

Q-ENTRY

INTERNATIONAL DATABASE
ON HIGHER EDUCATION
ENTRY QUALIFICATIONS

AUTOMATIC RECOGNITION IN PRACTICE



Examples and tools
from the project partner countries

This document was developed in the framework of the Erasmus+ co-funded project *International Database on Higher Education Entry Qualifications* (qENTRY+), which aims to support the achievement of automatic recognition. This document is one of the main deliverables of the project together with the improvement of the Q-ENTRY database, which contains authoritative information provided by the competent bodies on school leaving qualifications giving access to higher education in the national system of education.

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OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY



This document provides insight on automatic recognition in practice and outlines examples and tools from the project partner countries. It is developed in the framework of the project *International Database on Higher Education Entry Qualifications* (qENTRY+), which aims to support the achievement of automatic recognition. In this light, this document is one of the main deliverables of the project together with the improvement of the *Q-ENTRY database*, which contains authoritative information provided by the competent bodies on school leaving qualifications giving access to higher education in the national system of education.

The **primary objective of this study** is to gain insight on common challenges and gather possible solutions to foster the implementation of automatic recognition, starting from the perception of the stakeholders directly involved in the recognition process. Additionally, it aims at collecting and sharing practices and tools employed both at national and international level to build upon the knowledge and practical instruments we have at our disposal.

The consortium unanimously agreed to use a bottom-up approach starting from the current needs of higher education stakeholders. This was done through the organisation of a targeted focus group which brought together national institutions dealing with academic recognition of qualifications in each partner country, with a particular focus on access and/or admission procedures. The guiding questions of the focus group concentrated on investigating the understanding of the concept of automatic recognition, collecting information on practices for the implementation of automatic recognition currently in place, and exploring the perception of the main benefits and challenges regarding the concept and the practice of automatic recognition.

The document is divided into three main sections. The first one gives an overview on how access to higher education is regulated in the partner countries. The second part is devoted to the description of the focus groups results. The last section presents final considerations concerning the information collected in the study and is enriched by insights from participants in the workshop *the AR(t) of accessing higher education organised* in the framework of the 29th Annual Joint Meeting of the ENIC and NARIC Networks (Dublin, 19-21 June 2022).

Lastly, the two annexes provide a list of existing resources to implement automatic recognition (Annex I) and the focus group reports (Annex II).

STATE OF THE ART IN THE PARTNER COUNTRIES



The following paragraph describes how access to higher education in each of the 5 involved countries is regulated as well as the state of play concerning the implementation of automatic recognition at national level.

2.1. Access to higher education and implementation of automatic recognition

2.1.1. Belgium Flemish Community

The *Diploma van Secundair Onderwijs* (diploma of secondary education) provides general access to higher education and admission to all higher education programmes, regardless of the type of specialisation. There are four types of secondary education:

- *Algemeen secundair onderwijs (ASO): “general secondary education”*
ASO emphasises a broad general education. It does not prepare students for a specific profession. The ASO mainly lays a solid foundation for participating in higher education.
- *Kunstsecundair onderwijs (KSO): “fine arts secondary education”*
Kso combines a general education with an active artistic practice. After the KSO pupils can pursue a profession or follow higher education.
- *Technisch secundair onderwijs (TSO): “technical secondary education”*
TSO pays attention to general and technical-theoretical subjects. After the TSO the pupil can choose a profession or follow higher education. This education also includes practical training.
- *Beroepssecundair onderwijs (BSO): “vocational secondary education”*
BSO is practical vocational training. The pupil learns a specific profession in addition to general education.

ASO/KSO/TSO primarily prepare pupils to move on to higher education, while BSO is aimed at directly joining the labour market. In BSO, a seventh year is necessary in order to be granted a diploma of secondary education.

Associate degree programmes - level 5 NQF Flanders & European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF for LLL)¹

¹ EQF for LLL: The European qualifications framework distinguishes 8 levels, which go from level 1 to level 8. This is also the case for the Flemish qualifications framework: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/national-qualifications-framework-3_en.

On 1 September 2009, higher vocational education (**Hoger Beroepsonderwijs - HBO5**) was introduced in the Flemish educational system. Associate degree programmes are professionally oriented programmes situated in between secondary education and bachelor programmes.

Access requirements to enrol:

- You are no longer subject to (partial) compulsory school attendance (required age when enrolling: 18 years or turning 18 before 31/12).

And you possess one of the following study certificates:

- Study certificate of the second year of the third grade (vocational) secondary education, obtained at least 3 years before enrolment.
- A diploma of secondary education.
- A foreign qualification which is recognised as being equivalent by a Flemish Law, a Belgian Law, the European Directive, or an international agreement.

The board of the institution may, pursuant to the regulations, facilitate the access to a particular Associate degree programme on the basis of deviatory admission requirements, solely based on humanitarian grounds; medical, psychological or social grounds; the overall level of the candidate, which is assessed by the board of the institution. So, students not holding one of the certificates above, may take an entrance test. The regulations on the deviatory admission requirements may be obtained from the institution and have to be stipulated in their Education and Examination Regulation.

Bachelor's degree programmes - level 6 NQF Flanders & EQF for LLL

The following qualifications give direct **access** to a Bachelor's programme:

- The Flemish diploma of secondary education.
- A foreign qualification which is recognised as being equivalent by a Flemish Law, a Belgian Law, the European Directive or an international agreement.

For a number of programmes, there are **additional requirements**:

- Fine Arts: students who want to follow an artistic higher education programme must first pass a skill test, the artistic entrance exam, if they wish to enter a programme in the fields of study 'Audiovisual and Visual Arts', 'Music' and 'Performing Arts'.
- Medicine: for the university programme in medicine, you have to pass and obtain a favourable ranking in the entrance exam (*numerus clausus*).
- Dentistry: for the university programme in dentistry, you have to pass and obtain a favourable ranking in the entrance exam.
- For certain Bachelor's programmes: participation in a non-binding admission test is a condition for enrolment.

More information is available on this website: <https://www.studyinlanders.be/practical-information/admission-requirements>. An assessment of the knowledge of the teaching language may also be required.

The board of the institution may, pursuant to the regulations, facilitate the access to a particular Bachelor's programme on the basis of **deviatory admission requirements** (see above).

A student who has already obtained a Bachelor's degree can enter another Bachelor's programme without having to complete all the credits of that programme. A student who has already obtained an Associate degree does not have to start from scratch.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) may only admit students to **advanced Bachelor's programmes (Bachelor-na-bachelor)** if they have already obtained a Bachelor's degree.

Master's degree programmes - level 7 NQF Flanders & EQF for LLL

An academically oriented Bachelor's degree, provides direct access to at least one Master's programme.

A professionally oriented Bachelor's degree also provides access to a Master's programme, but HEIs may require a bridging programme. A **bridging programme** consists of a minimum of 45 and a maximum of 90 credits, which can be reduced to 30 credits based on the results of a test.

The HEI may also take into account the competences of the student like informal learning, non-formal learning and professional experience (*eerder verworven competenties* - EVC) and also previously obtained qualifications (*eerder verworven kwalificaties* - EVK) of the student. This may further reduce the bridging programme or even grant a full exemption.

In Flanders, Master's programmes should be concluded with a Master's thesis, which consists of a minimum of 15 ECTS and a maximum of 30 ECTS. A student with a Master's degree can enter another Master's programme without having to take up all the credits of that programme.

