European Commission | Once only technical system

Research

Benefits of the Once-Only Technical System for competent authorities

May 2026

Research set-up

Aggregated results from research on understanding the benefits of the Once-Only Technical System (OOTS) for public authorities

Summary

Between June and December 2025, the Directorate-General for Digital Services (DIGIT) of the European Commission conducted a series of interviews with representatives of public authorities (hereafter referred to as competent authorities, or CAs) within the scope of the Once-Only Technical System (OOTS). This document offers some insights from those consultations.

- The Once-Only Technical System is designed to simplify administrative processes across the EU by enabling public authorities to share evidence (data) directly (only at the users' specific request). By ensuring that citizens and businesses are not repeatedly required to submit the same information, the OOTS reduces administrative burden and facilitates more effective use of the European Single Market.
- The Single Digital Gateway (SDG) regulation provides a framework for improving access to information and public services for citizens and businesses across the EU.
- For the purpose of this document, a **competent authority** refers to any Member State authority or body with specific responsibilities related to procedures covered by the SDG regulation, in particular those acting as requesters or providers of evidence through the OOTS.

Research objective

This research aims to establish a foundational understanding of the key benefits of the Once-Only Technical System for competent authorities in the context of cross-border administrative procedures.

Methodology

Interviews were conducted with 15-25 individuals holding administrative or managerial roles within competent authorities in the Once-Only Technical System.

A maximum variation sampling approach was applied – covering different types of institutions, Member States, procedures, and demographic profiles – to capture a broad range of perspectives. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved.

This summary presents high-level insights derived from interviews, while ensuring full anonymity of all participants.

Stories of competent authority experiences

Three fictionalised cases

The findings of this research are **aggregated into three fictionalised use cases**, each drawing on real-life experiences of the interview participants. Together, these cases illustrate how competent authorities experience the process of connecting to and integrating with the Once-Only Technical System.

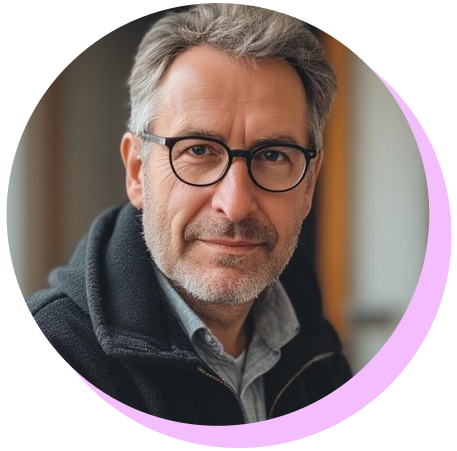
These narratives aim to:

- Provide **insights** into the implementation journey of competent authorities;
- Highlight current **challenges**, as well as anticipated **benefits** of the Once-Only Technical System;
- Identify key obstacles and potential enablers that may influence progress.

The analysis section further explores the findings through two tables: one outlining changes in evidence flows for competent authorities, and another highlighting potential benefits for specific profiles and departments within those authorities.

Competent authority use cases

Current challenges compared with the benefits of implementing the OOTS



Jan Haselhof*

Head of admissions – University

Evidence requester

*Fictional persona based on aggregated insights from respondent interviews

Jan integrates the OOTS in his admissions workflows

The OOTS guides citizens

Jan runs the admissions office of a university located in a region within the EU (for example, in Germany near the boarder with the Netherlands). A few years ago, the IT manager implemented EMREX* in the admissions workflow, reflecting the fact that a large proportion of international students came from the Netherlands. As a a result, **retrieving evidence for Dutch students has become significantly more efficient**, reducing the administrative workload for admissions staff.

For applicants from other EU Member States, however, the admissions office still needs to **provide detailed guidance and respond to questions on their admissions process**. Once the university is connected to the Once-Only Technical System, the admissions office plans to implement a dedicated feature on its admissions website for all EU applicants.

This would direct EU students to an intermediary OOTS platform developed for the higher education sector, guiding them through the application process without requiring direct intervention from university staff.

Current challenge: need to instruct and assist citizens

Admissions staff often need to **spend a significant time to following up** with citizens who, despite understanding the procedure, still seek direct support from the competent authority.

In certain professions - such as healthcare – obtaining the required documentation from an applicant's country of origin can also be particularly time-consuming.

Future with the OOTS:
Citizens know what to do to supply correct evidence

Through a Once-Only enabled procedure, end users have the option to use the OOTS to have the system **find and fetch the required, corresponding evidences**.

In this process, the competent authority does not need to intervene to guide the user, and users are free to import the evidences. This eliminates delays and **reduces back-and-forth exchanges between users and public administrations**.

*EMREX is an electronic data exchange system designed to facilitate the transfer of academic records across borders.

Jan wants to expand EMREX verification benefits to the OOTS

The OOTS facilitates evidence processing

Jan has asked the university's IT department to explore participation in implementing the Once-Only Technical System, to connect with other EU Member States (i.e., that are not connected through EMREX).

