# SeARcH ENGINE



## Guidelines on the Automatic Recognition for Higher Education Institutions

With the support of the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

# Table of content

# I. Foreword

This paper addresses the **automatic recognition of foreign academic qualifications in the European Higher Education Area**, more specifically the **automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad.** It aims to offer information on the current situation in the field of academic recognition and provide guidance as well as share best practice examples and recommendations for automatic recognition to employees of higher education institutions, ministries of education, ENIC-NARIC offices and other interested parties. The Guidelines are an output of the **Erasmus+ Key Action 3 SeARcH ENGINE project (2020-2022).**

The mutual recognition of academic qualifications between European countries is one of the main objectives of the European Council in the field of higher education. Already back in 1997, the Council of Europe in cooperation with UNESCO published the **Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region**, better known as the **Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC).** This Convention, which promotes the fair and reasonably fast recognition of academic qualifications for students and graduates, remains the main legal framework for the recognition of qualifications in Europe also 25 years later. The signatory states of the Convention agreed that degrees and periods of study abroad must be recognised unless *substantial differences* can be proved by the institution that is responsible for the recognition.

*"Each Party shall recognise the qualifications issued by other Parties meeting the general requirements for access to higher education in those Parties for the purpose of access to programmes belonging to its higher education system, unless a substantial difference can be shown between the general requirements for access in the Party in which the qualification was obtained and in the Party in which recognition of the qualification is sought."*

**Lisbon Recognition Convention, Article IV.1**

While the concept of Automatic Recognition is more recent, it has also existed for ten years as of now. It was first introduced in 2012 in the **Bucharest Communiqué of the European Higher Education Area Ministers of Education**, who were well aware of the importance of improving recognition processes. The Ministers committed themselves to the **long-term goal of automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees** and for this purpose a special working group was created – the **Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition.** The **Pathfinder Group report** was approved during the **Yerevan Ministerial Conference in May 2015.**

The general idea behind automatic recognition is that the unifying effort of the **Bologna Process**, which set up the current **Europe-wide structure of bachelor's, master's and doctoral programmes**, should result in **faster and more consistent recognition practices.**

*"Fair academic and professional recognition, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, is at the core of the EHEA. It is a direct benefit for students' academic mobility, it improves graduates' chances of professional mobility and it represents an accurate measure of the degree of convergence and trust attained. We are determined to remove outstanding obstacles hindering effective and proper recognition and are willing to work together towards the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees, building on the tools of the Bologna framework, as a long-term goal of the EHEA."*

**EHEA Ministerial Conference Bucharest 2012, *Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area* (Bucharest Communiqué)**

In 2018 the **Council Recommendation on Promoting Automatic Mutual Recognition of Higher Education and Upper Secondary Education and Training Qualifications and the Outcomes of Learning Periods Abroad** summed up the idea of the Automatic Recognition in the following words:

*"Automatic mutual recognition of a qualification: the right for holders of a qualification of a certain level that has been issued by one Member State to be considered for entry to a higher education programme in the next level in any other Member State, without having to go through any separate recognition procedure. This shall not prejudice the right of a higher education institution or the competent authorities to set specific evaluation and admission criteria for a specific programme. It does not prejudice the right to check, if the qualification is authentic and, in case of an upper secondary education and training qualification, if it really gives access to higher education in the Member State of issuance or, in duly justified cases, if the granted qualification meets the requirements for accessing a specific higher education programme in the receiving Member State."*

**Council Recommendation on Promoting Automatic Mutual Recognition of Higher Education and Upper Secondary Education and Training Qualifications and the Outcomes of Learning Periods Abroad, Glossary**

Finally, the **Council Resolution on a Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)**, which aims to establish a **new European Education Area by 2025**, has the following goal:

*"Furthermore, the European Education Area will be an area where learners and educational staff can easily cooperate and communicate across disciplines, cultures and borders, and where qualifications and learning outcomes from periods of learning abroad are automatically recognised."*

**Council Resolution on a Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)**

The *Concrete issues and actions* of the *Priority area − Higher education* relevant to the topic as given in the Council Resolution are:

*"Strengthening automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and study periods abroad for the purpose of mobility and further learning, while ensuring that quality assurance mechanisms provide a strong basis for public trust for further learning and safeguard the autonomy of higher education institutions. Automatic recognition of joint transnational activities and the recognition and portability of short courses, where appropriate, should be developed."*

**Council Resolution on a Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021–2030)**

The intent of the following text is to introduce and promote the concept of the automatic recognition of foreign education. The practical examples and case studies are collected from the countries participating in the SeARcH ENGINE project – the Czech Republic, Italy, the Netherlands and Latvia. The Guidelines reflect the *status quo* as of autumn 2022.

# II. Academic Recognition in Europe

The recognition of foreign qualifications or periods of study abroad facilitates international mobility and cooperation in higher education. A mobile student who has studied abroad for a period of time through an exchange scheme – most typically the Erasmus programme – wants to be sure that the credits they obtained during their period of study abroad are fully recognized in their home country upon their return. A student who has completed a bachelor's programme in one country and wants to continue their studies in another country seeks recognition of their bachelor's degree for admission to a master's programme abroad. It is important for students that **qualifications and credits are recognized in a fair and transparent manner.**

The fairness and transparency of academic recognition in European countries is ensured by a number of instruments. The basis for the recognition processes is enshrined in the **Lisbon Recognition Convention**, the official title of which is the **Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region**. This international convention of the Council of Europe was drafted in cooperation with UNESCO and replaced previous conventions that had been adopted in this matter by the Council of Europe or UNESCO. Up to the present, the Convention is the main legal agreement on credential evaluation in Europe and has been ratified by 54 countries (most of the member states of the Council of Europe except for Greece and Monaco, as well as some other countries such as Australia, Canada, Israel, New Zealand, the Russian Federation, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and the Holy See).

The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC), adopted in 1997, and its Revised Recommendation (2010) provide us with good practices and criteria for the fair recognition of foreign qualifications. In general, the LRC obliges signatory countries to make arrangements for recognising qualifications across borders, including the establishment of a national agency for recognition. The Convention distinguishes between the following types of recognition, which we will be addressing in our text: **recognition of qualifications giving access to higher education, recognition of periods of study** and **recognition of higher education qualifications.** It also sets a basis for the recognition of qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation. Key concepts of the LRC include *no discrimination, equal rights, transparency, consistency* and *substantial differences.* Many signatory countries have included the concepts of the LRC in their national legislation.

Based on the principles of the LRC, the **EAR and EAR HEI Manuals** were created eventually to help facilitate the recognition processes in Europe. The **EAR Manual** was endorsed by the Ministers of Education of the European Higher Education Area in the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué. It primarily targeted the ENIC-NARIC networks, the national information centres on recognition. **The EAR HEI Manual, short for the European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions, is a recognition manual for credential evaluators** developed on the grounds of the more general EAR Manual, especially for higher education institutions. Both manuals contain standards and guidelines on aspects of the recognition of foreign qualifications and aim to provide credential evaluators from the European National Information Centres (ENICs), the National Academic Recognition and Information Centres (NARICs), as well as recognition and admission officers at higher education institutions and other relevant parties, with a practical tool to assist them in their everyday recognition work. Both manuals were written as part of the **European Area of Recognition Project (EAR).**

As described in detail in the EAR and EAR HEI Manuals, when evaluating a foreign credential, one can distinguish between **five elements of a qualification** that determine the outcome of the assessment: *level, workload, learning outcomes, profile* and *quality.* As summed up by the EAR HEI Manual:

*"Five parameters are required to define a qualification: level, workload, quality, profile, and learning outcomes. Although there is overlap between the concepts, all have relevance and need to be considered when assessing a qualification, especially in establishing whether there are substantial differences between the foreign qualification and the required one. Learning outcomes are becoming the most important factor, the evaluation of which is aided by the other indicators."*

**The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions, Third Edition, p. 20**

To understand these five elements better, we need to return to our narrative of the historical development of the academic recognition process in Europe, namely to the Bologna Process.

The **Bologna Process**, which started with the **Bologna Declaration** in 1999, two years after the signing of the LRC, created a single **European Higher Education Area (EHEA)**, introducing a **uniform three-cycle higher education system (bachelor's/master's/Ph.D.)**, a standardized format for the **Diploma Supplement** and a common **European Credit Transfer and**

**Accumulation System (ECTS).** These tools increase *transparency, cohesion, cooperation, mobility* and facilitate the *mutual recognition of education qualifications* within the EHEA.