Advanced Master's programmes (Master-na-master) are only accessible to individuals who have already obtained a Master's degree.

Doctorate degree - level 8 NQF Flanders & EQF for LLL

In general, individuals who wish to obtain a Doctorate degree must already hold a Master's degree.

- The university may however request that the applicant passes an aptitude test to assess whether he is a suitable candidate to carry out scientific research in the field in question and whether he will be able to translate the results of this research into a dissertation.
- Students who have not obtained a Master's degree may be admitted to doctoral programmes. In such a case, the university may request that the student either sit a skills test to assess whether he would be a suitable candidate for a doctoral thesis or take an exam on components of academic education, which are determined by the university.

Implementation of automatic recognition

To enrol in higher education in Flanders, students need a diploma of secondary education, a higher education degree, or “a foreign qualification which is recognised as being equivalent by legislation (a Flemish Law, a Belgian Law, the European Directive or an international agreement)”. The following is an overview of the most important legal provisions regarding automatic recognition of foreign qualifications in Flanders.

International Baccalaureate and European Baccalaureate²

- The International Baccalaureate Diploma or *Diplôme du Baccalauréat International* awarded by the International Baccalaureate Organisation in Geneva is automatically recognised as equivalent to the Flemish diploma of secondary education.
- The European Baccalaureate is automatically recognised as equivalent to the Flemish diploma of secondary education.

Dutch qualifications issued abroad are automatically recognised in Flanders.

According to the *Besluit van de Vlaamse regering van 21 februari 2003 tot vaststelling van de gelijkwaardigheid van Vlaamse en Nederlandse studiebewijzen voor het voltijds secundair onderwijs*³, certain Dutch certificates obtained in secondary education are automatically recognised with a corresponding Flemish study certificate. The Dutch certificate *Diploma voorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs* (VWO) is automatically recognised as equivalent to the Flemish diploma *secundair onderwijs - algemeen secundair onderwijs* (ASO) and thus automatically grants access to higher education in Flanders.

Associate degree, Bachelor, Master and Doctor

(1) Benelux Decision on Mutual automatic level recognition of higher education qualifications

The Benelux Decision on Mutual automatic level recognition of higher education qualifications in the Benelux (*Dondelinger Decision*) of 18 May 2015, supplemented by the Benelux Decision of 25 January 2018⁴, offers every citizen legal certainty to **automatic level recognition** of all officially recognised higher education qualifications obtained in the Benelux. The level of such a higher education degree will be automatically recognised as equivalent, without any recognition procedure. The automatic recognition does not concern the content of the programmes leading to these degrees. Nor does it concern the recognition of professional qualifications, which is regulated by the [European Directive \(2005/36/EC\)](#).

² This is stipulated in legislation: Ministerieel besluit tot vastlegging van de algemene gelijkwaardigheid van het “International Baccalaureate Diploma”/“Diplôme du Baccalauréat International” en het “Europees baccalaureaatsdiploma” met het diploma van secundair onderwijs of 29 January 2015 <https://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/document.aspx?docid=14773>

³ <https://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/document.aspx?docid=13375>.

⁴ Decision M(2015)3 of the Benelux Committee of Ministers concerning the automatic mutual generic level recognition of higher education degrees, as supplemented by the Decision M(2018)1: https://www.benelux.int/files/9914/3807/8605/Publicatieblad_2015-2_NL.pdf; https://www.benelux.int/files/4015/1721/2782/Publicatieblad_2018-1_NL.pdf.

(2) Multilateral Treaty on automatic recognition of higher education qualifications⁵ within the Benelux-Baltic area.

Building on the Benelux Decisions and an agreement involving the Republic of Estonia, Republic of Latvia and Republic of Lithuania on the automatic academic recognition of qualifications concerning higher education in 2018, the Benelux members and the Baltic states recognise within their territories automatically each other's higher education degrees. They implemented the principle that a Bachelor is a Bachelor and a Master is a Master. This is a clear expression of the mutual trust of the Benelux and the Baltic authorities in each other's higher education systems, and in particular, in the quality assurance mechanisms underpinning them. The degrees will be automatically recognised as an Associate Degree, a Bachelor degree, a Master degree or a Doctoral degree, without the intervention of any recognition procedure whatsoever.

Other states are invited to accede⁶ to this Treaty.

Any state belonging to the European Higher Education Area may apply to accede it on the following conditions, namely having a trustworthy quality assurance systems for its higher education programmes in compliance with the *Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG), a Three-Tier Structure in the higher education system in compliance with the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area, and referenced its national higher education qualifications framework to the EQF for LLL⁷.

⁵ Treaty on the automatic recognition of higher education qualifications 14 September 2021
https://www.benelux.int/files/4316/3291/1017/TREATY_14.09.2021_EN.pdf

⁶ The secretariat of the Treaty is entrusted to the Secretariat-General of the Benelux Union. For more information on how to join, please contact Ms. Lotte Dijkink (l.dijkink@benelux.int) and Mr. Stephane Verwilghen (s.verwilghen@benelux.int) of the Benelux Secretariat.

⁷ For the paragraph related to Belgium Flemish Community refer to the following sources of information:

ENIC-NARIC centre of Flanders: <https://www.naricvlaanderen.be/>;

Studying and living in Flanders: <https://www.studyinlanders.be/>;

Compatibility with Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area: http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/Qualifications_frameworks/78/8/NQF_Flemish_National_Qualifications_Framework_596788.pdf;

Access and admission requirements in Flanders: <https://www.studyinlanders.be/practical-information/admission-requirements>;

Higher Education Law "Codex Hoger Onderwijs" of 11 October 2013: <https://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/document.aspx?docid=14650>;

Higher Education Register in Flanders contains all accredited Bachelor's and Master's programmes and Associate's degree programmes in Flanders, Belgium: <https://www.highereducation.be/home>;

Eurydice - National Education System Flemish Community of Belgium: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/belgium-flemish-community_en;

Higher Education in Flanders - Onderwijskiezer: https://www.onderwijskiezer.be/v2/hoger/hoger_higher_education.php;

Presentation Decision of Benelux on mutual automatic generic recognition of higher education degrees M(2015)3 of 18 May 2015: <https://rm.coe.int/16806933d9>;

Multilateral Treaty on automatic recognition of higher education qualifications within the Benelux-Baltic area: (scroll down for the English text version) <https://www.benelux.int/nl/nieuws/benelux-landen-en-baltische-staten-erkennen-automatisch-elkaars-diplomas>;

Report on the focus groups on automatic recognition in higher education institutions in Flanders (NARIC-Vlaanderen, 10th and 11th may 2021).

2.1.2. Bulgaria

To access higher education in Bulgaria it is necessary to undergo admission exams (*konkursen izpit*) administered by individual HEIs. Specific higher education admission criteria depend on both the type of HEI and the specialisation. HEIs establish their own admission procedures for each of their degree programmes on a year-by-year basis and publish these in advance. They are also free to determine whether to require additional tests on top of written admission exams.

Concerning the requirements for access to higher education with foreign qualifications, the official competent authorities for recognition of secondary education in Bulgaria with the purpose of access to higher education are the Regional Departments of Education (RDE), which are territorial structural units of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES). The legal basis of the procedures for secondary education recognition is Ordinance N. 11 from 1 September 2016 for Evaluation of Students' Learning Outcomes.

