of possibilities, limitations and potential solutions:

- Psycho-social context
- Medical situation
- Financial situation
- Housing situation
- Integration in culture and language
- Educational context

##### *Psycho-social context*

It is likely that the psychosocial context of a third-country national or refugee will be disrupted, at least temporarily. We suggest at least facilitating contact with a confidant within the Higher Education Institution and in their personal life (e.g., a buddy) to communicate about personal life issues. These may include concerns about family and friends at home, feelings of anxiety or loneliness, questions about integration into networks of students and other social contacts, access to social services, etc. The results of the European qualification scan, the first step of the MaxiPAC procedure, will be useful to assess the applicants' psychosocial situation and to establish contact with possible confidants in order to explore obstacles and find solutions to enable proper study.

##### *Medical situation*

Refugees and third-country nationals do not always find their way to health care, but may suffer from physical and/or mental conditions that require treatment. Guidance to and within health care can be offered by the MaxiPAC assessor/coach at the beginning or during the process. Working with a trained network of volunteer "buddies" can facilitate this process, build trust and provide comfort in difficult situations.

##### *Financial situation*

Refugees and third-country nationals may have their own income, or depend on social assistance. Taking into account the (high) cost of studying, it is important that all financial conditions are reflected in a realistic budget plan and that there is a clear commitment from all partners and social institutions involved. This means for the assessor - coach - buddy to reach out to the local network of social services and make clear agreements on facilitating access to higher education for immigrants from outside Europe who need help from these services.

### *Housing situation*

The same applies to the housing situation. The high cost of living in the EU can be problematic for any student, and that includes refugees and third-country nationals. The housing service of the HEI could reserve a specific and flexible or temporary housing offer for refugees and third-country nationals in urgent need of housing. Buddies can help with finding proper housing and other aspects of daily life.

### *Integration in culture and language*

The MaxiPAC online learning platform provides basic information and courses on the educational context and language requirements in participating European countries.

The impact of specific conditions for integration and enculturation for refugees with respect to work and education on the implementation of the MaxiPAC procedure within HEI will be examined for all MaxiPAC partner countries in Outcome 2, just as language requirements will be examined in Outcome 4.

Having friends, participating in social life, being connected within a network of people and organizations is a key to understanding the culture of the host country and provides an opportunity to learn the language in a more informal way. Since most Higher Education Institutions in the EU have strategies to build communities for ordinary students, we strongly recommend opening up and adapting these programs to refugees and other newcomers. A buddy can help connect with other social contacts, leisure activities and youth or adult organizations.

### *Educational context*

Since the MaxiPAC online learning platform provides basic information and courses on the educational context, a customized welcome for refugees and immigrants is needed to answer any questions and uncertainties in the applicant's mind.

The EQS provides information about an applicant's educational background, but there may still be doubts about time since the last school experience, or computer and language skills. As for all students, the type of exam and its difficulty is an ongoing concern. More than regular students, refugees and other third-country nationals will need very specific answers to questions about language requirements and internship opportunities in order to tailor the program's requirements to their current life circumstances. Sometimes adjustments to these requirements may be in order.

All (additional) costs should be clearly stated and communicated in advance. This may vary from institution to institution. We advocate free enrollment for refugees, with government intervention if necessary.



## 5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1. Policy Recommendations on the European level

The Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) is the main legal instrument for the recognition of qualifications in Europe for non-European citizens. It promotes fair recognition of academic qualifications for people educated outside Europe. The Council of Europe, in co-operation with UNESCO, drafted the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, more briefly referred to as the "Lisbon Recognition Convention" because it was adopted in Lisbon in 1997. This Convention is the main legal instrument on the recognition of qualifications in Europe. It has, to date, been ratified by more than 50 states.

The Bologna Declaration - the joint declaration of European ministers of education meeting in Bologna on June 19, 1999 - is the main guiding document of the Bologna process. It was adopted by the education ministers of 29 European countries at their meeting in Bologna in 1999. It proposed a European higher education area in which students and graduates could move freely between countries and previous qualifications in one country could be used as acceptable entry requirements for further study in another. The Bologna Declaration establishes a system of easily readable and comparable degrees across Europe: graduate, bachelor, master, etc.

Two bodies, the Committee of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region and the European Network of National Information Centers on Academic Mobility and Recognition (the ENIC/NARIC Network), are responsible for monitoring, promoting and facilitating the implementation of the Convention. The task of the Committee is to promote and monitor the application of the Convention. To this end, it may adopt, by majority vote of the Parties, recommendations, declarations, protocols and models of good practice to guide the competent authorities of the Parties. Before taking decisions, the Committee seeks the advice of the ENIC/NARIC Network. The ENIC/NARIC Network supports and assists the practical implementation of the Convention by the competent national authorities.

Despite all this regulation being sufficiently well known, it has remained mostly unapplied to this day.



We recommend that the European Commission, the Convention Committee and the ENIC/NARIC network take urgent action to revitalize the Lisbon Recognition Convention and ensure that the national European states who has signed the LRC make it possible for non-EU citizens to see their competencies acquired elsewhere valorized in Europe's higher education system. The MaxiPAC procedure is a tool that can be used deliberately and efficiently to this end.