Out of the five elements of a qualification listed above, the first two are directly tied to the Bologna Process's two major achievements. The *level of a qualification* can be easily judged when there is a **national qualifications framework (NQF)** in place giving a set of descriptors for each qualification level. The NQF might be linked to the **European Higher Education Area Qualifications Framework (EHEA-QF)** or the **European Qualifications Framework (EQF)**, both of which facilitate comparison between different national frameworks. When evaluating higher education outcomes, three levels (bachelor's, master's and doctorate) can easily be distinguished nowadays for most study programmes in Europe. The three levels of a higher education system are also referred to as cycle 1, cycle 2 and cycle 3 in the EHEA-QF and level 6, 7, and 8 in the EQF. In addition to this, both qualifications frameworks have a general set of **level descriptors** that make evaluation and recognition easier and smoother.

The *workload* can be judged by the amount of credits the student has achieved during a certain study programme, module or single subject. While the workload of a module or subject is important when recognising the outcomes of a **learning period abroad,** the workload of a **full degree**, a previously obtained **higher education qualification**, is measured in academic years. A certain amount of credits is assigned to one academic year for this purpose.

In Europe students usually gain 60 ECTS in one full-time year of HEI studies. Each credit represents a student workload required for the total study experience (counting together classroom time, fieldwork, time spent on possible placement/s related to the study programme, time use for reading, writing assignments or completing assessments and similar) and not just formal classroom or contact hours. The **ECTS Users' Guide** (2015) suggests that students are to accomplish a workload of 1500-1800 hours per academic year, which is about 25 hours per 1 ECTS. It should be stated, however, that there are differences in calculations of the workload and the number of the study experience hours necessary to earn 1 ECTS credit point between the Bologna signatory countries. These can vary up to 40%.[1]

Another of the five elements to consider when evaluating an academic qualification is **quality**. Quality can mean several things – for instance how well a student has performed in their studies or what kind of international or national ranking the institution has where the studies have been completed. But what is mainly being considered here is the general quality of the study programme and the institutional support structures. These may be subjected to external **quality assurance (QA)** procedures, either on a mandated or voluntary basis. Quality assurance is considered as essential for building trust in higher education qualifications, institutions and systems.

After the **quality assurance of programmes and qualifications** had been promoted by the Bologna Process as one of the important tools to help to facilitate academic mobility, a number of initiatives were introduced with the aim of creating a common basis for the QA in Europe. In the field of quality assurance of higher education, European cooperation within the EHEA has increased in the last decades, resulting in the publication of sets of principles

---

1    The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions, Third Edition, 2020 – p. 21.

and procedures such as the **Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (European Standards and Guidelines, ESG)**, the **European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)**, the **European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)**, and recently the **European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (EA)**. These recognition initiatives enhance mutual trust and transparency in quality assurance within the EHEA.

**"***A key goal of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) is to contribute to the common understanding of quality assurance for learning and teaching across borders and among all stakeholders. They have played and will continue to play an important role in the development of national and institutional quality assurance systems across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and cross-border cooperation. Engagement with quality assurance processes, particularly the external ones, allows European higher education systems to demonstrate quality and increase transparency, thus helping to build mutual trust and better recognition of their qualifications, programmes and other provision.***"**

**Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), Brussels 2015, p. 6**

To put it simply, education obtained at a higher education institution might be considered of good quality if the HEI is recognised by the state or other relevant authorities – and the degree programmes it offers are accredited. But not only that:

**"***Quality, whilst not easy to define, is mainly a result of the interaction between teachers, students and the institutional learning environment. Quality assurance should ensure a learning environment in which the content of programmes, learning opportunities and facilities are fit for purpose.***
***At the heart of all quality assurance activities are the twin purposes of accountability and enhancement. Taken together, these create trust in the higher education institution's performance. A successfully implemented quality assurance system will provide information to assure the higher education institution and the public of the quality of the higher education institution's activities (accountability) as well as provide advice and recommendations on how it might improve what it is doing (enhancement).***"**

**Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), Brussels 2015, p. 7**

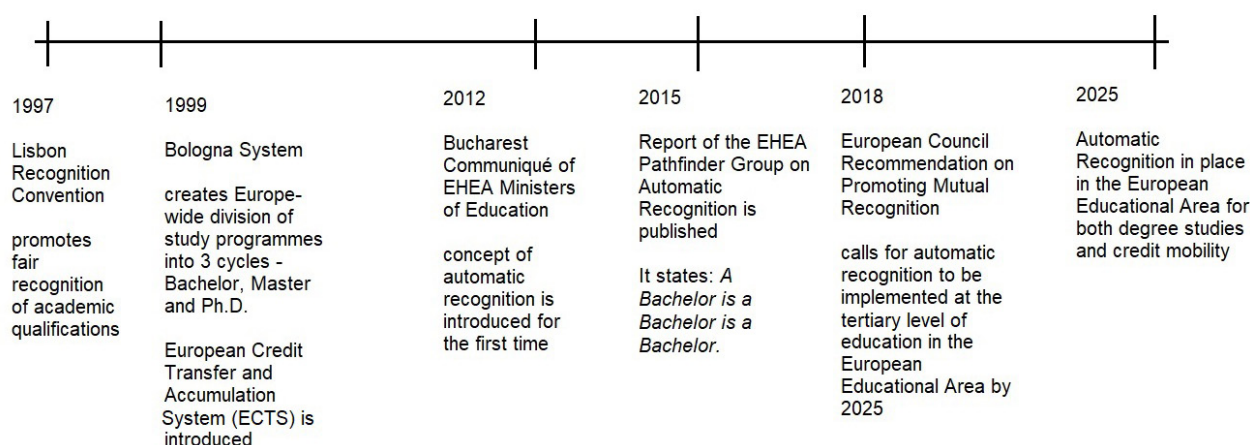Aspects assessed for the purposes of the internal quality assurance include e.g. the institution's policy for quality assurance, the design and approval of degree programmes, regulations covering the student life cycle such as student admission, progression, recognition and certification, competence of the teachers or information management. Institutions should also undergo external quality assurance on a regular basis.

The last two elements of a qualification as given by the EAR and EAR HEI Manuals are learning outcomes and profile.

The term **qualification profile** can be used in two possible ways: either to describe the general purpose or the content of the degree programme. This can be described in the Diploma Supplement or in the more recent degree programme profile. Application for a further degree programme may be limited for instance by a requirement for having previously obtained a certain qualification (with necessary prerequisites), e.g. a bachelor's degree in Physics may be a necessary qualification for applying for a Master of Science programme in Meteorology or Astronomy.

A **learning outcome** is defined as a statement of what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to demonstrate after completion of any type of learning activity. This statement may be given for a single module or subject, an individual programme, a qualification level, or anything in between. In practice, the term is also used to indicate the general output of a degree programme. Learning outcomes are usually divided into two types: **specific learning outcomes** (related to the subject discipline) and **generic learning outcomes** (transferable from one academic discipline to another).[2]

In addition to the five elements of a qualification, the **purpose of recognition** is important when evaluating a diploma or other results of previous studies in a foreign country. Two main types of recognition procedures exist in the European area: **academic and professional recognition**. **Academic recognition** refers to recognition requested for the purpose of further studies and/or the right to carry an academic title. **Professional recognition** concerns recognition for the purpose of entering the labour market. This second option is relevant mainly in the case of **regulated professions**, when recognition by a public authority is required. The regulated professions include teaching, medical professions and other specializations.[3]



| 1997 | 1999 | 2012 | 2015 | 2018 | 2025 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lisbon Recognition Convention | Bologna System | Bucharest Communiqué of EHEA Ministers of Education | Report of the EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition is published | European Council Recommendation on Promoting Mutual Recognition | Automatic Recognition in place in the European Educational Area for both degree studies and credit mobility |
| promotes fair recognition of academic qualifications | creates Europe-wide division of study programmes into 3 cycles - Bachelor, Master and Ph.D. | concept of automatic recognition is introduced for the first time | It states: *A Bachelor is a Bachelor is a Bachelor.* | calls for automatic recognition to be implemented at the tertiary level of education in the European Educational Area by 2025 | |
| | European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is introduced | | | | |

---

2    For more on this see The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions, Third Edition, 2020: https://www.nuffic.nl/en/publications/the-european-recognition-manual-for-higher-education-institutions.