The recognition decisions of RDEs are legally binding, with national validity, not only limited to the territory of the corresponding RDE. The official competent authorities for admission to higher education in Bulgaria are the autonomous HEIs. The legal basis of the procedures for admission to higher education is the Ordinance for the State Requirements for Admitting Students in the Higher Schools of the Republic of Bulgaria. The ordinance defines two types of admission procedures according to the citizenship of the applicants:

1. **Admission of Bulgarian citizens, citizens of member-states of EU and EEA, persons with humanitarian status and foreign citizens with Bulgarian origins:** The admission of this category of qualification holders refers directly to a prior recognition of RDEs as a condition for admission.
2. **Admission procedures for third country nationals:** The procedures here have different state requirements, which are incorporated also with the requirements for issuance of "student" visas. The compulsory educational documents within this procedure are two:
 - The secondary education diploma/qualification itself.
 - Official document by a competent authority stating the rights of the qualification holder to higher education in the country in which the secondary education has been acquired. The HEIs make preliminary admission approval of the candidates and send their documents to the Ministry of Education and Science for the purposes of student visa issuance, which upon its approval notifies the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior.

The procedure for admission of third country nationals does not directly require submission of a certificate issued by RDEs along with the two above cited documents.

Implementation of automatic recognition

The Bulgarian legislation does not currently provide automatic recognition regarding individual level recognition, instead the recognition authorities apply **system level automatic recognition**.

The current state of the art among Bulgarian competent authorities shows some common points and some different perceptions of the concept of automatic recognition especially its differentiation between **system level** and **individual level** recognition. The common points of agreement are connected to acknowledging the right of qualification holders for fair recognition of their educational level and the right to access to further education as it had been acquired in the country of origin, with maximum possible facilitation of academic mobility. The existing recognition and admission practices guarantee this, with **procedures being based on a system level recognition** of the education awarded with all rights acquired in the home country. Yet the **concept of automatic recognition is unclear** in terms of its specific scope, extent and limits when it comes from system level to individual level of recognition with all its specifics, having in mind not only challenges like diploma mills, fake and forged documents, etc., but also different learning outcomes of quality assured qualifications that are supposed to be comparable as a whole, like fail degrees of accredited providers, qualifications, awarded by quality assured institutions after education provided by non-accredited institutions, etc.

The discussions showed that the main steps to better currently approach automatic mutual recognition at the level of recognition authorities are those steps, concerning the everyday job within the current legislative framework, such as enhanced digitalization of procedures, better and wider information provision through access to structured sources of information about national educational systems, about recognized educational institutions and qualifications, publicly available registers of issued qualifications, as well as transparency tools facilitating the variety of different aspects of the current procedures of recognition, which is automatic on a system level. Their contribution to the current individual level recognition procedures would be a considerable step towards the concept of automatic mutual recognition both at the level of institution and at the level of the sector as a whole. Legislative changes at national level are connected to Europe-wide agreement on a common understanding of the concept of automatic recognition as a prerequisite for its Europe-wide applying as a step towards European Educational Area. The process should build upon the Lisbon Recognition Convention without compromising essential quality and recognition standards set out there as it is mentioned in the two Annexes below, which contain further details about the state of the art in Bulgaria. The contribution of the concept for automatic recognition would be most effective only in synergy with contribution of other tools, procedures and mechanisms affecting the international academic mobility.

2.1.3. Italy

To accede to higher education courses in Italian institutions it is necessary to hold the *Esame di Stato conclusivo del percorso di studio (durata anni___) di [corso di studio]* (Diploma certifying the results of the State Exam at the end of the course of studies (duration years____) in [course of study]).

The diploma is obtained after passing the relevant State Exam (called Maturity) access to which is subject to a decision taken by the class council following the final exam during the last class of a study course taken in a *Liceo* (Lyceum), *Istituto tecnico* (technical Institute) or *Istituto professionale* (professional Institute). The diploma is conferred on individuals upon completion of a total of 13 years of schooling, broken down into 5 years of primary school, 3 years of lower secondary school and the following 5 years of upper secondary school.

The diploma allows access to all Italian higher education courses. Specific admission requirements (exams, entry tests, etc.) may be requested by single institutions or, in the case of courses with limited access, based on national legislation.

Concerning the requirements for access to higher education with foreign qualifications, Art. 2 of [Law 148 of 2002](#) establishes that universities and HEIs are nominated as the competent bodies for the recognition of cycles and study periods abroad and of foreign qualifications, on the subject of:

- Access to higher education.
- Furthering university studies.
- Attainment of Italian university qualifications.

They will issue decrees within the scope of their autonomy and in conformity with the respective legislation, except for specific sectoral bilateral agreements.

These procedures, therefore, are directly performed by HEIs (Universities or AFAM [higher education institutions of fine arts and music]).

Implementation of automatic recognition

At the national level, the [Procedures for entry, residency and enrolment at HEIs for students requiring visas for higher education courses in Italy](#) guide the policies of Italian HEIs concerning the implementation of the principles of automatic recognition and, more broadly, regarding the admission of international students to their courses⁸. The document incorporated the [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](#):

⁸ The document is drawn up on the basis of the results of the annual Services Conference held by the Ministry of University and Research, together with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and the Ministry of the Interior.

- “institutions of higher education are invited to adopt useful tools for the verification of qualifications that can facilitate the entry of candidates with foreign qualifications, in line with the provisions of the recent “Recommendation of the Council of the European Union to promote automatic mutual recognition of higher education and higher secondary school qualifications and the results of study periods abroad”, including the use of new tools and new technologies made available internationally, including blockchain technology and the statements of verification of qualifications by the ENIC-NARIC centres”.
- “(...) for the access to second and third cycles courses: qualification awarded by a Higher Education Institution which gives academic rights for **the continuation of study at the next level** in the country of reference at the relevant academic institutions”.

In addition to the guidelines, the *Requirement for external quality assurance to assess recognition practice in higher education institutions* and the *General guidelines for university planning 2019-2021 and indicators for periodic performance assessment (Ministerial Decree n. 989 of 25 October 2019)* established specific indicators for HEIs connected to the work done by the national quality assurance agency - ANVUR.

Italy has also a long history of *de jure* automatic recognition. Among the bilateral agreements for recognition of academic qualifications:

- Austria: [Law n. 322 of 10 October 2000](#) established a cooperation between Italy and Austria aimed towards the automatic recognition of qualifications. This Law gives a table of equivalence of qualifications used by universities and employers in recognition procedures.
- China: since 2005 an agreement between Italy and China has been put in place to guarantee recognition of periods of studies and final qualifications with academic purposes. A table of comparison was established to ease recognition procedures in each field.
- San Marino: the agreement signed on 28 April 1983 (Law of ratification n. 760 of 18 October 1984).
- Holy See: the latest agreement signed on 13 February 2019 establishes the mutual recognition of higher education qualifications.

Furthermore, foreign schools operate in Italy on the basis of bilateral and multilateral agreements as well as of international programmes.

- France: bilateral cooperation in the field of schooling can be traced back to the cultural agreement between Italy and France of 1949. The cooperation between the two countries laid down the foundations for the agreement signed in 2009, which sanctioned the launch of the so-called “ESABAC”, i.e., the issue of French and Italian final higher

secondary school qualifications at the end of a course of integrated study lasting three years. These two qualifications allow access to higher education in each of the two countries.

