

'A BACHELOR IS A BACHELOR'

EURASHE STATEMENT ON RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS

The concept of recognition is one of the key principles for students' mobility within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), for the mobility of students, graduates and labour force within EU. Smooth and easy recognition of qualifications, academic achievements and other learning make a part of the desired vision driving developments within the Bologna process. However the reality and implementation are still far from fulfilling such vision.

EURASHE holds the view that each level of the three-tier system including the Short Cycle Higher Education has a generic quality and value, irrespective of the nature of the provision, the 'status' of the provider, and the type of learner. The only proviso should be that there is a robust and unequivocal quality control procedure, which monitors the above three features, under the responsibility of a national or regional government, and in line with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA.

Regrettably the above is still far from being a reality within EHEA, it may be helpful to insist on supporting measures that would substantially contribute to achieving this objective. These include, amongst others, 'automatic recognition', alignment of access and admission procedures, and enhanced cross-national cooperation and mobility.

In this statement for each of the above, we list the main arguments, and subsequently make a proposal for an effective implementation.

AUTOMATIC RECOGNITION:

Automatic recognition refers to the recognition of – usually foreign – degrees and qualifications from the learner’s point of view (i.e. academic recognition), as distinct from professional recognition. Favourable factors for such recognition are cultural and historical affinities between countries, geographical proximity and similar educational systems. Other factors, though they may be helpful, are not necessarily delivering the desirable effect, namely seamless acceptance of each other’s qualifications. Examples are: speaking the same language, corresponding economies, similar employment conditions, etc.

Whereas ‘trust’ is often seen as a sufficient ‘warranty’ for mutual recognition, it can also be misleading in the sense that this may lead to a disregard of the evidence base and the lack of insistence on continually updated relevant data.

Automatic recognition in order to have a legal basis, can be authorized by government decision only, and its remit can only apply to its own territory and the Transnational Education (TNE) within its borders.

Neither does it dispense with the rights of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to decide for themselves on the more specific recognition of foreign degrees in a particular study field, and for the programmes they offer.

 **EURASHE RECOMMENDS that countries which share common features as those described above endeavour to agree on mutual recognition of degrees and qualifications, in support of learning mobility and ultimately professional mobility.**

SOME OBSTACLES IDENTIFIED WITHIN THE CONSULTATION AMONG EURASHE MEMBERS

- *administrative, sometimes rather bureaucratic procedures, their length and complexity*
- *different rules applied by HEIs even within the same country, comprehension of “substantial differences”*
- *lack of evidence about competences acquired in a study programme; often due to limited Learning Outcomes approach in the country concerned*
- *different rules applied by HEIs in evaluating study results*
- *obstruction in some countries to equal treatment of university and other HEI delivering the foreign qualifications, especially resulting from differences in educational systems with unitary or binary structure or different structure of secondary education*
- *non-compatible National Qualification Frameworks make it difficult to accept foreign qualifications*
- *very often a case by case treatment, with a lack of clear criteria & quality assurance tools*
- *limited knowledge of English language with the administrators in HEIs, dealing with recognition issues concerning foreign qualifications*
- *procedural division of recognition within a HEI in two-step procedure: recognition as such is at the institutional level vs. the actual admission decided at the faculty/department level*
- *low attention paid to the choice of international partners for an exchange programme*

ALIGNMENT OF ACCESS AND ADMISSION PROCEDURES, ALSO ON THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL:

While the institutional autonomy requires that only the HEI itself can decide which student it accepts for a programme or course, the individual’s inalienable right to education also must be respected. In the EHEA there can be no discrimination between a national citizen and a citizen from another country in the EHEA.

The academic recognition of foreign qualifications is the institution’s prerogative, but sometimes there is a disparity between the procedures for access into a country’s education system (and into a HEI) and the procedures for study admission at a specific HEI programme. Furthermore, different HEIs of the same type adopt different approaches where admission is accepted in one and denied in the other. Bureaucratic regulations and administrative red tape are mostly blamed for this, but there is also unwillingness to consider the student’s viewpoint.

The discrimination is particularly striking (and occurs most) when it concerns a student from a HEI that does not have a university status, who is seeking admission for further study at a traditional university. Likewise, the problems encountered for someone with a vocational education and training (VET) qualification seeking access into Higher Education, the lack of effective interfaces and permeability tools between Higher Education and VET acts as a barrier to access.

➤ EURASHE RECOMMENDS that countries align their access and admission procedures, in support of learning mobility and ultimately professional mobility. There should be no distinction in principle between an academic and a professionally oriented qualification as regards recognition: 'A Bachelor is a Bachelor'. Further attention to the issue of permeability and recognition of prior learning and experience should respond to the growing need for flexible pathways within the life-long learning concept.