3    You can learn more on the website of ENIC/NARIC: https://www.enic-naric.net/page-professional-recognition.

# III. Automatic Recognition

In the European Higher Education Area the concept of automatic recognition appears for the first time in the **Bucharest Communiqué of the EHEA Ministerial Conference** of **2012**. Automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees is stated as a long-term goal to enable more flexible academic recognition:

*"Fair academic and professional recognition, including recognition of non-formal and informal learning, is at the core of the EHEA. It is a direct benefit for students' academic mobility, it improves graduates' chances of professional mobility and it represents an accurate measure of the degree of convergence and trust attained. We are determined to remove outstanding obstacles hindering effective and proper recognition and are willing to work together towards the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees, building on the tools of the Bologna framework, as a long-term goal of the EHEA."*

**EHEA Ministerial Conference Bucharest 2012, *Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area* (Bucharest Communiqué)**

But what exactly is automatic recognition and how does it differ from standard academic recognition? The **EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition** (established as a result of the Bucharest Ministerial Conference in 2012) defined the concept as follows:

*"Automatic recognition of a degree leads to the automatic right of an applicant holding a qualification of a certain level to be considered for entry to the labour market or a programme of further study in the next level in any other EHEA-country (access)."*

**Report by the EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition, 2015 – p. 5**

The crucial word here is that recognition provides **access**; automatic recognition does not guarantee admission to a degree programme or selection for a position on the labour market.

The main purpose of automatic recognition is to **make the recognition procedure easier and faster** and provide an **automatic right to be considered for access**, taking into account that the rights of access of the qualification should give the student the same rights of access as in their home country.

The EHEA Pathfinder Group report of 2015 also stated the famous sentence at its very beginning:

*"A Bachelor is a Bachelor is a Bachelor."*

These eight words underline the ultimate goal of the automatic recognition scheme. A bachelor in History from the Czech Republic is on equal footing with a bachelor in History in

Latvia, Finland or Germany. Similarly, a master in Biology from the Netherlands has the same value as a master in Biology from Italy, Portugal or Spain. Yet, there is still an important difference – a bachelor in History would not give to its holder right of access to a master's programme in Biology. There is a **substantial difference** between the two bachelor's degrees – the graduate in History would not have the necessary prerequisites to join the more advanced studies of Biology at master's level. As stated above in the quote from the **Bucharest Communiqué**, automatic recognition is applicable when recognising **comparable academic degrees.**

The potential benefits of automatic recognition are:

*"For students, automatic recognition means simpler access to a broader range of international study and research options, allowing them to acquire competences, knowledge and skills, and strive for academic excellence in the studies that most fit their academic profile and interests. Furthermore, automatic recognition has the potential of reducing the timeframe needed for selection-decisions, and encourages academic mobility throughout the EHEA, as the fear of not getting recognition of a degree as one of the main factors discouraging students from pursuing an entire degree abroad falls away.*
*For institutions, automatic recognition means that they have to use less of their capacity on processing and taking access-decisions, but they can concentrate fully on selecting and admitting the best students to their programmes from an expanded pool of excellent (international) candidates. Therefore, automatic recognition results in an increase in the quality of students and programmes, and does not go against HEIs' autonomy, as they are still able to decide on the key point of admission."*

**Report by the EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition, 2015 – p. 10**

The evaluation criteria that are used for automatic recognition are on **system level**, not on **programme level.** This means that a generic approach based on three of the five elements of a qualification listed above is being applied: **level, workload and quality. Quality** refers to the accreditation status of a qualification, while **level** refers to the level to which the qualification is linked in the **National Qualifications Framework (NQF)**. The **workload** is expressed in **ECTS** and is linked to the range of credits determined for that level in the NQF.

The two elements that are applied on **programme level** are the **learning outcomes** and the **profile of the qualification**. These still need to be checked separately for each application and are not included in the automatic recognition procedure. The higher education institution has the right to set additional admission criteria for certain programmes and check the authenticity of documents.

The Pathfinder Group report calls for a higher level of trust between countries and HEIs to facilitate automatic recognition in the tertiary education sector. This can be achieved by the more systematic application of existing Bologna system tools while placing a greater emphasis on **Quality Assurance.** The Group's main suggestion was:

*"The PfG believes that EHEA countries should take all steps necessary to ensure that qualifications from across the EHEA are recognised on an equal level with domestic degrees. Aware of the fact that this requires political commitment across the EHEA and might require legislative change in some countries, the PfG recommends to EHEA Ministers to ensure that qualifications from other EHEA countries are recognised on an equal level with domestic qualifications, for example through enacting specific legislation to achieve this objective."*

**Report by the EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition, 2015 – p. 21**

Before such legislation can be put in place, however, the most efficient way to apply the concept of automatic recognition seems to be the **system level recognition on a regional basis with like-minded partner countries**, a measure also suggested in the PfG Report.

Already before the PfG Report various **mutual academic recognition agreements** had existed, usually between two neighbouring states, enabling **automatic recognition between the signatory countries.** For example in the Czech Republic there have been such agreements signed with Slovakia, Germany, Poland and Hungary as well as Slovenia (the latest one is valid only for Slovenia).

Several new cooperative regional initiatives on mutual automatic recognition have already been implemented within the EHEA. In 2015 **Benelux Decision M (2015) 3 of the Benelux Committee of Ministers concerning the automatic mutual generic level recognition of higher education degrees** was adopted by Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg for the automatic mutual recognition of their bachelor's and master's degree programmes. This was followed by the 2018 **Benelux Decision M (2018) 1**, which also includes automatic recognition of the associate degrees and doctorates. Both Decisions are based on mutual trust and focus on academic recognition with the aim of saving costs, improving efficiency and promoting regional mobility in the Benelux area.

Also in 2018, the Baltic States signed a similar agreement on the automatic academic recognition of qualifications concerning higher education. The **Agreement among the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, the Government of the Republic of Estonia and the Government of the Republic of Latvia on the Automatic Academic Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education** aims to facilitate recognition of qualifications concerning higher education, for academic purposes, and to promote exchange of information on education systems of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. According to the Agreement, a qualification concerning higher education awarded in one Baltic State is automatically considered comparable to a qualification placed on the same level in the other contracting states, without any additional formalities. It should be noted, however, that this Agreement does not affect the application of national and international legislation of the states regulating professional recognition.

Both regional, legally binding treaties were combined in the 2021 **Baltic-Benelux Treaty on the Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications**, creating a large area of automatic recognition within the EHEA. The Treaty is open to other countries as well, as long as they have ratified the LRC, participate in the EHEA, have a quality assurance system based on the ESG, a three-cycle higher education system, and have a NQF in place.

Similar cooperation also exists between the Nordic countries – in summer 2022 the Nordic Ministers of Education adopted a **revised version of the Reykjavik Declaration**. The revised Reykjavik Declaration states that the mutual recognition of qualifications is now expected, as far as possible, to be automatic and without unnecessary delays.

The European Council Recommendation on promoting automatic recognition of November 2018 mentions the regional agreements and hopes for that these initiatives can serve as models for a broadening of the region towards a "Union-wide system". The aim is to create a European Education Area with mutual automatic recognition by 2025.

The policy paper **"A short path to automatic recognition – 4 models"** of 2018 provides more background information on the concept of automatic recognition and on the different models of automatic recognition that exist within the EHEA.[4]

# IV. Main Types of Recognised Qualifications and their Approach to Automatic Recognition

The Lisbon Recognition Convention differentiates between the following three main types of academic recognition:

**1) recognition of qualifications giving access to higher education**

**2) recognition of periods of study**

**3) recognition of higher education qualifications**

The first is usually a high school diploma, the second the results of a mobility programme such as Erasmus and the third a previously completed higher education degree – for example a bachelor's diploma enabling access to further studies at master's level.

In addition to this, the LRC also serves as a basis for the recognition of qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation. Options 1 and 3 in the above list of the main types of recognition would be the most relevant in our case.[5]

The learning outcomes that might be recognised in another country are typically results of a physical mobility, but in recent years, and especially in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic, virtual or combined (blended) mobility must also be considered. Virtual or combined mobility is connected to periods of study abroad in the majority of cases.

---

4   A short path to automatic recognition – 4 models, 2018, https://www.nuffic.nl/en/publica-tions/a-short-path-to-automatic-recognition-4-models.