- Germany: The recognition of qualifications awarded by German schools in Italy was made official by an exchange of notes and by an Italy-Germany memorandum, formalised in [Law n. 181 of 19 May 1975](#).
- Spain: the first cooperation document is [Law n. 8 of 3 January 1957](#). This was followed by an Exchange of Notes between the two governments in 1984. The 1984 agreement was supplemented and modified by a subsequent exchange of notes signed in Rome on 26 July 2000 and 23 May 2001.
- Switzerland: The mutual recognition of qualifications issued by Swiss schools in Italy and by Italian schools in Switzerland is provided for by the exchange of letters between the two governments, ratified and implemented by [Law n. 294 of 30 July 1998](#).
- United Kingdom: on the basis of [Law n. 121 of 16 April 1998](#).

Forms of automatic recognition are also applied to the European Baccalaureate, the International baccalaureate⁹ (for more information see the DOC CIMEA *Foreign Schools in Italy and Italian schools abroad*), and to doctoral diplomas issued by the EUI awarded by the European University Institute¹⁰.

Among the initiatives adopted and aimed towards the implementation of automatic recognition, it is worth mentioning that the section dedicated to the evaluation methodology on the CIMEA website states that “CIMEA and Italian HE institutions recognise the right for holders of a qualification of a certain level that has been issued by another country to be evaluated according to the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention for entry to a higher education programme at the next level in Italy, without having to go through any separate recognition procedure. This does not prejudice the right of a HEI or the competent authorities to set specific evaluation and admission criteria for a specific programme, and it does not prejudice the right to check if the qualification is authentic and in the case of a school leaving qualification, if it really gives access to higher education in the country of issuance in line with the Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018”.

⁹ L. Lantero, C. Finocchietti, E. Gitto, A. Garner, “Foreign schools in Italy and Italian schools abroad. Legislation, characteristics and recognition of qualifications”, CIMEA DOC 135, July 2021.

¹⁰ For further information visit the ENIC-NARIC website: <https://www.enic-naric.net/page-Italy>.

2.1.4. The Netherlands

Dutch HEIs can be classified into two types:

- Research oriented higher education (*wetenschappelijk onderwijs*, WO).
- Higher professional education (*hoger beroepsonderwijs*, HBO).

Admission requirements depend on the type of higher education and the specialisation.

Research-oriented higher education

For admission to research-oriented higher education (WO) students require one of the following diplomas:

- VWO diploma, awarded after completion of *voorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs* (VWO, pre-university education).
- Certificate of the *propedeutisch* examen awarded by a HBO (*hoger beroepsonderwijs* or higher professional education) institution after completion of the first year of a Bachelor's degree programme.

Additional requirements (e.g., a specific subject combination) apply to some study programmes. For admission to research-oriented higher education (*wetenschappelijk onderwijs*, WO) students require one of the following diplomas:

- Pre-university education (*voorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs*, VWO) diploma.
- Higher professional education (*hoger beroepsonderwijs*, HBO) first-year certificate (*propedeuse*).

Additional requirements (e.g., a specific subject combination) apply to some study programmes.

Higher professional education

For admission to higher professional education (HBO) students need one of the following diplomas:

- HAVO diploma, awarded after completion of *hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs* (HAVO, senior general secondary education).
- MBO diploma level 4, a secondary vocational education (*middelbaar beroepsonderwijs*) qualification.

Some HBO programmes also apply additional requirements, e.g., for subject combinations and/or skills. Students with a VWO diploma may be admitted to an intensive 3-year programme. For the sake of completeness, it should be noted that the Dutch law provides holders of an VWO/HAVO/MBO level 4 diploma as awarded in the Caribbean Netherlands (i.e., the islands of

Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba) with the same rights to access to higher education. For admission to higher professional education (HBO) students require one of the following diplomas:

- Secondary vocational education (*middelbaar beroepsonderwijs*, MBO) diploma level 4.
- Senior general secondary education (*hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs*, HAVO) diploma.
- VWO diploma.

Please note: some HBO programmes also apply additional requirements, e.g. for subject combinations and/or skills. Students with a VWO diploma may be admitted to an intensive 3-year programme.

Implementation of automatic recognition

Each Dutch HEI is responsible for setting its own specific admission requirements and for its admission procedures. Its admission officers have to take two types of foreign qualifications into consideration that are recognised by law in the Netherlands:

- The secondary leaving qualification European Baccalaureate.
- Higher education degrees from the Benelux and Baltic area.

The Decision M (2015)³ of the Benelux Committee of Ministers concerning the automatic mutual generic level recognition of higher education degrees, as supplemented by the Decision M(2018)¹ refers to the following degrees: Associate, Bachelor, Master and PhD. Due to the Treaty on the Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in 2021, the multilateral treaty currently includes 6 countries:

- Belgium
- Estonia
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Luxembourg
- The Netherlands

Even though automatic recognition applies in these instances, it does not concern actual admission to a specific higher education programme. For example, even though the European

Baccalaureate gives access to both research universities and universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands, holders of the European Baccalaureate will also have to meet any additional admission requirements that might apply to a specific degree programme. Regarding the automatic recognition mechanism within the Benelux-Baltic area, it only applies to the education level. The content of the degree programme itself would still have to be looked into during the admission procedure.

The Dutch law does not provide automatic recognition regarding other foreign secondary school leaving qualifications. However, the provisions found in the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (*Wet op het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek*, WHW) allow institutions to accept secondary school leaving qualifications that give access to research oriented higher education or higher professional education in the country of issue under a few conditions:

- The country in question has ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention.
- The Dutch HEI did not find/identify substantial differences regarding the admission requirements.

Dutch HEIs may request a minimum GPA or final school examination grades or entry examination results as part of the general admission requirements. In addition, other admission requirements (such as specific subject combination or certain language skills) may still apply.

2.1.5. Poland

The maturity certificate (*świadectwo dojrzałości*) gives general access to first cycle and long-cycle studies in Poland. The certificate has a state format, and it is awarded to those who pass the **maturity** (or matriculate) examination.

Admission to first cycle and long-cycle programmes is based on the results of the maturity exams¹¹. Additional entrance examinations may be conducted by HEIs only in the following cases:

- For candidates with foreign certificates, where the grades from the required subjects are not indicated in the certificate.
- To assess knowledge and / or skills which are not assessed by the maturity exam (e.g., specific aptitudes, artistic skills, or physical fitness).

Concerning the requirements for access to higher education with foreign qualifications, they may be recognised in Poland automatically (by operation of law) or as a result of an administrative recognition procedure done by a province education superintendent (*kurator oświaty*). The rules and procedures for recognition of foreign qualifications are detailed in the *93-93h of the Act of Education System dated September 7, 1991*, and in the *Regulation of the Minister of National Education dated March 25, 2015, on the proceedings for the recognition of a certificate or other document or confirmation of the educational qualifications or the entitlement to continue education, acquired in a foreign education system*.

The competent body in charge of the procedures for the recognition of a school certificate or other document issued abroad – that is not recognised by operation of law – is the education superintendent (*kurator oświaty*). The authority officially confirms the right to apply for admission to a higher education program, taking into account the scope of rights granted to the document holder in the state of issue. To be recognised in Poland, the certificate must be recognised by the state within the territory of which or in the education system of which the issuing institution operates. The educational superintendent may confirm (in official procedure) the level of educational qualifications obtained abroad by persons in a refugee-like situation who have significant difficulty with the provision of an original (or duplicate) of a certificate or the authentication of such certificate. This includes their right of access to higher education.

