

## **Peer-review report of SKVC, Lithuanian NARIC**

Peer-reviewed by: CIMEA NARIC Italia

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### **Index of the report:**

1. Executive Summary
2. Preparatory phase
3. Site visit
4. Outcomes and action points
5. Response of the centre under review

### **Annexes:**

- a. Agenda of the site visit*
- b. CV's of staff members*
- c. Self-evaluation report*

## **1. Executive Summary**

*Briefly describe the focus and the main outcomes/recommendations of the peer-review visit here (app. 1 A4).*

During the site visit, which took place on 8 January 2016 in Vilnius, at the headquarters of SKVC, the panel review was acquainted with the history of the centre and its development over the years.

The site visit at the Lithuanian centre SKVC focused on the contents of the self-evaluation. The SKVC is a public and independent body that was founded by the Ministry of Education and Science and the good cooperation with the Ministry itself is at the basis of the work at the centre. The organisation is funded by the Lithuanian state budget and through local and European projects. The centre deals with recognition of foreign qualifications not only concerning higher education but also issues advices regarding the employment in Lithuania. In particular, SKVC is not a national contact point for professional recognition of regulated professions. SKVC issues recognition decisions for employment purposes of non-regulated professions or simply gives advices when employers wish to learn if potential applicants have the necessary level or education, or if their documents are not fraudulent.

The discussion with the staff who wrote the self-evaluation and the staff in charge of recognition targeted the topics that needed some additional explanation but also the education system in Lithuania in general. In particular the panel asked about the process of evaluation which is being gradually digitalised, but still mostly on paper, the use of originals of qualifications and the specificities of the evaluation of foreign qualifications

The visit also focused on the improvements the centre is carrying out with the aim of continue being in line with the LRC and provide fair recognition. In particular, SKVC has decided to develop an entirely on-line procedure for getting recognition and an on-line database containing useful information concerning foreign qualification evaluation. Concerning this development, the centre is putting a lot of efforts to digitalise everything related to evaluation of credentials, even if currently there is no possibility to apply on-line on the web site application forms are already available in national language and English. These forms can be filled and printed by applicants to start the recognition procedure. SKVC started also digitalising the archive of personal files, scanning original documents for the purposes of creating the database of samples of qualifications used in specific country profiles and how various originals are analysed according to security features. These country profiles are in Lithuanian and the users are both SKVC staff and staff of HEIs, who do recognition for their own purposes.

## **1. Preparatory phase**

### **1.1 Request ENIC-NARIC**

*Describe the initial request made by the ENIC-NARIC under review. Why did the centre under review request the site visit? Are there any areas of specific interest to the centre under review?*

The centre under review asked the site visit to put to the test the work that has been done in the last years in terms of recognition procedures. The SKVC centre was also interested in the chance to share good practices with other NARIC centres and in the possibility to learn from the experience of other centres. Get some feedbacks from the experts concerning the developments of the procedures is one of the main reasons the site visit was requested.

### **1.2 Constitution of the review panel**

*Describe:*

- *How was the panel constituted (process)?*
- *Did the panel meet the criteria of the protocol and how was this checked?*
- *What internal and external expertise was included and why?*

The review panel was constituted following the protocol of the SQUARE project.

The experts from CIMEA NARIC Italia (Ms. Vera Lucke and Ms. Silvia Bianco ) were chosen by the Head of the Italian centre and the local expert was proposed by the SKVC centre (Ms Raimonda Markevičienė from Vilnius University). With their experience as credential evaluators and in the field of higher education systems, the experts that were chosen met the criteria of the protocol. The external expertise, Raimonda Markevičienė, was chosen by the Lithuanian centre not only because of her experience in the field of international cooperation within Universities but also because of her knowledge of recognition practises and of the centre itself, being a national Bologna expert.

### **1.3 Submitted documents**

*What documents were submitted in preparation of the site visit? Was this in line with the protocol? What additional information was requested by the peer-review team (if any) following the preparatory meeting?*

The Lithuanian NARIC centre, SKVC, provided the Self-evaluation protocol where the work of the centre is explained in detail. Annexes to the several chapters were provided giving clear examples of their evaluation process. As a supplement, a SWOT analysis was made available.

The Agenda of the visit was provided together with the CV of the staff members involved in the preparation of the self-evaluation report and the staff members involved in the site visit.

