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Final dissemination webinar – ARENA project

Time: Wednesday, 04.05.2022 (12:00 – 15:00 CEST)

Place: Online meeting – Zoom Webinar

Participants: Silvia Bianco (CIMEA), Nana Kusuma (NUFFIC), Stefan Sant (MQRIC), Jon Vercellono (MQRIC), David Bonello (MQRIC), Bessy Athanasopoulou (D.O.A.T.A.P), Dominique Van der Velpen (NARIC-Vlaanderen), Kim Vanelderden (NARIC-Vlaanderen), Henriette Stoeber (European University Association), Martina Darmanin (European Students Union) – did not attend because of illness, Marina Malgina (Council of Europe), Ceren Genc (European Association for International Education)/(Utrecht University), Maria Drakaki (International Hellenic University), Josef Buttigieg (Malta College of Arts, Science & Technology), Roberta Zammit (Malta College of Arts, Science & Technology), Roberta Gatt (Malta College of Arts, Science & Technology), Adriana Bortolotti (University of Brescia), Helén Sophie Haugen (NOKUT), Einar Meier (NOKUT), Florian Gorqaj (NOKUT), Kristina Rognlien Aardal (NOKUT) and Hemin Jaff (student).

1. Welcome and introduction to the project (Florian Gorqaj and Helén Sophie Haugen)

- Florian Gorqaj (NOKUT) provides the participants with an overview of today's programme, and general housekeeping rules.
- Helén Sophie Haugen (NOKUT) presents NOKUT as the Norwegian ENIC-NARIC office for recognition of higher education and vocational education, as well as recognition of professional education such as teachers and kindergarten teachers under the EU Professional Qualifications Directive.
- Since 2013, NOKUT has offered an interview-based recognition procedure for persons without verifiable documentation, and this is the UVD-procedure. This procedure is mostly aimed at refugees and displaced persons and many of our current international projects stem from our experience running this scheme.
- This webinar is presented within the framework of the ARENA project, a third cycle Erasmus+ NARIC project, where NOKUT is the coordinator.
- ARENA is a cooperation between ENIC-NARICs, international organisations and higher education institutions from across Europe – working together towards enabling access to higher education for refugees, displaced persons, and persons in a refugee-like situation.
- The project has run from June 2020 and runs until the end of this month, in a special time for all of us in regards of COVID. In an international project where meetings face-to-face would have been the norm, we have been able to achieve good results despite having moved the project fully digitally.
- The goal of the project has been to provide access to further studies for refugees and to build sustainable procedures for refugees at higher education institutions. This has been achieved through several different activities in Greece, Malta, the Netherlands and Italy.
- In a time of international insecurity, this type of cooperation becomes even more important to pave the way for individuals who have migrated across borders.
- Finally, on behalf of NOKUT, I would like to thank all actors involved in this project and wish you a fruitful webinar.



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2. ARENA: Rationale, Expectations and Results & Implementation of the Plan and Outcomes of the Project (Einar Meier)

