

A short path to automatic recognition - 4 models

Policy paper #1

February 2018

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Executive Summary

In 2015, the ministers of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) committed themselves in the Yerevan Communiqué to make automatic recognition a reality by 2020. With only two years left to achieve this goal, this paper aims to boost this agenda by offering a practical perspective on how to apply and support automatic recognition in a national setting.

An analysis of current systems of automatic recognition in the European Higher Education Area resulted in the distinction of the following four models of automatic recognition:

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 recognized 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.

Based on these models, the following recommendations are made to support the realization of automatic recognition by 2020:

- All EHEA countries should develop a national strategy and implementation plan for the (continued) implementation of automatic recognition, involving at least the Ministry of Education and the ENIC-NARIC centre;
- Conditions for how automatic recognition is applied should at all times be transparent to all relevant stakeholders and follow the principles of the LRC;
- Ratification and implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, implementation of the three cycle system and a quality assurance system based on the European Standards & Guidelines for quality assurance in higher education (ESG) is required for all countries to qualify for automatic recognition.

This paper is the result of the Erasmus+ Key Action 3 PARADIGMS project, undertaken by recognition experts from 9 ENIC-NARIC centres. The findings have been consulted in the ENIC-NARIC network which consist of 56 centres.

1. Introduction

The 47 Ministers of Education in the European Higher Education area committed themselves to make automatic recognition a reality in 2020. This paper provides recommendations that can support ENIC-NARIC centres and national governments alike to develop policies on the implementation of automatic recognition.

The recommendations follow from the PARADIGMS project, executed by a group of NARICs under the Erasmus+ Key Action 3 programme (see chapter 5 below – About the PARADIGMS project). The project builds further on the work of the Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition and adopted its definition of automatic recognition (chapter 2 – How to define automatic recognition). Next, the project team identified existing good practice in automatic recognition and extracted common elements (requirements for, agreements on and procedures for automatic recognition) that may be useful for all countries within the EHEA. This resulted in four models for implementation that are presented in chapter 3. Based on the findings, recommendations to achieve implementation of automatic recognition are presented in chapter 4.

2. How to define automatic recognition

“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)”

[definition Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition¹]

Automatic recognition is a system-level based recognition ('bachelor = a bachelor', 'master = a master') of quality assured comparable degrees, both for the purpose of continuing education and for access to the labour market (non-regulated professions), and without intervention of a credential evaluator.

It accepts the level, quality and workload of a qualification (3 of the 5 main elements). The foreign degree is recognized on the same level and gives the same academic rights (access to further studies) and employment rights (access to the labour market) in the country where recognition is sought, as in the 'home' country. The evaluation of the other 2 main elements of a qualification (profile and learning outcomes) is considered evaluation at programme level, and still requires a credential evaluation.

It is important to note that automatic recognition of foreign qualifications does not mean foreign students are automatically admitted to higher education institutions. In most EHEA countries admission is the prerogative of higher education institutions and may depend on additional selection criteria. Following the principles of the Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition, the PARADIGMS project focussed on all Bachelor and Master qualifications (EQF level 6 and 7), issued within the EHEA, using the recommendations of the Yerevan Communiqué on automatic recognition as a starting point. However, individual ENIC-NARIC centres are free to apply automatic recognition to a wider range of countries and/or qualifications.

¹ Report Pathfinder Group on Automatic recognition: <http://bologna-yerevan2015.ehea.info/files/EHEA%20Pathfinder%20Group%20on%20Automatic%20Recognition%20January%202015.pdf>

3. Four models for automatic recognition

Building on existing expertise and initiatives, the PARADIGMS project made an inventory of the different ways automatic recognition is currently being put in practice in the EHEA. Based on this inventory, four models are distinguished that together are considered to cover the options in which automatic recognition can be implemented:

- I. Legal bilateral and multilateral agreements;**
- II. A legally binding unilateral list of degrees;**
- III. Non-legal bilateral and multilateral agreements;**
- IV. 'De facto' automatic recognition.**

Below these four models are explained further and illustrated with examples of current recognition practices. An overview of the advantages and disadvantages ('pros and cons') of each model is also included.

I. Legal bilateral and multilateral agreements

Already prior to the 2015 Yerevan communiqué legally binding bilateral and multilateral agreements on the automatic recognition of qualifications came into use. Especially neighbouring countries took the initiative to come to formal agreements on the automatic recognition of each-others qualifications. Currently we count a number of bi- and multilateral agreements within all regions of the EHEA.