## 5.2. Policy Recommendations on the national levels

National European member states who has signed the LRC should support implementation so that non-EU citizens (refugees, immigrants, etc.) have their diplomas and competences acquired elsewhere valorized in higher education. Governments and education ministers of the countries concerned must take action to this end. The MaxiPAC procedure is a feasible and well-thought-out procedure that is not too difficult to implement in Europe's higher education system. For the Lisbon Recognition Convention to be implemented, national states must produce and implement legislation. As mentioned, more than 50 states, including almost all European countries, have signed the Lisbon Recognition Convention. National legislation urgently needs to be produced for the Convention to take effect.

We also ask signatory states to allow a higher percentage of bachelor and master programs in English. In many member states, only a maximum of about 6% of undergraduate courses may be taught in English. This would be a step forward for the international mobility of European students and make it a lot easier for non-European citizens to complete their studies in Europe.

Finally, we would like to ask the national states in Europe to relax the language requirements for non-native students. Currently, a B2 language level is usually required as a minimum to enter higher education. This bar is high for non-native speakers. Many highly educated third-country nationals cannot valorize their completed study track because they do not have a sufficient command of the national language of a European country, even if their degree leads to a job in which the language is not important. We doubt that obtaining the B2 level before starting studies is a proper requirement. Rather, one learns the language by going through higher education courses.





### 5.3. Policy Recommendations on the level of the Higher Education Institutions

To the HEI we recommend -in accordance with the Bologna Declaration- to ensure that competences and diplomas acquired elsewhere are recognized through an adapted EAC procedure.

This should be organized (1) for students studying in their own country; (2) for international students coming from another country in Europe; (3) but also for international students coming from outside Europe.

For this last group of student-refugees from outside Europe, we would like to refer to the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) which received numerous additions as recently as 2017. This convention explicitly refers to refugees coming to Europe from non-European countries and stipulates that the EAC procedure should be accessible to them. Well, MaxiPAC uses the EAC procedure and provides an adapted framework for immigrants from non-European countries.

In conclusion, we urge HEI to inform themselves about the MaxiPAC procedure and implement it in their operation.



## 6. Conclusion

The MAXIPAC project aims to streamline the validation of competencies and qualifications acquired elsewhere for refugees and other non-European immigrants at HEI and has therefore developed a procedure that is analogous for all HEI. This initiative is fully in line with European legislation, which requires us to regulate refugees and third-country nationals with qualifications and competencies acquired elsewhere. Since countries signed and ratified the Bologna Declaration (1999) and the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997), we are obliged to have a method to examine and recognize refugees' EAC in the absence of full proof of documents.

In this project, we have designed a uniform procedure that can be used by HEI in Flanders without too much additional investment. For the design, we were informed by many EAC managers at HEI. The voice of refugees and third-country nationals also features extensively in the research through open interviews, semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, and so on.

The procedure consists of four steps:

1. The European refugee qualification scan is a document that assesses higher education qualifications based on available documentation and a structured interview. It also includes information on the applicant's work experience and language skills.
2. Multiple short cases consist of multiple short, written files in the program in question, i.e., the program for which the third-country national is applying for exemptions or a shortened pathway. We intend to use the "multiple short cases" as an orientation to determine whether the MaxiPAC process makes sense.
3. If the third-country national wishes to continue the procedure, they must compile a portfolio and, depending on the application file, will receive additional assessments. This procedure is somewhat similar to the existing EAC procedure for Belgian students, although there are important differences from the MaxiPAC procedure for third-country nationals. For example, with one portfolio, the third-country national can submit both EAC for exemptions or apply for a shortened program. Competencies are assessed against the standards of the program, the domain-specific learning outcomes of the program. Specifically, the third-party student must classify all documents and evidence (certificates of courses taken, diplomas obtained at a foreign university, reports from employers, etc.) according to this subdivision. The final result consists of a "Go" or "No go".
4. This fourth step is not a linear fourth step, but a flanking step that is followed from step 1 to the final recommendation and even to the end of studies. It involves - in addition to the purely cognitive competence assessment of the third-party student - taking into account and supporting the psycho-social context; the medical situation; the financial situation; the housing situation; integration in culture and language and educational context.



Consistent with the Bologna Declaration and Lisbon Recognition Convention signed and ratified by European countries, we enjoin Europe to take stricter action against European countries that are massively neglecting their mandate to implement EAC for non-European citizens. Signed and ratified European recommendations must be translated into national legislation or they will remain a dead letter. The national legislation of European countries must provide sufficient English-language training, this will benefit European academia and provide opportunities for refugees and third-country nationals to continue their studies in Europe. In parallel, the question must be asked whether it is necessary for every non-native student to master language level B2 of the relevant European national language in order to enter higher education in a European country. To the HEI located in Europe, we recommend - in accordance with the Bologna Declaration and the Lisbon Recognition Convention - to ensure that competencies and diplomas acquired elsewhere by refugees and third country nationals are recognized through the MaxiPAC procedure.