As senior management has limited visibility of the administrative effort involved in the current admission process, he has made the case that the OOTS would significantly facilitate the verification processes and facilitate the matching of evidences to student applications.

Current challenge: Verification is manual labour

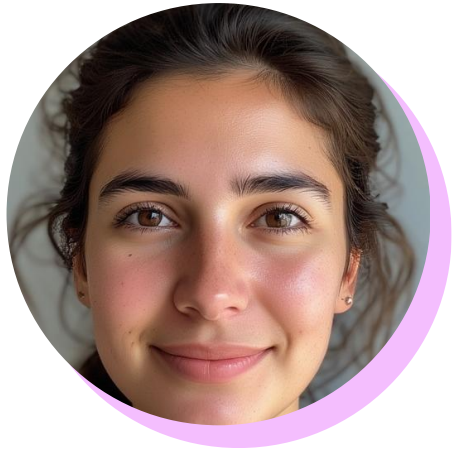
Experienced staff are often able to recognise certificates from specific countries, whereas junior colleagues may lack this experience and require considerable time to develop it.

Admissions departments must also handle a **wide variety of document formats and frequently rely on traditional technologies**, such as spreadsheets, to manage critical enrolment applications.

Future with OOTS: Verification process is built-in

Since the mapping of evidences has been done before the requesters receive the evidence, the **Once-Only Technical System ensures that an evidence provides the relevant procedural requirements** and is a match for the criteria for the admission.

This guarantees that the content of the evidence is a match, and the data fits the criteria of the application.



Andrea Borzano*

IT Project manager of the online health profession application

Evidence requester

*Fictional persona based on aggregated insights from respondent interviews

Andrea wants to continue digitalising the application process

The OOTS can make authentic data and document verification obsolete

Andrea is a project manager at the Ministry of Health in a Mediterranean Member State. She has just finished building a digital application platform for European medical professionals seeking to practice in her country. This platform has significantly reduced the workload of caseworkers and streamlined the application processes.

Despite these improvements, caseworkers still spend considerable time verifying the authenticity of evidences. In some cases, they are required to obtain physical document in order to detect potential forgeries. In addition, applicants often face delays in obtaining the necessary evidence, as many documents still need to be issued in paper form or require validation by the issuing organisation to confirm their authenticity.

Current challenge:
Checking authenticity delays processes

Even when technologies like QR codes are used, verifying whether a diploma exists in a university database remains time-consuming, and such technologies have inherent limitations.

Staff may also require **extensive training** to assess the authenticity of evidences at both technical and operational level.

In an increasingly complex environment - where **detecting forgeries is becoming more challenging** – reliance on predominantly manual, human-centric processing introduces greater risks.

Future with the OOTS:
Digitally issued evidences are trustworthy

With the Once-Only Technical System, there is **no need to confirm authenticity with the issuing organisation** and spend time manually checking evidences.

Evidences received through the OOTS are **guaranteed to be authentic data**, reducing the time required for both requesting and providing competent authorities.

Andrea wants to streamline communication about evidences

The OOTS enables automated exchange with connected countries

Exchanges with counterpart countries have traditionally been cumbersome. In some cases, caseworkers have established informal, manual verification processes based on personal contacts between organisations to verify and authenticate evidences.

At an OOTS event, Andrea learned that one of their regular counterparts is currently digitalising its databases and setting up a local Once-Only system. By connecting to the OOTS, her administration would be able to replace these manual exchanges with automated, reliable data sharing, reducing the need for direct staff involvement.

Current challenge:
Needing several different arrangements with counterparts to communicate about evidences

Exchanging data between individual counterparts is **less secure** and can be **vulnerable to risks**.

In some cases, competent authorities must ask applicants to contact their university departments to request verification emails confirming the authenticity of their diplomas.

Future with OOTS:
Automated exchanges with counterparts

With the Once-Only Technical System, there is **no need to set up or maintain separate communication processes** with each counterpart authority.

Connecting once to the infrastructure is enough to **exchange authentic and verified evidence** with any participating EU country.

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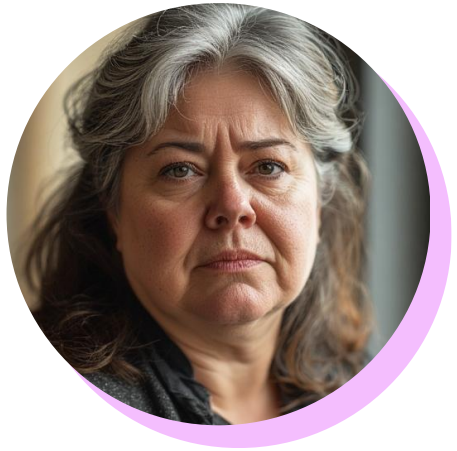
Competent authority use case

Accelerators and stumbling blocks to implementation



Justa Kirlikova*

IT manager of the national academic database – Ministry of education

Evidence provider

*Fictional persona based on aggregated insights from respondent interviews

Justa's database has been designated as an evidence provider

Ownership and understanding of all actors involved is important

Justa is the IT manager responsible for a professional and academic certification database at the Ministry of education in an eastern EU Member State.