Bilateral agreements exist between countries with legally binding recognition decisions as well as countries where recognition decisions are advisory. When drafting an agreement one should focus on the general outlines, leaving the details to the competent recognition authority (in many countries higher education institutions and/or the ENIC-NARIC centre). This offers the flexibility needed in response to ongoing developments in higher education. An example of an agreement on general terms is the *BENELUX agreement on automatic system level recognition of academic qualifications*.

The example of Flanders

In the past few years, NARIC-Flanders has gained experience concerning automatic recognition on the basis of legally binding bilateral and multilateral agreements. As it stands, Flanders has the following (pending) agreements concerning automatic recognition at system level:

- Level equivalence with the Netherlands - EQF-level 6-7-8 (bilateral since 2010)
- Level equivalence within the Benelux - EQF-level 6-7 (multilateral since 2015)
- Level equivalence with Denmark, Poland and Portugal – EQF-level 6-7-8 (bilateral, planned)

Two main principles underlie the Flemish model:

- A. A clear framework for automatic recognition
- B. Mutual trust between the participating countries

A. A clear framework for automatic recognition

In Flanders automatic recognition is regulated in article 255 of the Codex Higher Education. The Codex states that the Flemish government can stipulate automatic recognition at system level. Following the legislation, automatic recognition should be based on the following criteria:

- The presence of a Quality Assurance system (QA) that complies with the Standard and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA. The QA should guarantee that the learning outcomes are fulfilled;
- The presence of an education structure which is accepted within the EHEA and integrated in one or both of the European qualification frameworks.

Having well-defined criteria for applying automatic recognition provides a solid framework to enter negotiations and find agreement with other countries for bi- and multilateral agreements.

B. Mutual trust between the participating countries

Mutual trust between the countries involved is a second precondition for reaching (legal) agreements on automatic recognition

Over the past few years Flanders organized country-seminars with Portugal, Denmark and Poland to create mutual trust and to increase understanding of each-others education systems. As part of the country seminars, possible obstacles that should be overcome were identified. For example how to deal with 'pre-Bologna' degrees (issued before the implementation of the BaMa structure). Representatives of higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies and the Ministries of Education participated in the seminars. It is expected that the seminars will help to put automatic recognition into legislation.

Pros and cons

Legal bilateral and multilateral agreements	Pro	Con
	Clear (legal) framework	Coming to an agreement is a long and arduous process
	Recognition decisions are known in advance	The scope of the agreements is limited to a few countries
	Transparency for hei's, students and other stakeholders involved in recognition	The impression may rise that qualifications from countries that are not included in the agreements are – per definition – not suitable for automatic recognition
	Simplification of the procedures	Less flexible: revision of legislation may be needed to adapt to educational reforms and/or new qualifications
	Fast recognition decisions	The autonomy of hei's to make their own recognition decisions may be hampered

II. A legally binding unilateral list of degrees

A second model with a legally binding character is automatic recognition based on a list of countries. This model is not based on a bi- or multilateral agreement, as countries can decide unilaterally which qualifications from which countries to include. In Portugal, where a country list was introduced in 2007, a commission including representatives from the Ministry of Higher Education and higher education institutions was established to decide on the qualifications and countries qualifying for automatic recognition.

The example of Portugal

In 2007 the Portuguese government introduced decree law 341/2007 on automatic recognition of bachelor, master and doctoral degrees, aiming to remove mobility obstacles and to eliminate bureaucratic procedures and delays. According to the new law, foreign qualifications that are identical to the Portuguese Licenciado, Mestre and Doutor in terms of level, nature and objectives, entitle their holders to all academic rights in Portugal. Recognition decisions are published online for public consultation and transparency purposes. Application costs are low (around 27 euros) and the turn-around time is maximum 1 month upon submission of a complete file.

The Portuguese law on automatic recognition is the outcome of a consultative process, entrusting the decision regarding the recognition of foreign qualifications to a commission. This commission includes the Director-General of Higher Education (president) and representatives of the Council of Portuguese University Rectors, the Coordinating Council of Higher Polytechnic Institutes and the Portuguese Association of Private Higher Education. A fifth member is appointed by the others.

The Directorate-General of Higher Education, through the Unit for Recognition, Mobility and International Cooperation (DRMCI) provides technical expertise and implements the mechanisms at central level. For this purpose the Unit-DRMCI collects and analyses information on:

- Higher Education Systems in each country (pre and post Bologna)
- Quality Assurance & Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions
- National Qualification Frameworks
- Official degrees
- Grading scales
- Any other relevant info

Currently the Portuguese list includes 36 mostly EU countries, but as more higher education systems are being evaluated continuously, new countries or regions can be added to the list.