#### **1.4 Objective and focus of the peer-review**

*What aspects, issues and questions did the peer-review team decide to focus on during the site visit and why? Please explain if this was in line with the request of the ENIC-NARIC under review.*

The panel review team focused on the self-evaluation report. The standards of the self-evaluation were discussed taking into account the shared good practises related to the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

The questions made by the panel review and discussed with the staff responsible for the self-evaluation protocol were related to a few subjects that needed more explanations. The recognition procedure itself was discussed and the panel review team was shown the steps of the procedure, having the possibility to meet all the staff of the centre and see the practical steps of the procedure.

The practical procedure is rather slow and time-consuming action. During the discussion, the credential evaluators underlined the intention of developing a completely on-line procedure in the near future and that is already on the way in order to ease the procedure. Some of the reasons of the process' length can be resumed as following: the procedure starts only when the application package is complete and from this moment takes one month and the list of documents needed is determined by the Government resolution. If the person sends in the diploma, but not the diploma supplement, the latter is requested. If there are mismatches in documentation, facts are verified with the person and authorities that issued documents. The centre takes actions and reasonable precautions to assure documents are not fraudulent and for that internal and external verification means are used.

The number of applications for academic recognition both from persons and HEIs are increasing and lately, employers became very active in seeking the centre's advice. In addition, SKVC is getting more requests for advice regarding a choice of institutions/programmes even before people embark on studies abroad or come to Lithuania.

Another focus of the discussion was the impossibility of getting recognition of a foreign qualification that does not have a correspondence in the local system. If there is not a corresponding match in Lithuanian education system, SKVC advices what the person can do further – like in case of short cycle qualifications the persons may apply for credit transfer and continue their studies at a chosen HEI. In other cases, when full recognition can not be issued, conditional recognition is given.

The panel review also asked more information concerning the recognition of doctoral programmes that is now performed by the Research Council of Lithuania and the SKVC is not in charge of it.

## **1.5 Selection of staff**

*Which staff was selected to be interviewed and why?*

The staff selected for the interview was the staff responsible for the self-evaluation with whom the review panel had the possibility to discuss in detail the work of the centre and the staff in charge of recognition.

Meeting the staff in charge of recognition gave the possibility to have a more complete overview of the work at the SKVC centre and to gather more details on the procedure of recognition carried out.

## **2 Site visit**

### **2.1 Programme of the site visit**

*Describe who was interviewed and the topics and issues raised during (each part of) the programme.*

During the meeting with the management of the centre the discussion focused on the development of the centre from its beginning going through the history and the changes it was involved in. The management underlined the important role of the good relation with the Ministry of Education, which gives the possibility to the centre to continue working and developing in order to be more and more in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the shared good practices. Another very important linkage is with local higher education institutions, to which SKVC provides methodological support so that the best recognition practice is observed and whom the Centre is obliged to oversee so that institutions make academic recognition decisions according to the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

The meeting with the staff responsible for the self-evaluation was focused on the practises of the centre such as the methods used in the evaluation of the qualifications, on the information used internally in the procedure and on the international cooperation of the centre through the projects SKVC has been involved and is involved at the moment.

The meeting with all the other members of the staff was useful in understanding the division of the work within the offices (each person deals with a specific region) and the actual and practical procedure of recognition.

The panel was shown some of the internal tools used for the evaluation of foreign qualification. The centre has developed an internal database that contains information on education systems thank to experience of the centre. The centre has also several tool that are used to verify the security features of the qualifications being examined (such as magnifiers, UV lights and Spectral luminescent magnifier connected to the computer with a special software allowing us to image and store data.

## **2.2 Deviations**

*Were there any deviations from the protocol or were there any deviations from the programme originally agreed upon? If yes, please explain.*

The only deviation of the original agenda was that the panel had to postpone its visit from November 2015 to January 2016.

## **3 Outcomes and action points**

### **3.1 Outcomes**

*Describe the main outcomes of the site visit.*

The members of the staff were well prepared on the issue of how the recognition process is carried out and the self-evaluation report. They gave all the necessary elements to understand how the centre works.

The centre is already working on the implementation of some of the topics we discussed such as the need for a less time-consuming procedure and the possibility to work on only on scans.

### **3.2 Action points**

*List the action points recommended to the centre under review.*

A few recommendations concerning the procedure of recognition:

- The procedure itself needs to be eased in order to minimize the time consuming. The entirely on-line procedure the centre is working on will be useful to achieve this change.
- As the staff told, the centre is no more keeping the originals of most of the cases. But still the originals of some cases, which are not clear and need more time to be evaluated, are kept in a safebox at the centre. Our recommendation is to not keep any original in the centre and just keep good quality photocopies of the qualifications being processed.
- As SKVC is in charge of recognition of higher education qualification, the review panel suggests that it should take in charge the recognition of Doctorate degrees thanks to the great experience of the centre in the field of recognition of foreign qualifications and membership in ENIC/NARIC networks. SKVC has competent staff, necessary resources, and experience of processing applications in great numbers. Lithuania as a country would benefit from consolidating academic recognition of qualifications in the hands of the national information centre, SKVC, both from local and international perspective with the aim of achieving higher quality of work and for the benefit of individuals as well as institutions.