5   Automatic recognition usually cannot be applied here. In the case of Ukraine a call for fast track recognition was introduced in 2022: https://education.ec.europa.eu/document/guidelines-on-fast-track-recogni-tion-of-ukrainian-academic-qualifications.

# IV. a) Recognition and Automatic Recognition of Qualifications Giving Access to Higher Education and Degree Programmes

The recognition of a foreign academic qualification is used most typically when a prospective student applies for admission into a further learning programme (**degree studies**) at a higher education institution in what is going to be their temporary host country for the duration of their (next) degree course or their new country of residence should they plan to settle there for an extended period of time and potentially pursue also (part of) their later career or continue studying at the next level there.

When applying for admission to (advanced) degree programmes in a foreign country, students must first prove their right to enter the chosen degree programme of the intended host or new residence country. This takes the form of **recognition** – while **comparing the results of the prior studies on a secondary level or a previous foreign higher education qualification of a relevant lower academic degree** (e.g. a bachelor's degree to gain access to master's level) to the national educational and qualification framework and the academic qualifications that are requested as admission requirements from the domestic students.

During the recognition process, the **eligibility of the applicant** to enter a specific study programme is judged based on their previously obtained **academic credentials.** A request for recognition of the earlier academic qualification is an integral part of the application procedure for degree programmes, and usually consists of three steps, namely: receipt of application, the selection process and issuing of the final decision.

**General access** to allow admission for degree programmes at a certain level (e.g. bachelor's) is most frequently based on the **existence and recognition of a secondary school leaving certificate** (gained in a foreign country in our case) – or any other qualification that may be acknowledged as a proof of completion of the secondary level of studies (in a foreign country). These might be combined with an entrance examination (for example in the form of a written test or interview, or both) or other relevant admission procedures (e.g. motivation letter).

**Access to specific programmes** such as Medicine or Computer Science might, next to the conditions listed above, also have other, more field-specific, admission requirements such as a special application profile, for instance a pass in a relevant combination of subjects / credentials in subjects that are necessary to enter and successfully complete such a programme. In the event that admission to the programme is highly limited due to a lack of available places, the universities, or indeed also regions or states, may introduce other additional admission measures, such as e.g. *numerus clausus* (a limitation on the number of students admitted to a specific course per year).

While the recognition of previous academic qualifications can be fairly straightforward, it can also prove more problematic – especially in cases where substantial differences have been discovered between the foreign qualification and the qualification that would be required from domestic students.

One important aspect to keep on mind is that **recognition does not equal selection**. This means that, unless all students applying for a degree programme are automatically admitted solely based on the fact that they have submitted an application and provided a relevant previous qualification (which was recognised), the admission to the study programme can be guaranteed only if also the other admission requirements have been met (e.g. an admission test has been written with a required passing result). **Recognition serves as access to higher education** only – it does not constitute unconditional acceptance in the sense of automatic admission. In other terms, **automatic recognition applies to the access phase, not to the admission.** The study candidates should therefore be informed about the results of the recognition process already as a part of their selection process – they should not be required to wait until the publication of the final decision on admission.

The **automatic recognition of foreign academic qualifications** in the context of gaining access to a HEI aims to simplify recognition as well as the whole admission process. While in the past the individual contents of the previous qualification were judged one by one and their comparability was being considered, in the automatic recognition concept the simple fact of holding for instance a bachelor degree from a country or institution connected to the recognition party by **mutual trust** (at present represented mostly in a form of a **bilateral or multilateral treaty**) gives a general access to the education on the next level of advanced studies.

This corresponds fully with the concept of the statement *"Bachelor is a Bachelor is a Bachelor"* in the **2015 Report by the EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition.** A bachelor in History from the Czech Republic will be recognised as a bachelor in History in the Netherlands and will automatically allow for access to a master degree in History or possibly also Archive or Political Sciences which are closely related to the previous degree. Similarly, a master in Software Engineering from Latvia enables a student to enter a Ph.D. degree in the same or sufficiently related study field in Italy.

Employees of university recognition offices no longer need to compare the individual learning outcomes of foreign degrees if they have applied automatic recognition – unless a **substantial difference** appears which might hinder this much easier and faster way of processing the recognition. Such a substantial difference is usually connected to the requirements laid out by the HEI for entry to a certain degree.

Access to specific programmes may be limited by the previous successful meeting of certain requirements – or by having certain prescribed results (for example in the form of a grade average) or learning outcomes (for instance in the sense of having specific knowledge required for the follow-up degree – e.g. the ability to decipher medieval or early modern scripts in order to be able to pursue further studies in Archive Science; a skill that would most likely be possessed by a bachelor's graduate in History who then took a course on Medieval and Early Modern era – but it would most probably be lacking by a someone who gained their bachelor's in 20th-century history only).

A student cannot therefore rely on automatic recognition if they took their previous degree in Business Studies at bachelor's level and now aim to enrol for a master's in Physics, and vice versa. The same system applies to both international and domestic students.

If a difference in the requirements for the two degrees is not fully incompatible, there might be the option of an **alternative, partial or conditional recognition.** These offer a possibility to have the previous academic qualification (from abroad – but also a domestic one) recognized for access to another type of degree programme (e.g. a master's in Economics instead of Physics if we follow the example given above), may allow the recognition of at least part of the credits from the previous studies (for example some subjects in Mathematics in a bachelor's degree in Business Studies may also be relevant for Physics courses) or give the option of entering a study programme under certain conditions, such as gaining sufficient preknowledge in Physics from the bachelor's level prior to joining the master's degree programme in this field according to our example.

Currently, there are **4 types of automatic recognition applied at the tertiary level of education in the EHEA** as identified by NUFFIC:

1. **Legal bilateral and multilateral agreements***, which arrange for the automatic recognition between two or more countries;*
2. **A legally binding unilateral list of degrees***, which determines which qualifications are automatically recognised by that country;*
3. **Non-legal bilateral and multilateral agreements***, which are non-legal accords between countries to automatically recognize qualifications;*
4. **'De facto' automatic recognition***, which is a unilateral practice of automatic recognition based on a set of procedures without a formal or legal agreement.*

**A short path to automatic recognition – 4 models, 2018**

While bilateral or multilateral agreements currently exist between several states only (mainly Benelux and Baltic countries and the Nordic states), the aim of the EEA for the year 2025 is to facilitate automatic academic recognition in the whole of the new European Education Area. For this purpose, the Europe-wide fourth option would be the easiest solution, but – staying realistic – the European countries will most probably need to sign some type of agreement allowing for this to happen – likely in the sense of option one in the above given list.

### Example of a Good Practice: Recognition of High School Qualifications

In the framework of the **Q-ENTRY**, the **International Database on Higher Education Entry Qualifications** project, co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union, the consortium, composed of the NARIC centre of Italy (coordinator), France, Ireland, Latvia and Norway, developed the **Q-ENTRY database**. It is a first-hand information source providing relevant information on 95 school leaving qualifications giving access to higher education, in 53 EU and non-EU countries together with the *International Baccalaureate* and the *European Baccalaureate*. The Q-ENTRY database is updated annually and has been created with the aim of facilitating the automatic recognition of upper secondary school leaving qualifications as information on these has always been fragmentary and, in some cases, not easily found.

While automatic recognition has been indicated as one of the **educational priorities of the Czech presidency of the European Union in the second half of 2022**, we may need to wait until the next **Ministerial Conference of the Ministers of Education of the EHEA in Tirana in the spring of 2024** before we see a relevant legal framework or a new recommendation.

# IV. b) Recognition and Automatic Recognition of Mobility Periods

In addition to **degree mobility**, we also observe a high volume of **credit mobility of university students** in Europe and beyond, most typically through the Erasmus+ programme. In its Key Action 1: Learning Mobility of Individuals, the Erasmus+ programme unites several subprogrammes that enable the mobility of students and academic, as well as administrative, HEIs staff. The KA131 subprogramme mainly provides possibilities for mobility between programme countries of the Erasmus+ scheme (member states of the EU and EFTA – with the exception of Switzerland – and candidate countries for the EU) and since 2021 also gives an opportunity for programme partner countries' students to study all over the world (outgoing student mobility only). KA171, known also as International Credit Mobility, targets the partner countries of the Erasmus+ programme (essentially most countries which are not in the above list of programme countries) and gives opportunities for both outgoing and incoming students and staff from all over the world.