- Einar Meier (NOKUT) presents the previous Toolkit projects and the ongoing project. The ENIC-NARIC can be traced back to the Lisbon Recognition Convention, signed in 1997 and entering into force in 1999. This is the main legal instrument on the recognition of qualifications in Europe. It has been ratified by more than 50 states and in article VII of the convention “refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation who cannot adequately document the qualifications that they claim to hold are given the right to assessment of their qualifications when applying for admission to a study programme, or for the purpose of seeking employment.
- The latest monitoring report on the implementation of article VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention was published in 2019. 22 countries out of the 54 countries asked, documented that their national level procedures for the recognition of undocumented qualifications or that it is regulated by competent recognition authorities in their country.
- This is the third project in a series of Toolkit project that started in 2016 with the first project called Refugees and Recognition Toolkit. This first project was initiated in cooperation with several ENIC-NARIC centres, and the main result was the development of the Toolkit for Recognition of Refugees’ Qualifications.
- The second project, REACT, was initiated in 2018. In this project we cooperated with universities from five European countries in testing the Toolkit method as a platform for providing access for refugees with missing documentation into universities.
- The third project has run from 2020 to now and it is of course a very special period marked with COVID, but I am pleased to confirm that even though the project has been run fully digitally, we have still been able to complete the project and accomplish good results during the project.
- The ARENA project is a collaboration between ENIC-NARICs in Greece, Malta, the Netherlands, Belgium and Italy, higher education institutions and international organisations.
- The main goal of the project is to enhance the mobility, employability, and access to further studies for refugees, displaced persons, and persons in a refugee-like situation.
- Project activities have included testing the use of the Toolkit for Recognition of Refugees’ Qualifications for admission purposes in higher education institutions in Greece and Malta, in Italy the University of Brescia and the Italian ENIC-NARIC, CIMEA, have worked on establishing an admission pathway into the university for refugees who hold the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR), in the Netherlands NUFFIC, the Dutch ENIC-NARIC, and Utrecht University have explored how they can sustainably manage procedures that were put in place during the previous project. We have developed information resources: refugees country briefings, national seminars with the ministries in Greece and Malta to discuss the results of the testing, and a public dissemination webinar on the testing results that was held in January. This brings us to today’s webinar, the final project webinar, where we will hear more detailed about the results and the work in the project, and we will present the ARENA Pathway – developed as a practical tool in this project. We will also talk about our work on a new upcoming project application at the end.

3. Refugees Country Briefings (Kim Vaneldereren)

- Kim Vaneldereren (NARIC-Vlaanderen) presents the refugees country briefings developed in the ARENA project.



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- Output: development of five refugee country briefings; Yemen, Sudan, Palestine, Burundi and Rwanda.
- The country briefings were launched through a series of webinars.
- NARIC-Vlaanderen has been responsible for several country briefings in the three Toolkit projects and was responsible for Rwanda and Burundi in the ARENA project.
- The country briefings are recommendations for evaluating credentials by refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee like situation.
- The country briefings provide information on current situation, education (bodies), education chart, education system, grading system, information resources, recommendations and best practices, and existing best practices.
- The process of creating a country briefing: identifying key issues based on experience with the country, researching legislation and relevant publications, comparative analysis of findings and reference material, reaching out to colleagues within the ENIC-NARIC network and writing.

4. Admission Practices of Refugee Students – Examples of Pathways from Greece, Malta and the Netherlands with Higher Education Institutions and NARICs Involved in Testing of the Toolkit (Bessy Athanasopoulou, Maria Drakaki, Stefan Sant, Roberta Gatt, Nana Kusuma and Ceren Genc)

- Bessy Athanasopoulou (DOATAP) and Maria Drakaki (IHU) present the pathways taken in Greece towards refugees' admission to higher education, and the achievements, challenges and further possibilities.
- The roots of the participation in the ARENA project were DOATAP's participation in the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR) led by Council of Europe, and the University Center of International Programmes of Studies of IHU was approached by DOATAP as it had the knowledge of offering English taught programmes to foreigners.
- The University Center of International Programmes of Studies of IHU and DOATAP joined forces and successfully use the Toolkit for Recognition of Refugees' Qualifications to test a number of refugees holding no or insufficient official transcripts, as a supplement to ordinary admission procedures to master's degree study programmes, where two refugees admitted.
- DOATAP and IHU conducted a national seminar on the results of the testing.
- Testing process at IHU: 1. Recruitment of refugees: non-EQPR holders, EQPR holders and officially admitted IHU students in a simulation experiment, 2. Selection criteria, 3. Identified target group. Current situation: two refugee students have been admitted and are now attending classes in the Department of Science and Technology, UCIPS, IHU.
- Challenges: prospective candidates, if accepted, will be issued a Certificate of Attendance instead of a master's degree – a legislation issue, funding opportunities for prospective students, disseminating to the refugee community the information about admission to higher education, and language barrier at a bachelor level (very few bachelor's degree programmes are offered in English in Greek HEIs including IHU).
- Further actions: The HEI monitors the progress of the enrolled refugee students: if the students are successful and qualify for a Certificate of Attendance, it provides proof of concept for alternative pathways for admission of refugees in Greek (and other) HEIs, and the long-term, successful completion of studies for refugee students should ideally lead to policy changes.
- Stefan Sant (MQRIC), Roberta Gatt (MCAST) and Roberta Zammit (MCAST) present the admission practices of refugee students and giving examples of pathways from Malta with testing of the Toolkit.