The decisions of the commission are of a general nature, relating to:

- 1 - a qualification in a state;
- 2 - a qualification awarded by a group of higher education institutions in a state.

In Portugal public higher education institutions are entitled to recognize a foreign qualification to the corresponding degrees of licenciado, mestre and doutor. The 3rd cycle degree (doutor) can also be recognized by the Directorate General for Higher Education. To ensure higher education institutions are well informed about the law on automatic recognition, the Unit-DRMCI provides assistance and regular training sessions.

[See: Table with countries and degrees Portugal](#)

Pros and cons

A legally binding unilateral list of degrees	Pro	Con
	Clear (legal) framework	Conceiving the country list is demanding, as well as keeping it up to date
	Recognition decisions are known in advance	The scope of the agreements is limited to a few countries / selection of qualifications
	Transparency for hei's, students and other stakeholders involved in recognition	The impression may rise that qualifications from countries that are not included in the list are – per definition – not suitable for automatic recognition
	Simplification of the procedures	Less flexible: revision of the list may be needed to adapt to educational reforms and/or new qualifications
	Fast recognition decisions	The autonomy of hei's to make their own recognition decisions may be hampered

III. Non-legal bilateral and multilateral agreements

In addition to the above mentioned legalistic approaches to support automatic recognition, a third option is to come to 'soft' agreements on mutual recognition of each others' qualifications. The Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition recommended regional cooperation within recognition as a stepping stone towards the final achievement of automatic recognition within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In response to this recommendation the Nordic-Baltic countries jointly developed an admission manual.

The Nordic-Baltic example

The Nordic-Baltic admission manual was developed in 2016 with the purpose of creating a transparency and recognition tool for admissions officers in the Nordic and Baltic countries. The manual aims to present guidance on recognition of all higher education qualifications and to provide a basis for more automatic and smooth recognition of qualifications from the Nordic-Baltic region.

The Nordic-Baltic admission manual has been developed in a partnership among the central recognition authorities in each participating country, i.e. the ENIC-NARIC offices of Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Denmark, Iceland, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

The manual includes a table showing which national qualifications are comparable in level. Applicants who hold the qualifications mentioned in the table should be eligible for access to programmes at the next level within the region. By access it is meant that the qualifications fulfil the general requirements for access to studies at the next level, while the decision on admission and whether applicants meet the specific admission requirements will remain with higher education institutions.

In addition to the table, the manual provides information on the different higher education systems, including types of recognised higher education institutions and types of higher education qualifications, information on ECTS credits, degree titles in English and the national language, qualification frameworks level and the right to access the next level of study. Furthermore, information on upper secondary qualifications giving access to higher education studies in each country is included. The manual recommends that all upper secondary qualifications mentioned should give general access to undergraduate study programmes within the region.

See: [Recommendation on recognition of qualifications within the Nordic-Baltic region](#)

Pros and cons

Non-legal bilateral and multilateral agreements	Pro	Con
	Trust-based process without legal implications - coming to an agreement is less arduous	The scope of the agreements is limited to a few countries
	Process further enhances mutual understanding and appreciation of foreign education systems	The impression may rise that qualifications from countries that are not part of the agreement are – per definition – not suitable for automatic recognition
	More transparency for hei's, students and other stakeholders involved in recognition	Some scope for ambiguity as the agreement is not legally binding
	Autonomy of hei's to make their own recognition decisions remains intact	

IV. 'De facto' automatic recognition

A fourth and last option for automatic recognition of qualifications is 'de facto' automatic recognition. When making an inventory of current practices on automatic recognition within the framework of the PARADIGMS project, it became apparent that many EHEA countries already automatically accept bachelor and master qualifications from quality assured comparable degrees in other EHEA countries, without referring to formal procedures or agreements on automatic recognition.

In order to create more clarity and guidance about the possibilities to implement de facto automatic recognition, an inventory was made. On the basis of current national recognition practices, the recognition experts involved in PARADIGMS identified six criteria that can be used to decide if a country qualifies for de facto automatic recognition. These criteria are: 1) implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, 2) development of an NQF with reference to the EQF, 3) EQAR registration, 4) ENQA membership, 5) a national database with accredited hei's/study programmes and 6) availability of diploma supplements.