In Europe there are many more **mobility programmes in tertiary education** beyond the Erasmus+ programme – such as SEMP (Swiss-European Mobility Programme), which facilitates exchanges between Switzerland and the EU and EFTA countries, and the Turing Programme giving the same opportunity to the students and staff from the United Kingdom after Brexit and the UK's leaving of the Erasmus programme. There are also multiple national and regional mobility schemes and public and private foundations that provide financial support for exchange stays abroad or the possibility of free mover mobility, which is utilized mostly by students who have not found an established mobility programme that meets their needs. Last but not least there are also **mobility options in research** (for example fellowships), which are mainly targeted on Ph.D. students and postdocs. In the EU they are offered in the frame of the Horizon Europe programme, especially Marie Skłodowska Curie Action (MSCA). A specific type of mobility exists within **joint (double or multiple) degree programmes** such as Erasmus Mundus or, if applicable, networks of the **European Universities**. In this case the period spent studying abroad is often a mandatory element of the study programme. The principle of **cotutelle** – often referred to also as **joint doctorate** – is similar.

Mobility periods can be **short-term** (summer or winter schools, study visits, excursions, etc. – with duration of several days to max. several weeks) or **long-term** (usually one or two semesters spent abroad in the case of academic study mobility – for example with the support of the Erasmus programme – or a research fellowship, which can last even longer – e.g. with the support of MSCA the funding can be obtained for 1–3 years).

The mobility itself can be **physical, virtual or blended** – the latter combining elements of the previous two. Fully virtual mobilities were used especially during the strictest Covid travel restrictions in 2020 and part of 2021; blended mobility has been one of the options in the Erasmus+ programme since 2021 and also features in the new Erasmus programme period for the years 2021–2027.

The institutions at which students participate in the mobility programmes listed above, as long as they facilitate a **credit bearing mobility** or any other type of **mobility that counts into the degree** (e.g. a traineeship or a study visit for which credits may not be awarded), are bound to **recognize the academic results of the mobility** after the student's return to their sending institution. While there has been a call for **more or less automatic recognition** of such results, especially in the Erasmus programme, for many years now, the reality is in many places still different. In some HEIs students can get their results acknowledged only after submitting a special request for recognition. In other universities students do not automatically receive a *Transcript of Records* when leaving the host institution at the end of their mobility period and completing their studies – again, this happens only after a special request to the coordinators of the academic exchanges of the said HEI.

After the end of the selection process for a mobility programme, the study period abroad starts for the mobile student with **registration at the host institution and the drawing-up of a plan for their studies.** The student lists the courses they would like to enter in the host institution in a **Learning Agreement.** In the Erasmus+ programme the Learning Agreement automatically includes not only the list of courses at the host HEI *(Table A)*, but also a list of the course units or modules which these are to replace in the study plan at the sending institution *(Table B)*, including the number of ECTS awarded for both of these groups of courses.

*"The Learning Agreement must include all the educational components to be carried out by the student at the Receiving Institution (in Table A) and it must contain as well the group of educational components that will be replaced in his/her degree by the Sending Institution (in Table B) upon successful completion of the study programme abroad. It is necessary to fill in Tables A and B thoroughly before the mobility.*
*…*
*The objective is to make clear that there is no need to have one-to-one correspondence between the components followed abroad and the ones replaced at the Sending Institution. The aim is rather that a group of learning outcomes achieved abroad replaces a group of learning outcomes at the Sending Institution.*
*…*
*The total number of ECTS credits (or equivalent) in Table B should correspond to the total number of ECTS credits (or equivalent) contained in Table A."*

**Guidelines on how to use the Online Learning Agreement for Studies, 2020**

At the end of the study period abroad the courses that the student has passed and the credits awarded for them are listed in an official **Transcript of Records**, which must be issued within several weeks of the publication of the study results at the receiving institution (the

Erasmus programme asks for five weeks). The Transcript of Record is then delivered to the sending institution and the results are recognized by it (again, in the case of the Erasmus programme, within five weeks of delivery of the ToR to the sending institution).

The sending institution may use a **grade conversion table or programme** to record the grades obtained by the student abroad so that they correspond with their **scale of grades and grade distribution.** However, this is not necessary if, instead of grades, only the ECTS credits from abroad are recognized. As part of the study leading towards a degree, the results from a study stay abroad are later also recorded in the **Diploma Supplement** that the student receives on completion of their degree.

*"Following the receipt of the Transcript of Records from the Receiving Institution, the Sending Institution should recognise automatically the student's academic outcomes successfully completed at the Receiving Institution. The Sending Institution should fully recognise the total number of ECTS credits (or equivalent) contained in Table B (...) or the **simplified mobility programme and recognition table in case of short term mobility** and count them towards the student's degree, without the need for the student to take any further courses or exams. The process should be in line with the principles of the Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad.*
*Where applicable, the Sending Institution will **convert the grades** received by the student abroad, taking into account the **grade distribution information** from the Receiving Institution (see the methodology described in the ECTS Users' Guide). The European Commission **encourages institutions to use the EGRACONS tool for this purpose.**[6]*
*The Sending Institution will provide a Transcript of Records to the student or record the results in a database or any other means accessible to the student, normally within five weeks after having received the transcript of the Receiving Institution. The student will be able to report on the recognition by the Sending Institution via the online EU survey or a complementary online survey."*

**Guidelines on how to use the Online Learning Agreement for Studies, 2020**

Students are also encouraged to use the **Europass Mobility** to officially record their mobility experience, especially if they have participated in a traineeship. Europass Mobility is a document which describes the **skills the students have developed on a particular mobility experience** and that can be valuable when applying for jobs and courses in the future. The document can include information on their roles and responsibilities, job-related skills, language skills, digital skills, organisation and managerial skills or communication skills.[7]

---

6    The Egracons (European Grade Conversion System) project was a Lifelong Learning project (2012-2015) co-funded by the European Commission. It aimed to facilitate exchange mobility by working out a conversion system based on ECTS grade conversion tables as recommended in the European 2015 ECTS Users' guide. The project developed an online, web-based Egracons tool that allows direct and automatic conversions of grades on the basis of annual, statistically-based grading tables supplied by individual institutions as part of an overall database. For more see here: http://egracons.eu/.

7    You can learn more on Europass Mobility here: https://europa.eu/europass/en.

Do things really go this smoothly in reality? As someone who has worked in the Erasmus programme for over a decade as both coordinator for incoming students and Erasmus institutional coordinator in a large European university, I can say that, unfortunately, this is not always the case. There are some obstacles that hinder this. The first and most common obstacle is the fact that **course catalogues** at the HEIs in many cases lack consistency, especially there where the mobile students can select from the whole offer of courses of the host faculty/school or possibly even the whole institution (as long as they meet the prerequisites and the selected course/s can be counted towards their degree). This means that many students must amend their Learning Agreements after enrolment at their host institution.

While this may not usually be a big problem for students in the Humanities or Social Sciences, where there is more scope for selecting **alternative courses**, it may be a decisive complication for e.g. a student in Medicine. If they do not pass their courses in a certain order, they may have problems qualifying for the next year of their studies. Given their nature, courses in Medicine, Dentistry and similar study fields have a limited capacity – which means that receiving institutions can provide only a **limited number of places for mobile students in some courses**. There has always been a problem finding enough capacity in Dentistry courses or some very popular medical courses such as Paediatrics, Neurology or Gynaecology and Obstetrics in our institution after the amount of Erasmus (and other exchange) students reached a certain number. This leads not only to **changes in the Learning Agreements** (both Tables A and B in the Erasmus programme), but also **changes in the period of studies abroad** (some courses are offered only in certain semesters – while the student originally intended to arrive for Semester 1, they might therefore need to switch for Semester 2 or a full year's mobility) or even **cancelling the mobility**. The later recognition of the courses might also be more complicated in such a case.

So how can the full, or even automatic, recognition of mobility periods be achieved? The main suggestion would be to work with **reliable partner institutions**. If a problem such as those listed above occurred (NB: these are only examples, and places can be limited in many other study fields and courses open to exchange students – especially if a HEI becomes very popular with mobile students), they would alert the student in time and it would then be much easier to potentially find an **alternative solution for the mobile student/s affected** – for example **changing the mobility period or the host institution.**

The next suggestion would be for the receiving institutions to **set a limit on the number of mobile students they can accept in a certain study field** – especially if the study programme has highly limited capacity in the courses open to exchange students. There is also the option of admitting only exchange students to some classes or creating a special study offer for them – which often happens anyway due to English being the *lingua franca* of the exchange students and programmes in Europe, while most European universities teach the majority of their classes in local national languages. The problem of this solution is that mobile students often live in an international bubble, creating **mobile-students-only communities** and depriving exchange students of the possibility of mixing with local students.