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- The Toolkit has enhanced our means of inclusion at the College: The Toolkit is a practical way to evaluate the individual's knowledge and skills, and to offer the possibility for the individual to start at higher level courses; It offers the individual an opportunity to present and explain the knowledge, skills and competences acquired during earlier studies.
- Testing process at MCAST: firstly, communication with refugee Institutions was established: explaining the details of the project and how interested individuals could participate in this project. The refugee institution was asked to identify interested candidates. In parallel, the Toolkit was adapted into an all-inclusive form, which would serve different stages of the process: from initial screening to the interview, the initial assessment test, educational programme offer; and an initial assessment test in English Language and Mathematics was developed. Out of the interested candidates, 3 individuals participated in the initial interview. Prior to the interview, the CVs of these individuals were screened for any information needed for compiling a detailed profile of these individuals' education level and work experience. This information was then verified and updated accordingly during the interview. The interview served to identify the type and level of education of the individuals, and to assess the level of spoken English. The Toolkit was helpful as it provided basis for the interview and the initial assessment test. The interview also helped gaining a clearer picture on the experience of refugees, and better understanding of the drawbacks due to income and full-time jobs. Following the interview, candidates were asked to sit for an assessment test in English and Mathematics: this stage was a limitation since due to personal reasons candidates could not attend the assessment tests. Finalizing the testing process – based on the outcome of the interview and the assessment, the candidate would have been guided to the level of studies for which the candidate is deemed to have the required skills set to follow.
- Nana Kusuma (NUFFIC) and Ceren Genc (UU) present admission practices of refugee students with examples from the Netherlands.
- Indication of education level is given to applicants with no supporting documents available and includes information about the qualification and comparison with the Dutch system.
- Challenges: implementation is still too dependent on a few individuals, further embedding and dissemination of responsibilities is necessary, large number of international applications makes it challenging to implement personal approach, target group of refugee students is very diverse so it is difficult to develop right approaches, programmes they can apply for are very diverse with very different requirements and standards, and students without documents.
- How we tackle these challenges: 0 students recruited, we learned from our experience, dos and don'ts and communication is the key.
- International Student Admissions is in the center for dissemination of the toolkit.

5. The Admission Process – From a Student's Perspective (Hemin Jaff)

- Hemin Jaff (student at IHU) presents the admission process from a student's perspective.
- Hemin Jaff is a student in MA in Energy Building Design at IHU and holds a bachelor's degree from Salahaddin University – College of Engineering, Civil Engineering Department.
- From 2006-2018: accomplished various engineering works, from design, supervision, and implementation.
- Had to start from scratch when arriving in Greece in 2018 but participating in the ARENA project and going through the alternative admission process at IHU gave the possibility to continue with master's degree.
- IHU granted him a scholarship to study MA in Energy Building Design.



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6. EQPR Pathway for Admission to Further Studies (Silvia Bianco and Adriana Bortolotti)