The project team also explored the extent to which the identified criteria are 'hard' criteria or 'soft' criteria, the latter providing greater insight into the quality of the education system and/or the level of the qualification obtained without being a pre-condition for countries to qualify for de facto automatic recognition. The findings are presented in the table below:

Criteria to qualify for de facto automatic recognition

1. Implementation LRC	The implementation of the LRC is perceived as a 'hard' criterium to qualify for automatic recognition
2. National Qualifications Framework (NQF) with reference to European Qualifications Framework (EQF)	Introduction of the three cycle system in higher education and development of a NQF that is referenced to the EQF are also generally perceived as indispensable to qualify for automatic recognition. However, some caution is needed as a) countries sometimes make uneven references to the EQF (for instance short cycle qualifications in some countries are referenced to level 6 in the EQF, whereas comparable qualifications in other countries are referenced to level 5) and b) the NQFs may also include informal and non-formal qualifications, like sectoral qualifications. These may be recognized internationally, but do not qualify for automatic recognition at present.
3. Reference to the EHEA Framework	In light of the concerns mentioned under point 2 (EQF), reference to the EHEA Framework can provide a good alternative to qualify for automatic recognition. The EHEA Framework only includes higher education qualifications. However, many EHEA countries have not completed the self-certification process for the EHEA Framework.
4. QA agency is registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for higher education (EQAR) ²	EQAR registration is perceived as an important way to guarantee that the quality assurance system is in line with the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in higher education. However, it should be noted that quite a few EHEA countries whose education systems are commonly seen as 'of good quality' are not registered in EQAR (e.g. Sweden). Thus: EQAR registration is an important parameter for the quality of higher education, but countries that are not EQAR registered should not be excluded to qualify for automatic recognition beforehand.
5. QA agency is member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)	A second way to assure the quality assurance system is in line with the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in higher education, is ENQA membership. However, national quality assurance systems differ widely, reflecting local governance structures and policy priorities. Sometimes two or more local QA agencies operate in one country and they may not all be ENQA members. In addition, some countries do not have a national QA agency, but use the services of foreign QA agencies. Thus: ENQA membership is another important indicator of the quality of higher education. However, the criterium cannot be used to beforehand exclude countries from qualifying for automatic recognition.

² Remark: also in systems where the QA agency functions well, not recognized educational providers and/or diploma mills may be active. Thus, credential evaluators should always check if the qualification is issued by a recognized higher education institution.

6. National database with accredited hei's/study programmes	Although a useful transparency tool, national databases proved to be unavailable in many EHEA countries.
7. Availability of diploma supplements	Diploma Supplements were found useful in applying automatic recognition. However, issuing Diploma Supplements remains the responsibility of individual higher education institutions. This makes it very difficult to use this criterium to decide if a country qualifies for automatic recognition.

It should be noted that, when looking at the way de facto automatic recognition is currently being practiced within the EHEA, there is a great variety in the selection of countries and qualifications that are considered. However, as reflected in the table above, three criteria are often used. Countries applying for de facto automatic recognition should:

- Implement the Lisbon Recognition Convention;
- Introduce the three cycle system of higher education and develop a National Qualifications Framework that is referenced to the European Qualifications Framework and/or the EHEA Framework
- Have a quality assurance system based on the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in higher education (ESG).

Depending on national policy other criteria may also be taken into account, like the already mentioned availability of a national database or diploma supplements. In practice, historical reasons, political arguments and general trust often play a role in the selection process as well.

Although each country/ENIC-NARIC centre reserves the right to decide on its own policy on automatic recognition, transparency is always key. When applying de facto automatic recognition, it is therefore important to clearly describe the procedures and criteria used. This may be done by publishing the procedures or, as NARIC Ireland has done, introducing standardized comparability statements. Often used descriptions of foreign education systems are useful transparency tools as well.

Examples of transparency tools for de facto automatic recognition

NARIC Ireland offers a [Foreign Qualifications Database](#) where standardized statements can be downloaded free of charge.

Nuffic (NARIC The Netherlands) publishes online [descriptions of foreign education systems](#), including a standard comparison with the Dutch education level.

Pros and cons

De facto automatic recognition	Pro	Con
	This model can relatively easily be applied (no long and arduous process to come to an agreement)	Continuous need to inform admission officers on when and how to apply de facto automatic recognition
	Inclusive approach – not limited to a few countries or qualifications	More scope for ambiguity as there is no binding agreement
	Flexibility to add new qualifications/countries in response to ongoing developments in higher education	–
	Autonomy of hei's to make their own recognition decisions remains intact	–

4. Recommendations

There are several ways to work towards the Yerevan goal of achieving automatic recognition in the EHEA in 2020. Several countries have opted for a legalistic approach in the form of bi- or multilateral agreements or in the form of a unilaterally composed country list. Other countries have made 'soft' non-legalistic agreements about mutual recognition of qualifications. Finally, it is possible to implement 'de facto' automatic recognition on the basis of a number of set criteria. Countries/ ENIC-NARIC centres that want to give automatic recognition an impetus, should consider carefully which approach fits best within the national legal and societal context.