The best solution for facilitating the automatic recognition of mobile periods might currently be the concept of a **mobility window**. A mobility window is a **mandatory or optional component of a study programme** and can be **a semester or two which are reserved for**

**mobility periods.** These can be strictly limited to certain periods of time within the study programme – for instance the third semester of a bachelor's programme in Political Science – or they could only be used as a recognition tool of the mobility period/s and facilitated throughout the whole study programme (as long as this is also permitted by the selected mobility programme). The mobility window can include obligatory study elements or have a looser structure, with the mobile student being only obliged to gain a prescribed amount of credits during the mobility period. Since, in this concept, single courses or module units are not usually recognised, but rather **the full semester abroad is acknowledged as a mobility window worth a certain number of ECTS credits**, this is certainly one of the easiest ways to make automatic recognition of mobility periods a reality.[8]

Automatic recognition is always in place for other programmes where the mobility period is a **mandatory component leading towards a degree** – such as cotutelles, Erasmus Mundus study programmes or other joint study programmes (e.g. within the European Universities networks).

In the case of the **most common one- or two-semester mobilities which are not a mandatory part of a study programme**, but run rather on a voluntary basis, and are determined by the interest of the student in the mobility rather than any obligation towards it, automatic recognition is mostly not yet fully in place. There may be several reasons for this – the aforementioned **necessity to change the proposed study plan abroad** and possible problems in finding a solution for the full recognition of courses that have not been agreed upon at the sending institution before the student has left for their mobility period; **unwillingness of a student to obtain recognition** of all the credits gained abroad (possibly due to insufficient grades for the purpose of their further studies or interest in them or because they prefer to take the exam in their native language at their home institution); or **unwillingness of the sending institution's teaching staff to approve the credits** gained during the mobility period if the course contents or syllabus are not the same or highly similar to their own.

Obstacles to recognition occur most frequently with **mandatory classes**; the recognition of **non-mandatory course units** is usually smooth. But where the HEI still requires the student to submit a **special request for recognition**, the students may opt not to request it – which might lead to misunderstandings in the **university's willingness to recognize the results gained during the mobility periods.** A step forward to the automatic recognition of the mobility periods would therefore be to recognise the **Transcript of Records** from abroad without the students having to submit any special request for those HEIs where this is a reality.

There may be some valid reasons why the mobile students do not ask for recognition – or where the recognition or automatic recognition might be against the student's best interest. These may need to be considered in addition to setting the conditions for automatic recognition so that they do not become obstacles in facilitating mobility.

---

8    For more on the concept of Mobility Windows see Irina Ferencz, Kristina Hauschildt and Irma Garam (eds.): Mobility Windows: From Concept to Practice (ACA Papers on International Cooperation in Education), Bonn 2013. Download is possible on the website of Lemmens Medien, https://www.lemmens.de.

## Possible Obstacles of the Automatic Recognition by the Results of a Mobility Period

While the goal for the recognition of mobility periods in Europe, and especially those facilitated through the Erasmus programme, is set for 100%, only slightly above 80% of Erasmus students report that the learning outcomes they achieved during their study abroad period were recognised. This does not necessarily mean that their sending HEI has not been willing to recognise their learning outcomes, however. Unless the mobility period is an integral part of a study programme – most typically in the form of a mobility window – and if the HEI does not automatically facilitate the recognition of the contents of the Transcript of Records issued by the receiving institution of the mobile student, some students decide not to apply for recognition – or request only partial recognition.

The reasons why students do not wish to apply for the (full) recognition of results gained during a mobility period abroad can vary. Firstly, they may be worried about asking for recognition of a lower grade than they assume they would have received when completing the same or similar subject or module in their sending institution, studying and being examined in their own native language. Another reason may be connected to rules of the study programme – for example, under which conditions a student might be exempt from paying (part of the) tuition fees.

**Real-life example 1:** A non-native German speaker on a master's course in History, with a specialisation in the Middle Ages, joins a German Medieval Language and Literature course at a German university during their exchange stay abroad. The person is fluent in German, but not on the same level as native speakers. At the end of the course, the student decides to take the standard exam with local students, one half of which consists of the translation of medieval German text into current standard German. The result is a pass, but the grade is low. The student therefore decides to not ask for the recognition of this particular result, which would damage their average study score – and enrols in a Medieval German course at their home university in the next academic year. Here, the student has one of the best German language competencies, and easily achieves the highest grade, which later enables them to apply for a Ph.D. programme in Medieval History at their home institution. Having the low grade from the mobility period recognised may have hindered this, as the average study score from the previous degree is considered in the admission process.

**Real-life example 2:** An Italian student of Medicine is admitted for an Erasmus stay in a Central European country. The student aims to later start a doctorate in Pathology, but Pathology is one of the exams they take during the mobility period. While scoring the highest possible grade, the student is informed that the result is only going to be acknowledged as a lower grade – with the reasoning that subjects and modules completed during a mobility period abroad are generally easier than those passed in the home institution. The student cannot avoid the automatic recognition of the result and is later informed that they will not be considered for the doctorate in Pathology due to the lower than wished for result in the Pathology exam during their master's degree.

**Real-life example 3:** Students in their final years of studies participate in the Erasmus programme. They have already passed all modules in their degree programme – and while they decide to also enrol in some classes out of interest during their mobility period, the main purpose of the mobility is to collect materials for their thesis. They do not ask for recognition of the classes they attended abroad, either because they feel they no longer require it, or they do not sit exams in them. Some of their peers might have an even more pragmatic reason – in their case, they have also almost finished their studies, but there are still a few qualifications missing. If they can prove that the results of their mobility period have not been recognised as mandatory subjects, their tuition fee in the following year may be lower.

We can imagine that the fully automatic recognition of the results of a mobility period in these or similar cases might be problematic for some students and there should be measures in place to assist in these matters, offering a good information and support service concerning planned learning outcomes and their recognition prior to, during and after the mobility. Despite this, we believe that, for the vast majority of students on mobility, the fully automatic recognition of study periods abroad is highly beneficial and HEIs should aim for its best possible facilitation.

# V. Vision for the Future of Recognition of Foreign Education

The EHEA countries committed to the long-term goal of the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees with the **Bucharest Communiqué of 2012**. In 2018 the **Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad** was adopted. The Council Recommendation calls for the improvement of procedures for the mutual recognition of qualifications in the EU Member States. With the Council Recommendation, the EU Member States made a **political commitment to take steps to introduce automatic recognition by 2025**. It is meant to become one of the cornerstones of the new **European Education Area.**

In the field of higher education, the Council Recommendation can build on advancements already facilitated in the academic recognition processes by the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Recognition Convention, or – on a smaller geographical scale – in multilateral agreements between groups of the EU Member States, such as the **Benelux Decision on the Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications** and the **Agreement between the Baltic countries**, or their joint **Baltic-Benelux Agreement on Automatic Recognition of HE degrees** initiative of 2021. Similar cooperation also exists between the Nordic countries – in summer 2022 the Nordic Ministers of Education signed a **revised version of the Reykjavik Declaration** which states that the mutual recognition of qualifications is now expected to be automatic and without unnecessary delays.

The Council Recommendation promotes the use of existing tools to support the recognition of qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad in Europe as instruments towards automatic recognition – **Europass**, the **European Qualifications Framework**, the **European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)**, the **Diploma Supplement** or the **European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)**.

At upper secondary level, the Council Recommendation calls for **improvement in the recognition processes for qualifications required to access higher education, including vocational education and training qualifications.** Finally, the Recommendation also promotes the recognition of the outcomes of learning periods abroad at this level.

In summary, a variety of initiatives, measures and agreements are in place that work towards the **automatic, system-level recognition of comparable, quality-assured degrees.** What is missing, and probably won't be available until after at least the next Ministerial Conference of the Ministers of Education of the EHEA, which will be held in Tirana in the spring of 2024 – if it is adopted at all – is a centralised legal instrument for automatic recognition.