- Silvia Bianco (CIMEA) and Adriana Bortolotti (UniBs) present EQPR Pathway for admission to further studies with examples from Italy.
- CIMEA, background and key actions: implementation of art. VII of the Lisbon Convention in the Italian Legislation. Launching of the National Coordination for the Evaluation of Refugee Qualifications (CNVQR) in Italy in 2016. Participation in Toolkit projects since 2016. Launching of the pilot project European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR) of which Italy has been part since 2017. Implementation of the EQPR project in Italy in 2018 with Italian HEIs hosting the EQPR evaluation sessions. Micro-credential on the EQPR methodology for Italian admission officers in 2021
- CIMEA, lessons learned: Recognition of qualifications held by refugees, even in case of partial or missing educational documentation, is possible. Tools and instruments are available and well tested: Toolkit for recognition of refugees' qualifications, European Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Refugee Country Briefings. But tools as such are not enough: cooperation at national and international level, capacity building and a community of practice are key to fully exploit their potentiality and to support the recognition process.
- UniBs and EQPR: 2019: two grant winners UniBs achieved EQPR during the fourth Italian EQPR session at Bari University and completed enrolment. 2020: fifth Italian EQPR session organised by UniBs (15 candidates, 13 EQPR issued and 1 grant winner UniBs).
- ARENA project as an opportunity for UniBs: to better UniBs procedures addressing refugees, to exchange experiences with ENIC-NARIC centres and European higher education institutions, and to improve personnel skills and knowledges about new pathways for refugees' inclusion in higher education.
- EQPR offers key information to verify refugees' qualifications compliance with the requirements approved by Italian Ministry of University and Research and University of Brescia academic board.
- Challenges at UniBs: candidates applying for admission in second cycle degrees (assessment to verify compliance of subject studied with new topics, final score, English language proficiency), candidates requesting previous exams recognition (syllabus missing) and candidates applying for benefits (final score missing).
- Non-standard procedures at UniBs: commissions -> evaluation of available documents -> interview-based assessment of knowledges and skills. EQPR added among documents submitted and assignment of medium final score.

7. ARENA Pathway: A Practical Tool and Training Programme for Admission of Refugee Students to Higher Education (Kristina Rognlien Aardal)

- The ARENA Pathway is a set of practical guidelines for higher education institutions who wish to set up admission pathways for refugees in higher education.
- The Pathway is available as a module, in order to make it an interactive learning platform.
- The ARENA Pathway has been developed as a result of the experiences from the project through the activities of: i) testing of the Toolkit for Recognition of Refugees' Qualifications, which was developed in the first Toolkit project. The Toolkit was in this project tested at Malta College of Arts, Science & Technology and International Hellenic University, ii) progress towards implementing sustainable procedures at Utrecht University in the Netherlands and iii) developing further procedure for holders of the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR) seeking to access further studies at the University of Brescia in Italy.



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- The Pathway includes five different steps; 1. Reaching out, 2. Mapping, 3. Toolkit, 4. Assess for admission and 5. Admission.
- There are different challenges that are faced when integrating refugees into higher education. The five steps of the Pathway are intended to help solving the challenges in a systematic way and to find a sustainable pathway for admission of refugees into your institution.
- The Pathway being a digital platform allows us to add, remove, improve layout, and maybe even establish a forum if needed for institutions to share their experiences and thereby help others. We see the need of a dynamic module that compiles of both formal methods that are tested and are being used, as well as shared experiences to create better awareness towards challenges and opportunities.
- The module is divided into two sections: the pathway with its five steps including Q&A in each step, plus a summary of the experiences from the project for the new institutions to learn from, and also to be aware of potential challenges at their own institutions and how to address them.
- The module is almost finished and will be published by the end of this month.
- The module is open for everyone and is free of charge, and you do not have to register or create an account.

8. Reflections and Commentaries from the Steering Group (Henriette Stoeber, Marina Malgina and Ceren Genc)

What do we do when crisis unfold – such as the war in Ukraine? How can this project contribute towards capacity building in similar crisis, and how can your institutions contribute towards our common goal of including refugees into higher education?

- Henriette Stoeber (EUA) presents the EUA, the European University Association, which is a membership association currently bringing together around 800 higher education institutions, national level rector's conferences and other stakeholders in higher education in the countries of the European higher education area.
- As an organisation we have two-fold activities: on one hand we represent universities towards a policy level and the other hand we do a lot of projects and connecting with our members on various themes, and one of these themes has been inclusion of refugee students and researchers at risk. Many of our member universities are actively supporting refugee students and they have been doing so since 2015.
- Many universities over the years were able to link activities of including refugee students to university strategies to their values and third mission.
- When we ask our members what challenges are faced when including refugees, the budget comes up, but what comes up even more often is recognition. This has been coming up in the last seven years, and recognition especially in the sense of the LRC article VII in terms of incomplete documentation for those with a refugee-like background.
- In light of the war in Ukraine and the terrible situation that the students face, fleeing with their families and arriving in Europe and trying to get into higher education. We know from before the war that the administrative documents in Ukrainian higher education institutions were paper based and not digital which perhaps even makes the situation more difficult than it would be in terms of digital documentation. Paper based universities have been destroyed or partially destroyed, or even if they were digitally based, documents and the universities at the moment cannot be reached.
- The tools and knowledge produced by the ARENA are even more important than ever, especially when it comes to the Toolkit and the passport discussed earlier.