Implementation of automatic recognition

The Polish law already provides a basis for automatic recognition of (upper) secondary school certificates which give access to higher education in their country of issue for the purpose of applying to higher education programmes in Poland. According to the law, certificates, diplomas,

¹¹ Since 1 January 2022 Polish Higher Education Institutions may decide to take into account in their admission procedures also the results of state vocational examinations (egzamin zawodowy, egzamin potwierdzający kwalifikacje w zawodzie). Additional entrance examinations for candidates who completed their previous stage of education in Poland may not cover skills which can be confirmed by passing those VET examinations.

or other educational documents that confirm the completion of secondary education in the European Union, European Economic Area (EEA) or OECD member states as well as the right to apply for higher education programs in the country of issue shall be recognised in Poland by operation of law. Individuals in possession of such documents have the right to apply for studies at a Polish HEI. The documents may be filed directly with a university, HE institution or employer without asking any other Polish authority for an additional confirmation of recognition or proceedings. Such regulation has been valid since 31 March 2015.

Upper secondary certificates or other documents which allow access only to specific higher education programs in the state of issue, also in Poland give the right to apply for admission only to such higher education programs which are identical or similar in terms of curriculum.

Automatic recognition also applies to:

- International Baccalaureate (IB).
- European Baccalaureate (EB).
- Certificates, diplomas and other documents issued abroad by schools or educational institutions in accordance with the principles laid down in bilateral agreements on mutual recognition.

The Polish law does not give any institution the task of checking and officially confirming that a particular foreign certificate meets the conditions of automatic recognition. The competence of the national ENIC-NARIC centre (NAWA) is limited to higher education diplomas and academic titles and it cannot access documents at the secondary school level.

The verification of authenticity, validity, and assessment if the certificate entitles to access to all or only particular types of programmes in the country of issue is done by HEIs themselves as part of their admission procedures. Therefore, in case of doubts or complex situations, the burden of proof is often on the candidate's side (e.g., they may be asked to provide attestation from the home country competent institution, that their certificate gives access to higher education there). Each Polish HEI has the right to define its own admission requirements. This includes the rules of counting the results of foreign upper secondary school final examinations or graduation marks or additional entry exam requirements for subjects/skills not covered in the certificates or diplomas.

AUTOMATIC RECOGNITION IN PRACTICE AND THE PERSPECTIVE OF HIGHER EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS



The focus groups were organised at the national level in each partner country with the main expected outcome of gaining insight regarding the current state of affairs concerning automatic recognition, as well as of sharing experiences and practices currently in place for its implementation within their national context. In addition to this, a second objective was also to learn directly from the stakeholders operating in the sector, who have first-hand experience with automatic recognition, their perception regarding its implementation and possible improvements starting from the experiences they live through their daily job.

The analysis underscores the fact that despite the different national contexts, there is nevertheless a *fil rouge* connecting the partner countries, a common thread linking the experiences of the participants, who highlighted similar challenges and possible solutions in the five countries.

3.1.1. The concept of automatic recognition

In all countries, participants identified the two distinct moments of recognition as “access” and “admission” and highlighted that automatic recognition should happen in the first part of these two phases/stages. It was stressed that automatic recognition of secondary school leaving qualifications concerns the right to access higher education in general, while the admission to a specific higher education programme remains the responsibility of the competent authority (HEIs). The implementation of automatic recognition is acknowledged by all partner countries **not only as feasible**, but also **as a useful tool which can benefit both applicants and competent authorities** in the recognition process. All partner countries reported that the existing national practices were aimed towards supporting and facilitating the implementation of this initiative and that a system level recognition is ensured to a large extent.

Based on their direct experience, there was general agreement that on the side of the applicant, the implementation of automatic recognition would entail a **higher degree of transparency** in the evaluation process as well as raise students' awareness about their right to be considered for access to a programme of further study, whereas for the competent authorities it would translate to a **lighter workload for admission officers**. Furthermore, it was highlighted that automatic recognition implies a **reduction of administrative burdens** for staff in charge of admission procedures in HEIs. In this regard, the importance of **providing clear information about the admission phase** was also highlighted, since the evaluation of the qualification is still to be carried out by the competent authority and on a case-by-case basis. Against this backdrop, participants underlined the importance of **effectively conveying the concept of automatic recognition both among students and professionals** in the field. In fact, the term "automatic recognition" may generate expectations from the students, who may suppose their qualification will be automatically recognised for admission; therefore, the communication related to it should be as clear and pertinent as possible. Ensuring the understanding of the difference between access and admission for applicants and how this relates to the existing admission conditions of the institutions is considered a pivotal element.

On the other hand, it is also important to share information among the countries engaged on the topic of automatic recognition, as well as to involve countries less represented, from which HEIs may receive files difficult to manage due to a lack of information.

Among the findings, two additional points were indicated as key factors to consider: **verification of authenticity** and **substantial differences**. As a matter of fact, the implementation of automatic recognition still requires reliable tools to verify the authenticity of qualifications, especially in the context of increased digitalisation linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the ability to identify and assess cases of substantial differences in qualification recognition procedures is considered a key element.

The Council Recommendation on promoting automatic recognition

When asked about their degree of familiarity and thoughts on the [Council Recommendation on promoting automatic recognition](#) of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad a lack of awareness was highlighted regarding the document as well as regarding specific practices to foster its implementation. In a few cases, participants knew and had worked with specific sections of the document, such as the ones devoted to the recognition of outcomes of learning periods abroad. In other cases, despite not being familiar with the Council Recommendation, participants were familiar with policy developments at European Union and EHEA level, as well as national bilateral and multilateral agreement in place at the national level.

The Polish regional education authority, which is obliged to follow EU initiatives and legislation, stressed its potential as a basis for developing tools that can simplify the work of both education authorities and HEIs. In this light, it was also stressed that the contribution of professionals directly involved in recognition is fundamental in finding possible and feasible ways to translate into practice the objectives set at the level of the European Union.

3.1.2. Automatic recognition in practice

As far as the application of the policy is concerned, all the countries, to a certain degree, have put in place practices which can be categorised as automatic recognition, even in cases where this is not explicitly stated. The nature of implementation ranges from an institutional approach to a systemic approach. The first would be the case of **Belgium Flemish Community** where single HEIs apply the principles described in the Council Recommendations as intended and practices vary from one institution to another. Some institutions stated that holders of secondary diplomas from EU and EEA countries do not have to go through an admission procedure; whereas other HEIs mentioned that they only apply automatic recognition in cases of qualifications that meet the criteria of the Benelux Decision, the European Bacca-laureate diploma, and the International Bacca-laureate diploma.

In **Italy**, HEIs underlined that the approach to automatic recognition varies across institutions, similar to what was stated in the case of Belgium Flanders. Notwithstanding the different approaches, they all mentioned the *Procedures for entry, residency, and enrolment of international students and the respective recognition of qualifications, for higher education courses* in Italy as a tool they rely on to assess qualifications. What's more, it is particularly interesting to note that practices towards the implementation of automatic recognition of qualifications are in place, although they are not explicitly framed in the policy context. In this light, it was mentioned that HEIs are including in their websites information such as the documents needed to evaluate qualifications issued by the countries they receive most of the applications from. Participants also reported that the decision to include this data was taken as a result of training courses attended by the admission officers.