As a result of the previous Ministerial Conference in Rome in 2020 the **Rome Ministerial Communiqué** was published. The EHEA Ministers of Education committed themselves to:

*"We will ensure automatic recognition of academic qualifications and periods of study within the EHEA so that students, staff and graduates are able to move freely to study, teach and do research. We will make the **necessary legislative changes to guarantee automatic recognition at system level for qualifications delivered in EHEA countries** where quality assurance operates in compliance with the ESG and where a fully operational national qualifications framework has been established. We also encourage the application of agreed and secure systems of digital certification and communication such as blockchain, as well as the further development of the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) to facilitate automatic recognition."*

**Rome Ministerial Communiqué 2020**

The necessary legislative changes called for are more likely to be adopted on a more regional or country-specific scale – as is done and encouraged at present.

The **2020 Bologna Process Implementation Report** indicates that slightly **less than half of EHEA systems currently automatically recognise qualifications from other EHEA countries at system level (for academic purposes). Ten of them do so for all EHEA countries.**[9] Regional intergovernmental agreements on automatic recognition, such as the Baltic-Benelux and Nordic agreements, seem to be the most effective instruments for mutual automatic

---

9    For more details and a map see The European Higher Education Area in 2020. Bologna Process Implementation Report, Luxembourg 2020, pp. 86-88. The Benelux-Baltic (2021) and Nordic (2022) automatic recognition agreements were signed after the report had been published.

recognition at present. We should not forget that automatic recognition is also present in bilateral agreements, one of the oldest of which is the bilateral agreement between Italy and Austria of 1952.[10]

However, it is not currently anticipated that all European countries will enter into regional agreements on automatic recognition, apart from those that they already have with closer partners (most typically neighbouring countries). Some countries may, instead, introduce measures leading towards automatic recognition as part of their national law in the years to come, while others might search for alternative means of implementing automatic recognition processes that suit them the best.

# VI. Instructions for Recognition Bodies

The ENIC/NARIC website states that:

*"Automatic recognition is (…) the recognition of quality assured comparable degrees at system level (meaning, a bachelor = a bachelor and a master = a master), without having to go through a separate recognition procedure. The foreign degree is recognized on the same level and gives the same academic rights in the country where recognition is sought, as in the country of issuance."*

**ENIC/NARIC website on automatic recognition**

Automatic recognition is therefore possible in such cases where **mutual trust** exists **between the issuing and recognition countries or bodies**, while the **comparable degrees** recognised at system level have the necessary **quality assurance.**

The evaluation criteria used for automatic recognition are not on programme level, but always on **system level** only. This means that a generic approach based on three of the five elements of a qualification is applied: **level, workload and quality. Quality** refers to the accreditation status of a qualification, and **level** to the level to which the qualification is linked in the **National Qualifications Framework (NQF)**. The **workload** is expressed in **ECTS** and is linked to the range of credits determined for that level in the NQF.

The two elements that are applied on **programme level**, and are therefore not recognised automatically, are the **learning outcomes** and the **profile of the qualification**. These must be checked separately for each application and are not included in the automatic recognition procedure. In addition to this, the higher education institution has the right to set additional admission criteria for certain programmes and check the authenticity of documents.

---

10    See the website on automatic recognition of ENIC/NARIC for more information: https://www.enic-naric.net/page-automatic-recognition.

Automatic recognition, despite being called so, is therefore not fully automatic, but could be rather described as more flexible. The key aspect is that it is indeed **more flexible, smoother, and also faster** – which is beneficial to both the credential evaluators and the students and graduates applying for recognition.

Recognition and admission officers at HEIs and other recognition bodies must at all times **keep up to date with current legislation in their countries or measures put in place by their institution**, as some HEIs have already started using the automatic recognition concept to make their recognition processes more efficient.

It is also recommended to study the findings and recommendations of various policy papers published as part of projects on recognition, and more specifically automatic recognition.

The most relevant recent projects and publications in the field of the automatic recognition are the:

1) **PARADIGMS project** (2016-2018), an output of which was the ***A short path to automatic recognition – 4 models*** brochure[11]

2) **AR-NET project** (2018-2020), with the publication ***The Triangle of Automatic Recognition. Guidelines for the application of de facto automatic recognition.***[12]

3) **I-AR project** (2020-2022), in which a chapter on automatic recognition will be written for inclusion in the EAR Manual and qualification tables on system level will be drafted per country in the EHEA[13]

4) **AdReN project** (2020-2022) on implementing automatic recognition in the Adriatic region[14]

5) **AURBELL project** (2014-2016) on recognition between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania[15]

6) NORRIC report **Automatic recognition in the Nordic Region** (2019)[16]

7) **Q-ENTRY** (2018-2020) and **qENTRY+** (2020-2022) projects with the publication ***Automatic recognition in practice – examples and tools***[17]

8) **FAIR project (2015-2017)** which aimed to improve recognition of foreign qualifications at 22 higher education institutions in Europe[18]

---

11   https://www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/recognition-projects/paradigms-concluded

12   https://www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/recognition-projects/ar-net-concluded

13   https://www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/recognition-projects/i-ar-2020-2022

14   http://www.adren.info/adren-project/

15   https://aic.lv/en/par-aic/projects/aurbell-automatic-recognition

16   https://norric.org/automatic-recognition-in-the-nordic-region/

17   https://www.q-entry.eu/

18   https://www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/recognition-projects/fair-concluded

# VII. SeARcH ENGINE Project

The **SeARcH ENGINE project** (Strengthening Educational and AwaReness Campaign in Automatic Recognition for Higher Education Institutions - ENGAGE / INFORM / IMPLEMENT) ran between 2020 and 2022 and had the goal of sharing experience and best practice on the application of the European instruments in the automatic recognition of secondary and higher education qualifications and results of learning periods abroad between NARIC centres, higher education institutions and other stakeholders.

The project was co-financed by the European Commission from the Erasmus+ KA3 programme. The participants of the projects were the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic which coordinated the project in cooperation with the Czech National Agency for International Education and Research, STICHTING NUFFIC – NARIC Netherlands, Associazione CIMEA – NARIC Italy and Akadēmiskās informācijas centrs (if the special characters are not available: Akademiskas Informacijas Centrs) – NARIC Latvia.

By organising seminars and training courses on methods and approaches to automatic recognition in secondary and higher education, the SeARcH ENGINE project contributed to the implementation of the information and awareness campaign to strengthen the implementation of automatic recognition in the project countries and beyond. The automatic recognition concept was also promoted through videos and publications produced as outputs of the project.

# Project Partners

Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic (link: https://www.msmt.cz/)

STICHTING NUFFIC – NARIC Netherlands (link: https://www.nuffic.nl/en)

Associazione CIMEA – NARIC Italy (link: https://www.cimea.it/EN/)

Akadēmiskās informācijas centrs – NARIC Latvia (link: https://aic.lv/)

Czech National Agency for International Education and Research
(link: https://www.dzs.cz/en)

# VIII. List of Abbreviations and Glossary of Terms

| Abbreviation: *If left empty an abbreviation does not exist or is not used.* | Term: | Glossary: *Definitions of terms are adapted from the definitions on websites and/or in publications of the European Commission, the Council of Europe, described entities and projects, as well as the ENIC-NARIC glossary of terms (EAR Manual) or other relevant publications on academic or automatic recognition.* |
|---|---|---|
| AR | Academic Recognition | The recognition of diplomas, qualifications or parts of study programmes of a domestic or foreign educational institution by another educational institution. |
|  | Access | Certain qualifications give to the holder the right to access other qualifications, courses or study programmes at another (higher) level of the same education system E.g. a bachelor's degree provides access to master's studies. |
|  | Accreditation | The process of evaluation of the quality of a higher education institution or of a specific educational programme. |
|  | Bologna Process | Bologna Process was launched with the Bologna Declaration of 1999 as an intergovernmental higher education reform process. Its purpose is to enhance the quality and recognition of higher education systems in Europe. The main achievements are: the three-cycle degree structure (Bachelor's, Master's, Doctorate), the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) or the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). |
|  | Credit | A quantification expressing the volume of learning based on the workload students need to achieve the expected outcomes of a learning process at a certain level of studies. |
|  | Credit mobility | A period of study or traineeship abroad set within studies at a home institution for the purpose of gaining credits in another organisation in a foreign country. After the mobility, students return to their home institution to complete their studies. The credit mobility is usually max. 1 year long. |
|  | Degree mobility | A period of study abroad leading to award of an official degree or qualification in the destination country/ies. |
|  | Degree programme | A study programme leading to a formal qualification awarded by a higher education institution. |