When her country's SDG national coordinator* became aware of the database, they contacted the Ministry, which agreed that it should be connected to the Once-Only Technical System as a provider.

However, Justa – despite being the process owner - was not initially consulted. She had a bad feeling about this project. Lacking clarity on the purpose of the OOTS and the benefits of participation, she was hesitant to commit her team's resources.

After raising concerns with her superiors, Justa was put in contact with the SDG national coordinator, who engaged directly with her and her team to address their questions. Together, they assessed whether the database fell well within scope and explored the potential value of enabling cross-border services.

The national coordinator subsequently involved Justa in a national working group, involving other competent authorities and the organisation responsible for developing the intermediary platform. This collaboration provided greater visibility on the implementation process and helped clarify the practical implications of connecting to the OOTS.

Stumbling block: lack of ownership, pressure without explanations

IT and project managers in competent authorities need a clear understanding of both the benefits and practical implications of any large-scale IT project.

Accelerator: open communication and inclusion of all actors

Managers responsible for, or planning, the roll out the Once-Only Technical System can engage relevant authorities through targeted events and coordination meetings. These forums provide opportunities to address challenges and build a shared understanding of the broader benefits of connecting to the system.

* Representative of an EU Member State's representative in the Single Digital Gateway coordination group, responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Single Digital Gateway regulation.

Justa sees the role of her database in the European network

Having counterpart connect and seeing value contributes to the OOTS' acceptance and implementation

Initially, Justa believed there was little demand for the data held in her system and that connecting to the OOTS would be both unnecessary and resource-intensive – if counterpart authorities were not yet connected.

However, after her team was invited to an OOTS event, the requirements and objectives of the SDG regulation became much clearer.

During the event, Justa engaged with peers from other domains, who demonstrated that becoming an evidence provider is relatively straightforward. She also learned that early adopters often act as catalysts, encouraging other competent authorities to connect as evidence requesters.

Stumbling block: there is not enough demand to connect

Many managers must justify a business case and the relevant cost. At first glance, this may not be clear.

Accelerator: Connecting creates momentum for others to follow

Any centralised database managed by a competent authority can become a potential authentic source beyond the country concerned. However, its value depends on demand from other organisations across Europe – demand that is enabled and amplified by the scale of the OOTS as a pan-European system.

Summary

The Benefits of the Once-Only Technical System for competent authorities

Summary of benefits of the Once-Only Technical System for competent authorities

Evidence flow

STEPS	1. User provides evidence	2. Verification	3. Authenticity	4. Counterparts contact each other
AS IS	Citizen provides evidence manually	Verification is done manually by the competent authority	Authenticity needs to be manually checked	Evidence providers and requesters need to interact in different ways bilaterally to finalise the procedure
TO BE	Correct evidence is fetched through the OOTS	OOTS ensures evidence is the relevant match for the application	OOTS ensures evidence is authentic	No interaction needed; information is shared automatically
INSIGHTS	50% of respondents identified dealing with errors by citizens during the evidence exchange process as a key pain point. *"When wrong or unreadable documents are submitted, we have to get back to the citizen".* 70% of respondents mentioned extensive efforts to assist citizens *"Answering questions takes a lot of time".*	60 % of respondents indicated that specialized expertise is needed to assess whether submitted evidence meets the requirements of the application. *"We have an Excel sheet per country to know what kind of evidences we should receive".*	65 % of respondents expressed concerns about the risk of forged documents. *"The techniques to fraud have become so advanced and accessible"* 75 % of respondents highlighted the effort required to obtain confirmation of authenticity *"Knowing we received an authentic evidence would relieve us of so many checks".*	45 % of respondents reported the need to rely on multiple communication channels when interacting with counterpart authorities. *"We often need to push students to get a verification e-mail from their provider".*

*quotes from research respondents.

Role-specific benefits and needs for competent authorities

Example roles (with a typical CA)	Benefits
Case worker Day to day citizen contact	• Having verified information saves time in verifying and/or requesting new documents; • No need for expertise in all evidence types; • No need to create manual evidences as provider.
IT manager/process owner IT management and maintenance	• No need to maintain various bilateral arrangements; • As requester: receiving digital documents is harmonised; • As provider: value of database/registers increases; • The OOTS makes it easier to comply with the SDG regulation, with even greater end-value for the competent authorities.
IT project manager Develops IT applications	• The OOTS pushes the digitalisation of all actors throughout the evidence flow; • No need to create new and possibly cumbersome and specific data flows to account for all variations in evidence.
Legal advisor Knows legal side of processes	• Consent mechanism is built-in [explicit request] allowing more and easier exchange of data.

Find out more

To learn more about how EU Member States are implementing the Once-Only Technical System, you can visit the Once-Only hub and subscribe to the newsletter.