In **Bulgaria** a more systemic approach was described, where the Regional Departments of Education implement *de facto* system level automatic recognition of all foreign qualifications for secondary education issuing legally binding decisions. The adoption of this practice implies that the average duration of procedures at the individual level is less than a month and facilitates incoming mobility. Moreover, the participating HEIs also confirmed that the duration of procedures for third country qualification holders (of which they are in charge), being closest to the notion of automatic recognition without being actual automatic recognition, does not pose an issue from the admission point of view.

In the case of the **Netherlands**, participants acknowledged automatic recognition application to a large extent with current practices being based on the provisions found in the National Law on Higher Education and Research. It was also mentioned that HEIs must adhere to the Code of Conduct for enrolling international students as a means of promoting transparency and clear communication. As concerns access to the undergraduate degree level, institutions process all qualifications at a central level to determine whether the qualification in question meets the general entry requirements. Among the practices that are currently in place in the Netherlands, it was mentioned that one of the HEIs published on its website a list to inform applicants which foreign qualifications meet the general entry requirements. Moreover, some institutions use a database to enable standardised evaluations for a large set of foreign qualifications.

Instead, as regards admission to postgraduate level programmes, procedures are not usually centralised.

The focus group also gave rise to the example of **Poland** where the basis for automatic recognition of (upper) secondary school certificates giving access to higher education is regulated by law. As a matter of fact, the practices currently implemented are a consequence of the national legislation which had to be implemented earlier for groups of candidates with certificates from EU/EEA/OECD countries and where mutual agreements apply, as well as for IB and EB. The holders of such qualifications may file their documents directly with a HEI without asking any other Polish authority for an additional recognition confirmation.

Concerning the practices adopted in the institutions involved, most of them refer to sharing with candidates and with other institutions clear, detailed and updated information on access and admission requirements, that help automatise the process and facilitate communication with candidates. Among the practices mentioned by participants:

- Publishing on official websites:
 - the admission criteria applied in the case of students with a foreign qualification.
 - documents needed for evaluating qualifications from the countries they receive most applications from.
 - a list of countries whose documents are automatically recognised.
- Making use of a database to enable standardised evaluations for a large set of foreign qualifications.

HEIs mentioned that they rely on information provided in each other's websites to compare resources and solutions for assessment of certain qualifications and on the national ENIC-NARIC website.

3.1.3. Existing tools to build on within the ENIC-NARIC Networks

In addition to the practices currently in use, the focus groups also revealed some of the tools that the various stakeholders have at their disposal. A closer look at the reports released by the focus groups revealed a relatively uniform set of instruments and means at the disposal of institutions for the implementation of automatic recognition.

Along with the **databases available at the national level**, such as national databases containing registers or previously resolved recognition cases, most participants reported official **websites of other countries** presenting their education systems (to check access and admission criteria or accredited institutions lists for a country) and **official pages of education boards** allowing them to verify exam results.

Moreover, **services and databases offered by the ENIC-NARICs** are considered useful. In particular, the following services and tools were mentioned:

- Methodological information on the recognition process.
- The Q-ENTRY database.
- Education system profiles or descriptions published by other ENIC-NARICs (Dutch Nuffic, Swedish ENIC-NARIC) as well as other specific information provided by the Networks, both on the joint website and on the website of each centre.

When it comes to the European level, information portals such as EURYDICE were mentioned among the tools employed for recognition purposes, whereas at the international level, the information published online by the Association for International Credential Evaluation Professionals (TAICEP), the Educational Credential Evaluators (ECE) as well as by the Australian Country Education Profiles (CEPs).

Despite the variety of tools available, almost all focus group participants brought forward possible improvements to facilitate a more comprehensive implementation of automatic recognition. Among the improvements mentioned are:

- Developing **tools to verify the authenticity online**. As previously stated, verification of authenticity is perceived as one of the main elements to be addressed and digitalisation represents at the same time an innovative and powerful tool and a potential challenge due to the possible proliferation of fraudulent documents online.
- Maintaining, improving and **updating existing databases**, including directories/lists of schools and educational institutions and samples of nationally recognised secondary education qualifications, granting access to higher education with descriptions and links to them.
- Developing **databases** collecting:
 - the specific learning outcomes for various secondary school subjects from different countries.
 - information on previous systems that might still be encountered, including exams and documents (what they are entitled to in the country of issue and what were access criteria at the time of issue) as such information is often difficult to find online.
- Developing publicly available web tools/applications for the conversion of individual and average grades from the grading system of the home country to the grading system of the host country (which would be very useful for the stages of actual recognition and admission).

Cooperation with other institutions

The focus group discussions also focused on the role of cooperation as a tool in the implementation of automatic recognition.

All participants highlighted that **cooperation, training and networking are considered fundamental** elements to support the road towards a more thorough automatic recognition. The national **ENIC-NARIC centre was mentioned, in the first place**, as the institution they cooperate with in terms of both sharing information and receiving methodological support.

When asked about the degree of cooperation among institutions, it emerged that **collaboration among stakeholders takes on a more “self-organised” form rather than a structured one**. Participants reported information through different communication channels: email, phone call, phone text, social media posts. In some cases, it was added that occasionally there are informal contacts between admission officers from different institutions or with colleagues from other HEIs regarding *ad hoc* questions.

Among the several ways in which institutions interact with other relevant stakeholders, participants reported taking advantage of opportunities of training and information sharing such as education fairs seminars and webinars.

The type of cooperation reported by the Dutch focus group seemed to take on a more structured form. At the national level, there are two admission officer networks: one for the universities of applied sciences and one for the research universities. Together, these two networks establish a highly significant type of cooperation within the Dutch higher education sector. The networks organise regular meetings and specific discussion sessions on topics such as substantial differences and automatic recognition.

The focus groups also underscored the importance of a greater degree of cooperation within EU countries, specifically among universities. **Further cooperation among EU countries** would also help to have access to information, especially with regards to extra-EU institutions.

By and large, one of the most interesting findings arising from the focus groups was that all participants confirmed the **need for greater efforts to ensure a higher degree of cooperation both at the informal and formal level**.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS AND POSSIBLE WAYS FORWARD



This document is grounded on a needs-based approach to better understand higher education stakeholders' perception on automatic recognition as well as practices and tools in place at the national level to implement it. This bottom-up perspective was considered the most effective one for the development of a practical tool to support the implementation of automatic recognition starting from the actual needs and possible improvements identified by those professionals who are called to apply automatic recognition in their daily job. In line with the inclusive approach of the document, the reflection on these issues is also enriched by the insights from ENIC-NARIC centres that were collected during the workshop *the AR(t) of accessing higher education* organised in the framework of the 29th Annual Joint Meeting of the ENIC and NARIC Networks (Dublin, 19-21 June 2022).

Results from the focus groups allow the identification of two overarching elements to take into consideration as a prelude to some final considerations.

Firstly, the fact that all participants acknowledge automatic recognition **not only as feasible, but also as a useful tool which can benefit both applicants and competent authorities** suggests that stakeholders are engaged in supporting its implementation.

Secondly, similarity of results arising in different national contexts seems to indicate that different countries are facing comparable issues when it comes to the application of automatic recognition, making it possible to identify (or prioritise) actions that could lead to widespread improvements.