| DEQAR | Database of External Quality Assurance Reports | DEQAR provides easier access to quality assurance reports and decisions on higher education institutions/ programmes externally reviewed against the ESG. It was created and is maintained by the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). |
|---|---|---|
| DS | Diploma Supplement | Diploma Supplement is an annex to the official degree or qualification certificate (e.g. a diploma). It provides a description of the nature, level, context, content and status of the studies that were successfully completed by the holder of the degree or qualification. |
| ECTS | European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System | A Bologna System and EHEA tool for making studies and courses more transparent, designed to make it easier for students to move for studies between countries. ECTS credits express the volume of learning based on the learning outcomes and their associated workload. The workload of a full-time academic year or its equivalent is 60 ECTS. |
| EEA | European Education Area | One of the main objectives of the European educational policies is a creation of an European Education Area by 2025. The idea of the EEA was first introduced at the 2017 Social Summit in Gothenburg, Sweden. The EEA initiative aims to help EU member states work together to build more resilient and inclusive education and training systems. |
| EHEA | European Higher Education Area | The European Higher Education Area was launched in 2010, during the Budapest-Vienna Ministerial Conference, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Bologna Process. Its creation was the main objective of the Bologna Process. The EHEA was meant to ensure better comparable and more compatible and coherent higher education systems in Europe. The EHEA is a unique international collaboration on higher education unifying 49 countries that agreed on common structural reforms and shared tools. The main goal of the EHEA is to increase staff and students' mobility and to facilitate employability. |
| ENIC-NARIC | Network of Recognition Information Centres<br><br>ENIC: European Network of Information Centres in the European Region. A network under the European Council and UNESCO.<br><br>NARIC: National Recognition Information Centres in the European Union. A network under the European Commission. | ENIC/NARIC is a network of national centres providing information, advice and assessment of foreign qualifications. The centres were created to help improve the academic recognition of international qualifications.<br><br>ENIC is European Network of Information Centres in the European Region developed to enhance academic mobility and higher education and qualification recognition. It was founded by the Council of Europe and UNESCO in order to facilitate academic mobility and to realise the LCR.<br><br>NARICs are National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union developed to facilitate the recognition of foreign degrees and qualifications, founded by the European Commission. The NARIC's main aim is to support academic mobility, activities in the area of foreign degree and qualifications recognition and providing information on the national and foreign education systems.<br><br>The ENIC and NARIC networks cooperate closely. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Erasmus+** | **EuRopean Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students** | EU's programme to support education, training, youth and sport in Europe. In the current programme period 2021-2027 it has an estimated budget of 26.2 billion EUR. This is nearly double the funding compared to its predecessor programme (2014-2020). |
| | | Erasmus+ offers mobility and cooperation opportunities in higher education, vocational education and training, school education (including early childhood education and care), adult education, youth and sport. |
| **EQAR** | **European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education** | The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education is the EHEA's official register of quality assurance agencies (QAA) that comply with the ESG. |
| **EQF** | **European Qualifications Framework** | The EQF aims to relate different countries' national qualifications systems to a common European reference framework. Users can apply the EQF to better understand and compare the qualification levels of different education and training systems. |
| **ESG** | **Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area** | The ESG were adopted at the EHEA Ministerial Conference in Yerevan in 2015. The ESG provides a framework for internal and external quality assurance in higher education. |
| | **Europass** | Europass was established by the European Union to assist European citizens in making their skills and qualifications clearly and easily understood throughout Europe. Its main objectives are to help citizens to better communicate their skills and qualifications when searching for a job or training; to help employers understand the skills and qualifications of the workforce; and to help education and training providers define and communicate the content of curricula. |
| **HEI** | **Higher Education Institution** | Any type of higher education institution which, in accordance with national legislation or practice, offers recognised academic degrees or other recognised qualifications at tertiary level of education. |
| | **Joint degrees** | A higher education qualification issued jointly by two or more higher education institutions or jointly by one or more HEI(s) and other awarding bodies, on the basis of a commonly developed study programme. |
| **LA** | **Learning Agreement (students)** | An agreement between the sending and receiving institution and the participating student in mobility programmes such as Erasmus+, defining the aims and content of the mobility period to ensure its relevance and quality. It can be used as a basis for recognition of the period abroad. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **LRC** | **Lisbon Recognition Convention**<br><br>**or**<br><br>**The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region** | The Council of Europe, in cooperation with UNESCO, adopted the LRC in 1997. The LRC is the main legal instrument on the recognition of qualifications in Europe and beyond. It has been ratified by more than 50 states.<br><br>Two bodies, namely the Committee of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region and the European Network of National Information Centres on Academic Mobility and Recognition (the ENIC Network) oversee, promote and facilitate the implementation of the LRC. |
| **NQF** | **National Qualifications Framework** | An instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria applicable to specified levels of learning outcomes. |
| **QA** | **Quality Assurance** | The process or set of processes adopted nationally and institutionally to ensure the quality of educational programmes and qualifications awarded. |
| **QF-EHEA** | **Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area** | The QF-EHEA is the Bologna Qualifications Framework. As overarching framework it helps to compare qualifications in the EHEA and sets the parameters for each Bologna country to develop its own national qualification framework. |
| | **Substantial Differences** | Major differences between qualifications providing a reason for non-recognition, introduced by the LRC. |
| | **Traineeship (work placement) in the Erasmus programme** | One of the Erasmus+ mobility schemes for students and graduates. It's a time spent in an enterprise or organisation abroad to acquire specific competences that are needed by the labour market and to gain work experience. |
| **ToR** | **Transcript of Records** | An official document which provides a complete summary of the student's academic record at an institution – either as part of their degree studies or credit mobility. |
| | **Workload** | Indication of the time students usually need to complete the learning activities (lectures, seminars, practical work, self-study, examinations, etc.) required to achieve the expected learning outcomes. |

# IX. Information Resources

A short path to automatic recognition – 4 models, 2018 (link: https://www.nuffic.nl/en/publications/a-short-path-to-automatic-recognition-4-models)

Automatic recognition in practice – examples and tools from the project partner countries, 2020 (link: https://www.q-entry.eu/the-projects/qentry-project-20-22/)

Automatic recognition in the Nordic Region, 2019 (link: https://norric.org/automatic-recognition-in-the-nordic-region/)

Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad (link: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32018H1210(01) )

Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) (link: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32021G0226(01) )

ECTS Users' Guide, 2015 (link: https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/ects-users-guide_en.pdf)

EHEA – European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process
(link: http://www.ehea.info)

EHEA Ministerial Declarations and Communiqués
(link: http://www.ehea.info/page-ministerial-declarations-and-communiques)

ENIC/NARIC network (link: https://www.enic-naric.net/)

ENIC/NARIC – Recognition tools and projects
(link: https://www.enic-naric.net/page-recognition-tools-projects)

European Commission – European Educational Area and Automatic Recognition
(link: https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/automatic-recognition-of-qualifications)

The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions, Third Edition, 2020
(link: https://www.nuffic.nl/en/publications/the-european-recognition-manual-for-higher-education-institutions)

Guidelines on fast-track recognition of Ukrainian academic qualifications, 2022
(link: https://education.ec.europa.eu/document/guidelines-on-fast-track-recognition-of-ukrainian-academic-qualifications)

Guidelines on how to use the Learning Agreement for Studies, 2022
(link: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/document/guidelines-on-how-to-use-the-learning-agreement-for-studies-2022)

The Lisbon Recognition Convention or The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, 1997 (link: https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treatynum=165)

Report by the EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition, 2015
(link: EHEA_Pathfinder_Group_on_Automatic_Recognition_January_2015_613723.pdf)

SeARcH ENGINE project (link: https://www.msmt.cz/areas-of-work/tertiary-education/project-search-engine-strengthening-educational-and)

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), Brussels 2015 (link: https://www.enqa.eu/esg-standards-and-guidelines-for-quality-assurance-in-the-european-higher-education-area/)

The Triangle of Automatic Recognition, 2020
(link: https://www.nuffic.nl/en/publications/the-triangle-of-automatic-recognition)

––––

Irina Ferencz, Kristina Hauschildt and Irma Garam (eds.): Mobility Windows: From Concept to Practice (ACA Papers on International Cooperation in Education), Bonn 2013

The European Higher Education Area in 2020. Bologna Process Implementation Report, Luxembourg 2020