Please cite as: EUAA, '3.4.9. Quality assurance of first instance procedures and decisions' in *Asylum Report 2024*, Ιούνιος 2024.

3.4.9. Quality assurance of first instance procedures and decisions

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Providing procedural safeguards and an adequate reasoning in first instance decisions are guarantees of legal certainty to ensure that the standards provided in CEAS are respected by national authorities. In 2023, determining authorities followed up on lessons learned from past quality assessment initiatives, provided more training to staff and started new quality review processes for first instance procedures and decisions.

In several EU+ countries, such as Bulgaria, Denmark and Iceland, training efforts were vamped up to ensure the continued professional development of staff working in international protection, 438sometimes in line with the increase in the number of staff. Denmark provided for the first time an advanced course on interviewing techniques.

In Poland, asylum officials took part in about 50 workshops and training sessions on various topics, including courses in the EUAA Training Curriculum and EUAA tailor-made training. Asylum case officers and COI experts attended 10 workshops on the situation in different countries of origin, which were delivered by Polish experts. For newly-recruited staff, a special on-boarding programme was prepared and delivered.

In Finland, the Immigration Service commissioned an external audit of the application of its guidelines, which concluded that they comply with the law, but they are too open to interpretation.439The Dutch IND piloted additional quality checks on positive decisions.440 Furthermore, the Dutch IND published its second Performance Update and assessed it reached the limits of feasibility. Next to the high number of applications for international protection, applications increased from highly-skilled and labour migrants, as well as from international students. In addition, the decisions are required to be reasoned in a more detailed manner, and this requires extra time and care from staff. The update highlighted, for example, that the number of penalty cases were increasing for applications decided beyond the deadlines. The IND assessed that penalties did not contribute to faster decisions, as there was no lack of will from the organisation's side, but rather there was not enough capacity. In addition, processing default notices and appeals against late decisions also require time from staff.441

In Cyprus, the IPAC rejected complaints of alleged violations of the procedure by the Asylum Service when an EASO officer was involved in the procedure by providing a recommendation. The court stated that the provision of assistance and support to the Asylum Service by an EASO

officer in examining the application took place within the framework of existing national and European legislation, while the operational plan had already been signed and entered into force between EASO and Cyprus.

In Czechia, the Organisation for Aid to Refugees (OPU) welcomed the development by the Ombudsperson and the Ministry of the Interior of a new template for asylum decisions, announced in November 2023 and to be tested in the ensuing months.

In Norway, an independent investigation into the quality of the UDI's asylum interviews concluded that the interview model and quality were largely in compliance with recognised standards for investigative interview methods, while also recommending that the UDI should reduce variations in the conduct of interviews, update certain standards and guidelines for asylum interviews, and further investigate the role of the interpreter during the interview.442

Fundación Cepaim noted the lack of assessing individual circumstances in Spain when model decisions were used for applicants from countries with high arrivals, such as Colombia and Veneuzela. The NGO further added that there were deficiencies in notifying rejected applicants about negative decisions, as notifications were done without certification of delivery or to non-designated addresses, leading to missing the time limit to appeal.443The Asylum and Refugee Office (OAR) worked with UNHCR (in the regular framework of UNHCR's protection work and through a specific consultancy) to enhance the quality of the asylum procedure and to develop operating procedures to expedite decision-making for well-founded cases.

UNHCR urged the Luxembourgish government to establish a continuous quality control mechanism when assessing requests for international protection.444

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