

## Málaga. Personal impressions of the Fourth Annual Groningen Declaration Network Meeting

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Many higher education professionals work on and read about international mobility, student exchange programs, and the internationalisation of higher education, but most often we are talking about such issues from a distance; we debate trends, present data and work according to set procedures within institutions. Members of the Groningen Declaration Network (GDN) are looking at internationalisation from another angle: what are the tools needed to enable this process in the modern age? The answer for this group: digital student data.

On 4-7 May, 84 participants from 24 countries – members of the GDN and newly introduced stakeholders – met for the Network's fourth annual conference in Málaga, Spain. Hosted by the University of Málaga in a breath-taking setting, the group brought energy and enthusiasm to what could be considered a rather routine, technical issue. Yet throughout this meeting, the human elements of curiosity, ambition, trust and communication were the drivers of every conversation about how and when digital student data could, and should, be used.

### Recognition of Academic Degrees

Not everyone is aware of what it takes to enable student mobility. The process involves the student (willingness / commitment), the institution at which the student is enrolled (secondary or post-secondary), the institution to which the student is heading, but also the employers or professional bodies of whichever country the student-turned-graduate will work: these bodies have to acknowledge the validity of the degree the student has earned. The process of validating a degree from another country or any higher education institution is called recognition.

Recognition is a particular area of expertise within the higher education sector, one that crosses into the sectors of labour and immigration, higher education accreditation and licensing, technical expertise and academic proficiency. Recognition of foreign-earned credits and degrees facilitates the global process of student mobility. This process is not automatic; it takes a great deal of effort on the part of many players and it affects many more than the individual student who studies abroad.

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### The Groningen Declaration

The Groningen Declaration was launched in Groningen, Netherlands on 16 April 2012. Starting with the eleven original signatories, the Declaration had been signed by 24 organisations by early 2015. In Málaga, sixteen new signatories joined the movement.

By signing the GD, organisations are pledging to aim for the establishment of a global area of convergence on digital student data depositories to make free movement of students and skilled workers a reality. They confirm they will pay due attention to privacy rights, identification, access, and forwarding/sharing of data, next to compatibility of systems and comparability of data. Signatories can include stakeholder groups such as education institutions, national ministries, employers and associations, as well as organisations that serve as depositories of digital student data.

The declaration is designed to focus on concrete tasks, including discussing the purpose, feasibility and cost-efficiency of worldwide exchange of digital student data; looking into ways to make systems more compatible, inter alia by looking into semantic interoperability; looking into ways to make data more easily comparable; and sharing or forwarding data through designated systems. The full text of the Groningen Declaration can be found [here](#).

### The Fourth Annual Meeting of the Groningen Declaration Network

The Network's main events are the annual meetings, hosted by one of the signatories each year. This May, the University of Málaga welcomed keynote speakers from the European Commission and the OECD and organised panel sessions for technicians and policy-influencers concerned with the tools and functionality of digital student data for mobility. All world regions were represented, with participants from Asia, Africa, Australia, Europe, North and South America.

In the course of discussions, it became clear that some countries are in a privileged position: where the political will to share data exists, the movement toward digital student data is not considered a threat to current funding structures or the balance of power.

At the forefront of nearly every session was concern for privacy requirements and the need for transparency, access and consent in the handling of student data.

### Takeaways from a Plenary Panel

As the final session of the first day, I moderated a plenary panel on "Digital Student Data and Automatic Recognition: Uneasy bedpartners? Or a match made in heaven?" While automatic recognition remains a highly charged debatable issue, the need for reliable digital student data

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depositories was met with widespread agreement.

In the course of the session, it became clear that terminology needs to be clear and appropriate to avoid mis-communication. As a newly-developed practice, digital student data has to be accessible to newcomers who are not familiar with the rapidly evolving jargon.

One of the panel speakers pointed to the importance of working to align standards within a framework, which the GDN provides, in order to achieve “interoperability”. This is an example of insider terminology that has to be explained to the newly initiated: the intention is that the different standards in different countries and institutions should be sufficiently aligned to allow for reliable, efficient transfer of data that complies with the minimum standards everywhere.

### Commitment and Engagement

The most notable element of the fourth annual GDN meeting was intangible but evident to everyone involved: the remarkable level of commitment and engagement demonstrated by all participants. While digital student data may not seem particularly enthralling to everyone, members of the GDN work in this area because, as one participant noted, “depositories have a real function to fulfil” and “we believe that depositories and the lifelong learning concept connect with immigration policies, employers, etc... the collection of data is first and fundamental.”

The GDN is growing: at the fourth annual meeting, a signing ceremony was held where 16 additional organisations became signatories of the Network, including Universities Australia; ARUCC, the Association of Registrars at Universities and Colleges in Canada; Academic Information Centre of Latvia/Latvian ENIC-NARIC; Groningen University, Stanford University, the University of Málaga, and the University of Texas at Austin; as well as the IERF, the International Educational Research Foundation.

While GDN events remain rather exclusive – participation is by invitation only – the intention is to expand as widely as possible while remaining functional, task-oriented and results-driven. The Network secretariat, based in Groningen, is attentive and responsive to inquiries for information and requests to participate in future events.

*For information, visit the GDN website.*