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- I would like to congratulate all the participating partners in this project and the universities for successfully piloting and testing again and adapting the Toolkit and the tools that have been created in the previous projects.
- I think the prefect that was providing to the ARENA project is highly relevant for other higher education institutions that are trying to do the same. They show that indeed it might not be easy to recognise in the sense of article VII but it can be done.
 - I think important from today is that the knowledge that the ARENA project and other such projects have been producing over the years gets further disseminated and reaches universities that are newcomers to welcoming refugee students. This links back to the current situation and crisis in Ukraine, where universities in Eastern Europe neighbouring Ukraine who were not the most active in the last couple years when it comes to the inclusion of refugee students. There will be need for prior learning from capacity building and for exchanging information of good practices.
 - ARENA and the knowledge that you have gathered is not only relevant for other universities that would like to try the Toolkit but also relevant to the policy level in terms of article VII.
 - We see that the bordering countries of Ukraine have made or are in the process of making article VII possible and finally implementing what they had signed many years prior, and we hope that we can see results of this in the next monitoring report. The tools in ARENA will be useful in many countries that do not have procedures or legal framework in place for article VII. Of course, many universities are autonomous and can make their own decision when it comes to admissions and they often rely on their national ENIC-NARIC in the legal framework that they work in.
 - Marina Malgina (CoE) presents the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe in cooperation with UNESCO which drafted the Lisbon Recognition Convention. The focus on article VII came into forefront of the activities of credential evaluations in the time of previous refugees' crisis, the influx of refugees coming from Syria to Europe in 2015. By that time, not many countries were able to start using practical tools in order to support inclusion of refugees into higher education or label market, and in general providing the recognition opportunities for them. Since that time, we have seen huge improvement and the Toolkit projects have contributed to this by sharing experiences, cooperation, involving new partners and involving higher education institutions in a larger extent. It all helps us to ensure that the right to education which is in the European convention for human rights is respected, protected and fulfilled.
 - What can we do in our capacity to support the right for all people to participate in education? I hope that this project will be evolving and include new partners and universities. It is important to involve universities that were not included in tackling the refugee situation in 2016 and to involve the bordering countries. Involving authorities at national level and individual higher education institutions in order for them both to learn about the opportunities to involve refugees who is missing documentation into the study programmes and the label market. We also hope to include more professional credential evaluators who will be able to serve the EQPR project and to help refugees to get their qualifications evaluated.
 - Concrete measures undertaken by the Council of Europe: participation in the Refugee and Recognition Toolkit projects as member of the steering group and our leadership in the EQPR initiative.
 - Department of Education in the Council of Europe has prepared several tools in order to help refugees to get support from their respected national authorities in order to ease the situation for the refugees. The overview of these tools is available at the Department of Education's



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website, and one of the tools which is mentioned there is the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees.

- Ceren Genc (EAIE) presents the level of partnership. Networking, the basic level of partnership, exchanging information with each other. The activities that could be done for this common purpose: cooperation and sharing resources. We are now in the cooperation stage which means that using each other's capacity for enhancing a joint outcome.
- We saw that in this crisis, and we are still experiencing that, how fast we were to gather information and follow policies. The level of partnership (organisations, HEIs and ENIC-NARICs) are larger and more fruitful and we are working for a common goal.