Based on the experiences with the four models that are identified and described in the previous chapter, the following recommendations can be made about the implementation of automatic recognition:

- Transparency is key, regardless of the implementation model chosen. Procedures and the criteria used for automatic recognition of foreign qualifications should at all times be clear to all stakeholders;
- Different models of automatic recognition can be applied simultaneously, allowing flexibility to choose the best strategy for your country. For instance in The Netherlands that has a multilateral agreement with Belgium and Luxembourg (Model I) and applies de facto automatic recognition for most other EHEA countries (Model IV);
- When opting for a legalistic approach it is recommended to agree on general principles, leaving the details to the competent recognition authority. This offers the flexibility needed in response to ongoing developments in higher education;
- Implementation of the LRC, the three-cycle system of higher education with reference to the EQF/EHEA Framework and a quality assurance system based on the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in higher education are important criteria for all forms of automatic recognition. Countries in the EHEA that do not yet meet these criteria should work towards them to make automatic recognition in the EHEA a reality;
- For historic reasons, out of mutual confidence as well as for political reasons, countries/ ENIC-NARIC centres may implement automatic recognition without applying formal criteria. As a result, they may automatically recognize qualifications from a country that does not meet the above mentioned criteria (implementation of the LRC, introduction of the three-cycle system and a QA system based on the ESG). When this has proven to be successful in practice, there is no reason to alter these policies.

Following these recommendations, the following actions are identified to support the implementation of automatic recognition in the EHEA by 2020:

- On national level the main stakeholders in recognition should start a discussion on what strategy fits the (further) implementation of automatic recognition best. This should result in an implementation plan. The partners involved in this discussion depend on the national context, but should at least include the Ministry of Education, the ENIC-NARIC centre and Quality Assurance Agencies;
- Ministries of Education in the EHEA should ensure that on national level two preconditions for automatic recognition are met: 1) ratification and implementation of Lisbon Recognition Convention and 2) implementation of the three cycle system;

- Quality assurance agencies in the EHEA, together with the responsible national authorities, should ensure that their QA system is based in the European Standards & Guidelines for quality assurance in higher education (ESG);
- ENIC-NARIC centres should ensure that the conditions for automatic recognition are transparent to all relevant stakeholders and follow the principles of the LRC;
- All stakeholders in recognition on national and international level (ENIC-NARIC centres, the NARIC Advisory Board and ENIC Bureau, students, quality assurance agencies, competent authorities, etc.) are encouraged to create commitment to the above recommendations when discussing the implementation of automatic recognition with European stakeholders, in order to pave the way for its implementation.

5. About the PARADIGMS project

This paper was produced as part of the New Paradigms in Recognition (PARADIGMS) project, which aims to contribute to more effective policies for the recognition of foreign qualifications in the European Higher Education Area, by exploring two important new developments: a) the implementation of automatic recognition and b) recognition of experiences gained through new forms of learning such as MOOCs and in-company training programmes³.

Between March 2016 and February 2018 two expert groups have been formed to make an inventory of the latest developments on automatic recognition and on what has been named 'eclectic learning'. In addition, guidelines to further implement automatic recognition in the EHEA and to recognize new forms of learning, have been developed and tested.

The PARADIGMS consortium is composed of representatives from the ENIC-NARIC network: NARIC France, NARIC Denmark, NARIC Lithuania, NARIC Norway, NARIC Portugal, NARIC Ireland, NARIC Slovenia, NARIC Flanders and NARIC The Netherlands. Other partners involved are The President of the ENIC Bureau and the Vice-President of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee. The project is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.

³ Another paper is available on the recognition of MOOCs and in-company training programmes. See: <https://www.nuffic.nl/en/diploma-recognition/paradigms>

Colofon

This publication is part of the PARADIGMS project.
Its partners are:

- Nuffic (coordinator)
- Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education Lithuania (SKVC)
- Centre international d'études pédagogiques (CIEP)
- Danish Agency for Science and Higher Education
- Directorate-General for Higher Education Portugal (DGES)
- Ministry of Education, Science and Sport Slovenia
- NARIC Vlaanderen
- Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT)
- Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)



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Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

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