EXAMPLES OF SOLUTIONS WITHIN THE CONSULTATION:

At EU and/or EHEA level:

- *support for implementation of existing instruments within national policies and legislation*
- *support for peer learning and exchange of experience and best practice*
- *support for international cooperation of institutions*
- *support the discussion on permeability between VET and HE and an approach to enhanced compatibility of instruments*

At national/regional level:

- *implement Lisbon Recognition Convention and align NQF to the overarching EQF & EHEA-QF (legislation and procedures should be in place at all levels)*
- *develop a form of 'automatic recognition' on a 'generic' basis with preferential partners (countries), which have a comparable/compatible HE system in (for example) the same region (e.g. BENELUX agreement, involving 4 countries/regions)*
- *provide stimuli for professional development of administrators in charge of recognition/admission at HEIs*
- *access policies should be in line with employment policies (and vice versa); education and labour/employment ministries therefore have to liaise with each other*

At university/HEI level

- *promote comprehension and use of the full potential of the learning outcomes concept*
- *make regulations and procedures at institutional (recognition level) and programme level (admissions level) more compatible*
- *make 'mobility' of students an integrated part of the internationalisation strategy of HEIs: it will make the recognition issue more relevant*
- *stimulate the knowledge of adequate foreign language (primarily English) and other relevant skills for credential evaluators*

CROSS-NATIONAL COOPERATION AND (INTERNATIONAL) MOBILITY:

Cross-national cooperation and (international) mobility is mostly presented as the ultimate goal of ensuring that foreign qualifications recognised, but it is also a means to achieve recognition. For it requires countries to get their things in order, each time new forms of learning experience in other countries and the supporting mobility present themselves. Examples from the recent past are forms of internship and work placements, within or outside the regular curriculum, individual learning experiments, and all forms of prior learning. Though such forms of international cooperation have been there since the Erasmus programme for student exchange came into existence, and gradually became mainstream with the steady participation of professionally oriented programmes, it took decades before such types of mobility were recognised as an integrated part of an exchange programme, and later as a recognised and fully credited form of learning exchange in their own right.

As the EU 'Sorbonne Statement' now starts pushing the frontiers between the different sectors of education, with its blurring of priorities, namely studying, learning, research, and working, the emphasis is increasingly on the outcomes of education rather than on the experience of learning itself. It is up to the stakeholders in education to ensure that an appropriate balance is kept between these aspects.

➤ EURASHE VALUES the diverse forms of international experience, including relevant work experience, and as the voice of professionally oriented programmes we would wish to see a better alignment between academic and professional recognition. For academic purposes a full implementation of the existing 'Bologna' instruments at the national and institutional level seems to be a sufficient condition for enhanced recognition within higher education. EURASHE calls for an enhanced support for capacity development at institutional level and sharing experience using the national and EU programmes.

FULL RECOGNITION OF THE 'SHORT CYCLE HIGHER EDUCATION'

Finally, bearing in mind that the main priority of the Bologna Process remains the harmonisation of HE systems of countries in the EHEA, based on a three-cycle system of education with short cycle qualifications adopted by the Yerevan communique of the ministers (2015),

➤ EURASHE RECOMMENDS an advanced entry in the first cycle for the holders of a short cycle higher education degree included in the national qualifications framework of the country of origin provided that the Bologna tools are applied to those degrees. Moreover, EURASHE calls for a full adoption of the short cycle qualification as a specific, stand-alone qualification level within the Qualification Framework of EHEA. This type of programmes may enhance 'advanced entry' and access to higher education.

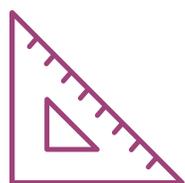
'A BACHELOR IS A BACHELOR'

EURASHE STATEMENT IN A NUTSHELL



AUTOMATIC RECOGNITION

We recommend that countries which share common features endeavour to agree on mutual recognition of degrees and qualifications within the coming years, in support of learning mobility and ultimately professional mobility. Yet the vision of automatic recognition across EHEA should be followed further.



ALIGNMENT OF ACCESS AND ADMISSION PROCEDURES, ALSO ON THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

We recommend that there should be no distinction in principle between an academic and professionally oriented qualification as regards recognition: 'A Bachelor is a Bachelor'.



CROSS-NATIONAL COOPERATION AND (INTERNATIONAL) MOBILITY

We call for alignment of academic and professional recognition. We see the full implementation of existing tools and instruments within the Bologna process at all levels as the main task for enhanced mobility and recognition. We call for an enhanced support for capacity development and shared learning at institutional level.



FULL RECOGNITION OF THE 'SHORT CYCLE QUALIFICATION'

We call for a full adoption of the short cycle qualification as a specific, stand-alone qualification level within the Qualification Framework of EHEA and its recognition for the transfer to further levels.