#### 4 Response of the centre under review

*In this section the ENIC-NARIC centre under review has the opportunity to briefly respond to the report findings.*

SKVC is grateful for the opportunity to participate in the SQUARE project and learn through the voluntarily self-analysis and peer-review process of itself as an organisation, which was the first of this kind to us as ENIC/NARIC centre. We are thankful to the review panel for the visit paid, discussions held during it and the present report.

In particular, we were glad to learn in the oral feedback session that SKVC managed to be self-critical and the review panel agreed with our self-evaluation findings against SQUARE standards and guidelines as follows:

1. Procedures, Criteria and Quality Assurance – *substantial compliance*,
2. Applicant-centered Recognition – *full compliance*,
3. Quality, Legitimacy and Authenticity – *full compliance*,
4. Evaluation Tools and Resources – *substantial compliance*,
5. Transparency and Information Provision – *substantial compliance*,
6. (Inter)national Cooperation and Presentation – *full compliance*.

We are determined to further improve our work around the action points included in the SWOT analysis and following recommendations of the review panel.

SKVC is concerned about the applicant-centeredness already for some time, and this, among other includes shortening the application processing time. While Revised Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications<sup>1</sup> stipulates that applications should be processed as promptly as possible, and the time should not exceed 4 months, for many years it was established that SKVC processing time was 3 months. In 2012, we have made a major cut in the length of the procedure switching to maximum 1 month allocated for scrutiny and decision making on a file from the moment all required documentation is submitted. It is foreseen that once implemented, on-line applications will speed up the processing time even more. Notably, already now, in cases when SKVC is not taking legally binding decisions, but issues advice to authorised higher education institutions, recommendations are given within 5 working days if no further information gathering is needed.

During the site visit, SQUARE standard 3 on Quality, Legitimacy and Authenticity was discussed at length, especially requirements towards documents, to be submitted by applicants and usage of originals versus copies in our office. Legally binding decisions that we give, put huge responsibility on our shoulders among other to assure that reasonable measures were taken to guarantee decisions were based on authentic documents. As fixed in EAR Manual, in the recognition procedure, one of the first major steps is to certify the applicant's identity, and to make sure that documents provided are authentic. To quote further, in cases, when the internal verification turns up some irregularities and forgery may

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<sup>1</sup> adopted by the LRC Committee at its meeting in Riga (2004), revised in Sèvres (2010)

be suspected, applicants should be required to submit original documents for forensic examination. EAR Manual has it, that while certified photocopies of official documents are sufficient in most cases, the competent recognition authorities should be in a position to require original documents where this is considered necessary for the purpose of detecting or preventing the use of forged documents. SKVC follows these recommendations. Originals are requested in exceptional cases and from countries, where other verification methods appear to be not sufficient. Documents can be collected within a week, or in case of need, even sooner. Working with originals, among other, enables us to build the internal database of sample documents and develop such a tool as country profiles for usage of our own evaluation credentials and registered users within local higher education institutions.

As for all ENIC/NARIC centres, the context in which we operate being a public service organisation, our present mandate in academic recognition and the legally binding status of decisions are very important factors. SKVC operates in various capacities – as academic information centre, as evaluation body, as methodological centre, as the one in charge of oversight of quality of academic recognition done by authorized higher education institutions. There is a legal framework defined, however, it cannot be viewed as rigid and static; rather the opposite – methodologies and procedures are regularly revised to incorporate best practices in recognition, adjusted taking into account internal learning. We believe, that many international projects in which we actively participate, contribute both towards improvement of our own work and help advance the academic recognition field in general. Cooperation with fellow ENIC/NARIC centres and other stakeholders in higher education both at home and abroad are among our top priorities.

As covered during the site visit, the present set-up in Lithuania is such that responsibility to take recognition decisions regarding foreign qualifications of different sectors, including vocational education and training and doctoral education, falls on various organisations. This has impact on how the internal work is done and how applicants are served currently. Considering roles of ENIC/NARIC centres in other countries and approaches applied there, we believe there is room for improvement. SKVC already started discussions with both the Ministry of Education and Science and the Research Council of Lithuania regarding the future shape of the academic recognition system. SKVC is open to explore various possible routes with the ultimate aim of assuring recognition is implemented professionally and consistently.

[29 February 2016]