Looking at the focus group results, the points raised by higher education stakeholders underscore room for improvement that can be grouped into three main areas

The first area is **KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION PROVISION**.

Results show a general knowledge of automatic recognition provided as access that may be granted to the next level of study, with a clear distinction between the two phases of access and admission. This knowledge is not supported, though, by a strong awareness about the Council Recommendation and how it is applied at institutional level. All the countries, to a certain degree, have in place practices which can be categorised as automatic recognition. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that, together with the ones designed at the national and institutional level in execution of a more structured implementation plan, there are practices that are not explicitly defined as automatic recognition carried

out in response to specific needs that come up during the recognition process. On the one hand, this can be read as evidence that automatic recognition is perceived as a useful tool and practices supporting its implementation come into being with a view to simplifying procedures. On the other hand, improving knowledge of the Council Recommendation and sharing a more structured implementation plan starting from its principles could help the homogeneous application of automatic recognition at the national level. This is also in line with the need of improving cooperation, training and networking activity expressed by participants. In this regard, ENIC-NARICs mentioned some recurrent training/information activities organised to provide HEIs with guidance, support and information (i.e., Germany organises one meeting with HEIs every year, Italy organised national meetings to present national guidelines for access higher education).

The second point is related to the need for providing applicants with transparent, clear pertinent information. Participants revealed the **need to better convey to students the message that automatic recognition does not imply their admission** to a particular study programme and that the final admission decision is still carried out by HEIs on a case-by case basis within the scope of their autonomy. This point was also stressed by the ENIC-NARIC centres, who underlined that automatic recognition **does not prejudice the autonomy of HEIs and competent authorities** as well as their right to set specific evaluation and admission criteria. In this light, it could be useful to work more on the academic guidance for students to be supported in the choices of their educational careers as well as in the knowledge of the recognition procedures and the stakeholders involved.

In addition to this, improving **information sharing among higher education stakeholders** is considered pivotal, as well as the **involvement of countries that are less represented**, from which HEIs receive files difficult to manage due to lacking information.

The second area is related to **TOOLS TO BE DEVELOPED or improved**.

The focus groups revealed a relatively uniform set of instruments and tools at the disposal of institutions for the implementation of automatic recognition. They all rely on databases available at the national level (such as registers of previously resolved recognition cases), services and databases offered by the ENIC-NARICs as well as portals available at the European and international level (EURYDICE). National guidelines for access to higher education are also mentioned among the documents to rely on.

Among the possible improvements, the most recurrent need is related **to tools to verify the authenticity online**, especially in the context of increased digitalisation, which represents at the same time an innovative and powerful tool and a potential challenge due to the possible proliferation of fraudulent documents online. The implementation of the [DEQAR database](#) was mentioned as a useful tool to facilitate the verification of qualification.

On this note, it is also worth mentioning that ENIC-NARICs stressed the importance of providing information and support to higher education stakeholders and students regarding fraud in education. An additional need expressed by participants is to maintain and continuously

update existing databases, as well as to **develop databases** collecting specific learning outcomes and information on previous systems that might be encountered. **Conversion of grades** was also mentioned as one of the elements that must be addressed. In this light, it is considered useful to develop web applications/tools for the conversion of grades, while ENIC-NARICs proposed the example of the comparative guide to grading systems drafted by HEIs admission officers in Ireland¹². Other tools and initiatives mentioned by ENIC-NARICs that are carried out at national level to support higher education stakeholders are the “Exam Handbook” developed by Danish ENIC-NARIC for HEIs, which contains information about access qualifications from over 130 countries, the *anabin* database developed by the German centre and the Polish KWALIFIKATOR.

The use and improvement of databases which comprise national qualifications giving access to national higher education systems, such as the Q-ENTRY database, were also mentioned to facilitate automatic recognition.

Annex I to this publication is aimed at sharing the set of tools related to automatic recognition that are at the disposal of higher education stakeholders.

The third area is **COOPERATION, TRAINING AND NETWORKING**.

This was mentioned by both focus groups participants and ENIC-NARIC centres as a transversal area that comprises initiatives which higher education stakeholders can take advantage of and that can be further developed to foster the implementation of automatic recognition.

Networking is considered a key aspect in fostering automatic recognition. All participants reported being involved in formal or informal networks, which they consider particularly useful. Cooperation and networking are considered pivotal also in view of improving the sharing of information, including information about extra-EU countries. Conferences for credential evaluators of different HEIs at the national and international level, agreements among HEIs, opportunities for formal/informal meetings are among the activities suggested in the focus groups. Furthermore, ENIC-NARICs proposed to establish permanent cooperation with HEIs in order to promote the Council Recommendation, as well as practices and tools to implement automatic recognition. They also suggested organising national/regional seminars aimed at sharing information, tools and practical work on automatic recognition.

Finally, the organisation of training **activities** was suggested, intended both as refresher training courses dedicated to credential evaluation and policy topics such as automatic recognition. This would also include the competence of different stakeholders and recognition authorities; therefore, it would help provide complete, pertinent and transparent information.

¹² More information at: <http://www2.cao.ie/downloads/documents/Guidelines-EU-EFTA.pdf>.

ANNEX I

EXISTING RESOURCES TO IMPLEMENT AUTOMATIC RECOGNITION



Council recommendations

Lisbon Recognition Convention

ENIC-NARIC website (country pages and automatic recognition)

AdReN

NORRIC

Q-ENTRY database

SCAN-D database

FraudSCAN database

Country profiles

Bilateral and multilateral agreements

EURYDICE

National guidelines for access to higher education

National databases with comparability statements available for download

Digital tools

Platforms for sharing and verifying authenticity of digital credentials

ANNEX II

FOCUS GROUP REPORTS



Belgium - Flemish Community

Introduction

On 10 and 11 May 2021, NARIC-Vlaanderen organised two focus groups in the framework of the q-ENTRY+ project. Twelve credential evaluators and admission officers from nine HEIs took part. They represented one university and nine university colleges. In advance, a questionnaire was sent to all HEIs in Flanders. This way, the institutions that could not participate in the focus groups could still provide input for the sessions.

NARIC-Vlaanderen received input from 4 universities and 10 university colleges.

Methodology

Because of the corona measures, we organised the session digitally via MS teams. To ensure that all participants would actively participate and give input, we used interactive online tools such as google jam board and interactive polls.

Understanding of the concept of automatic recognition

We asked the participants about their knowledge of the concept of automatic recognition. We can group the output of the group into a **few major themes:**

- Recognition of level and the Benelux Decision¹³ which stipulates that Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands recognise the level of each other's higher education diplomas automatically.
- More efficient access procedures within the HEIs: participants mentioned a reduction of the administrative burdens in the admission procedures at the HEIs e.g., faster access procedure (or even none at all), more transparency, more uniformity, saving of time and resources of the HEI, direct access.