9. Recognition and Admission of Refugee Students to Higher Education – how can these tools be helpful? (Marina Malgina, Einar Meier and Q&A)

- Marina Malgina (CoE) presents the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR) initiated by the Council of Europe in 2017.
- The idea was to test and see if it was possible to establish multinational cooperation tools – practical tool for implementation of Lisbon Recognition Convention Article VII, in order to support countries and HEIs who were not able to serve their population of refugees who might be missing their papers or who might not be able provide the documentation that credential evaluators need for the recognition process.
- Since 2017 this project has been established as a practical tool for implementation of LRC Article VII.
- The goal set in 2017: provide a tested system for future crisis. A European system, not the responsibility of the first reception countries alone and a methodology and format accepted throughout Europe. The goal set in 2017 has been successfully achieved.
- The objectives of the EQPR, the methodology and the format are achieved. The main goal of our activities in the EQPR which are admission to studies and work is achieved. This approach should be made known to more stakeholders, upscaled and adjusted to the situation which we tackle.
- The EQPR methodology is established now. Interviews are done by credential evaluators from two ENIC-NARIC offices where the result is the established format of presenting and describing the education in a standardised document.
- In the beginning of project, there were four countries participating in the project: Norway, Italy, Greece and the United Kingdom. Today there are 15 countries participating. We have also cooperated with HEIs and have very good experiences from Greece and Italy.
- The EQPR was one of the first measures which were put in place to tackle the situation with Syrian refugees in 2015 and 2016 and was then included as example of good practices alongside with the Toolkit project of the LRC.
- In 2020, the Rome Communiqué was endorsing the use of the EQPR in the respective 49 international contexts and the 49 ministers of education were welcoming the EQPR and stated that they are willing to support further broadening its use in their systems.
- We see that European Commission included the EQPR as one of the tools which can be implemented and used to support opportunities of Ukrainian refugees to participate in labour market and further studies.
- The Council of Europe has started certain numbers of actions to address the necessity of the situation we see now with the Ukrainian crisis. CoE is in dialogue with our partner countries and reaching out to the first-receiving countries which are still not partners of the project in order for them to be better informed by the potential of the participating of the EQPR initiative. By



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doing that, we are hoping to help them in their activities related to recognition of qualifications held by refugees.

- War in Ukraine and emergency measures: the most important thing is that we are here as a part of international community of credential evaluators to boost support for Ukrainian refugees. Either we are admissions offices, recognition professionals, international education professionals or employers, we have to find feasible ways to help refugees establish themselves in their new societies.
- CoE provides training on how to evaluate Ukrainian credentials for EQPR evaluators, colleagues from ENIC-NARIC network, novice evaluators and HEIs. CoE has already planned some onsite and online sessions in countries receiving refugees from Ukraine.
- CoE is planning awareness raising events in different national contexts in order to inform about the potential and use of the EQPR in different national contexts.
- Einar Meier (NOKUT) presents the fourth project in Toolkit series. The series of Toolkit projects coordinated by NOKUT and the EQPR coordinated by the Council of Europe are sister projects in a way, they are brought out of the same ideas and the same work that was done in 2015 and 2016 among several ENIC-NARIC offices. Throughout these projects we have sufficient proof concept that the admission of refugees with undocumented qualifications can be done through interview-based procedures through the EQPR and procedures used in the current project. We also see that there is still work to be done both at the institutional level and to ensure the sustainability of the results produced in these projects.
- A call has recently been launched by the European Union for funding for another round of projects aimed at the NARIC centres, and all the three Toolkit projects have been funded through the Erasmus+ program in this call. The deadline for application is in June, and we will be trying to bring onboard many of our previous partners but also to reach out to particularly countries bordering Ukraine.
- Central and Eastern Europe have not implemented as many procedures as in other countries. The lack of policies and procedures, both at institutional and national level, need to be addressed in the current situation.
- The main goals in the new project: implementation of sustainable procedures for recognition of refugee qualifications, to help increasing the number of students with missing or insufficient documentation admitted to HEIs and to enhance cooperation between the NARIC offices.
- Activities in the new project: facilitating capacity building and supervision for admission of refugees for NARICs and HEIs based on best practices from previous projects, establishing national recommendations on assessing qualifications after the supervision board (to fit the national context), and assessment of procedures.

10. Closing Remarks (Florian Gorqaj)

- Thank you all for attending the webinar.
- You can visit our website or if you have any questions, you can send us an email to *project-arena@nokut.no*