¹³ Mutual automatic level recognition of higher education diplomas in the Benelux ('Dondelinger Decision'), supplemented by the Benelux Decision of 25 January 2018, offers every citizen legal certainty to automatic level recognition of all officially recognised higher education diplomas and degrees obtained in the Benelux. The level of such a diploma or degree will be automatically recognised as equivalent, without any recognition procedure. The automatic recognition does not concern the content of the programmes leading to these diplomas or degrees. Nor does it concern the recognition of professional qualifications, which is regulated by a European Directive (2005/36/EC). The level of a higher education diploma or degree is automatically recognised as equivalent if it has been issued by a recognised institution and if it concerns a recognised programme

http://www.benelux.int/files/3514/3210/2537/Publicatieblad_2015-2_NL.pdf
https://www.benelux.int/files/6715/1721/2145/M20181_NL_.docx.pdf

- Useful tools such as a list of entry qualifications at national level or even at European level, a European-wide database that allows the verification of qualifications following the example of the leer - *en ervaringsbewijzendatabank* (LED)¹⁴ in Flanders.
- Equal opportunities for students

The practices of the implementation of automatic recognition that are in place

At the moment of the survey, most of the HEIs indicated that they are little familiar or not familiar with the Council Recommendation on promoting automatic recognition. There is a wide variation of practices of the implementation of automatic recognition that are in place within HEIs in Flanders.

- Some institutions indicated that, in general, they do not apply automatic recognition during the admission procedures, with a few exceptions such as the study certificates that meet the criteria of the Benelux Decision (mainly Dutch certificates), the European Bacallaureate diploma and the International Bacallaureate diploma.
- Some HEI's stated that they already do apply the principles described in the Recommendation as intended. Secondary school leaving certificates from EU Member States (and by extension EEA countries) give direct access to their bachelor programmes. Holders of such diplomas do not have to go through an admission procedure.
- One institution stated that only less common diplomas (certain forms of adult or vocational education) need to go through the admission procedure.
- One institution stated that almost all non-Flemish diploma's needed to go through an admission procedure, but many diplomas can be handled on autopilot.

In general, there is an **individual approach** to applications for access and admission but diplomas that occur frequently can be dealt with more quickly. European diploma and diplomas from LRC countries are mostly considered to meet their academic requirements. **Existing tools make a difference.** The institutions mainly base themselves on their own lists of precedents. For the estimation of the level of diplomas online information sources such as the country sheets from Nuffic and Ecttis are widely used. For more difficult cases, the institutions sometimes turn to NARIC-Vlaanderen for advice. Access and admission procedures are found easier when there are tools available to **verify the authenticity of diplomas online.**

Sometimes 'automatisation' of recognition is not possible because of practical or technical barriers. For example, one institution indicated that the enrolment tool used would have to be technically modified in order to apply automatic recognition in practice. The need to verify authenticity of the certificate and the need to assess the language level of the applicants remains.

¹⁴ LED is a database that collects data from Flemish qualification certificates (diplomas, certificates, ...). The database provides clarity about the authenticity of qualifications and makes the data easily accessible. Certificates of qualification issued by Flemish institutions are immediately included in LED. <https://leerenervaringsbewijzendatabank.be>

There is *little formal cooperation* or exchange of information on this topic between the institutions or between the associations¹⁵. There is slightly more cooperation within the same association and within the own cross border network to obtain information. Between the HEI's there are, however, *some informal contacts* to address *ad hoc* issues.

Main benefits and challenges perceived regarding the concept and practice of automatic recognition (challenges perceived and suggested responses/main needs and how to address them)

Benefits

- Timesaving: speeding up the admission process.
- Uniformity, clarity, simplicity of the procedure.
- Greater trust between European institutions.
- Automation of processes.
- European databases (e.g., LED).
- Transparency for the candidates.
- Efficiency, confirmation of own decisions.
- Less prior knowledge required, less chance of "errors".
- Less "shopping" by the students. It happens that students apply for admission at different institutions simultaneously, so that several admission officers from the same institution are working on the same case.

Challenges

- Digitisation of the enrolment process, implementation, automation, technical difficulties.
- Understanding of the difference between admission/access for applicants.
- Sufficient flexibility for HEIs must be maintained.
- Technical difficulties, authenticity checks, language levels.
- European database must remain up to date.
- Some diplomas cannot be entered in a database: some older diplomas, or diplomas that do not "fit" in the database, what with diplomas that change their name?
- How does this relate to the existing admission conditions of the institutions.
- Authenticity must always be checked.
- The database must be complete and correct.
- Creating a uniform European policy is difficult with the different education systems.
- "Hybrid" educational paths (partly professional, partly academic, etc.).

¹⁵ An *association* in Flemish higher education is a non-profit organisation to which university colleges and research colleges may transfer certain decision making powers. An association consists of on the one hand a research university, which has the authority to autonomously offer both bachelor and master programmes, and on the other hand at least one university college. A university college or research university can never be part of more than one association. The associations were established when the Bachelor-Master structure was introduced in 2004 and are a concrete result of the Bologna Process. The aim is to organise higher education more efficiently.

How to address the challenges?

- More and better cooperation within the associations.
- Specific software to facilitate enrolment procedures.
- Clear agreements at the HEI and within the association.
- Open communication within and between the institutions.
- Database at the Belgian national level containing study certificates issued by the three different communities (there are three competent authorities responsible for education in Belgium).
- European Diploma supplement for secondary education (information about access to HEI - academic vs. Professional).
- Complete list of Secondary Education Entry qualifications that is up to date so that we always know that this information is correct.
- Online verification possibilities.
- Agreement at Flemish level on minimum access requirements.
- Within the institutions the tasks of the various employees or departments should be reviewed and adjusted internally.
- q-ENTRY: it should be clear what the database stands for and it should be more widely known. The database must be kept up to date.
- One single contact person (point) in Flanders for further questions on this topic.
- digital verification of diplomas.
- NARIC -Vlaanderen could play a guiding role.

Bulgaria

The official competent authorities for recognition of secondary education in Bulgaria with the purpose of access to higher education are the Regional Departments of Education (RDE), which are territorial structural units of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES). The legal basis of the procedures for secondary education recognition is Ordinance 11 from 1 September 2016 for Evaluation of Students' Learning Outcomes. The recognition decisions of RDEs are legally binding, with national validity, not only on the territory of the corresponding RDE.

The official competent authorities for admission to higher education in Bulgaria are the autonomous HEIs. The legal basis of the procedures for admission to higher education is the Ordinance for the State Requirements for Admitting Students in the Higher Schools of the Republic of Bulgaria.

Within the Q-ENTRY project a Bulgarian focus group was formed, comprising four institutions, including the two biggest RDEs as representatives of the secondary education recognition authorities and two of the biggest Bulgarian universities, as representatives of the admission authorities. All four institutions do have considerable and representative expertise with secondary education qualifications in their own procedures.

The discussions were held in the frame of a pre-defined set of questions and this report summarises the results of the discussions for Bulgaria.

Who are you and what is the role of your organisation in access and/or admission procedures?

The Regional Departments of Education organise the procedures for recognition of completed grades (VII to XII including), as well as recognition of completed basic and secondary education for all legal purposes, including for the purpose of access to higher education. More than half of their recognition cases are for completed grades and periods of studies, which allows them to implement the national policies for inclusive education and prevention of drop-outs for children, who have returned back to homeland, combining national policies with their control and supervising territorial functions as structural units of MES. The remaining part of recognition cases are with secondary education graduates for all recognition purposes, including access to higher education.

The main educational documents, required for the recognition procedure are: A. the secondary education diploma/qualification itself, and B. official document stating the rights for further education in case when this is not certified in the diploma itself. The final decision may be positive or negative. The recognition procedure requires also conversion of the marks and average grades of the completed secondary education, which are included in the recognition certificate. The average marks are later used by HEIs for their admission purposes and procedures.

The Bulgarian HEIs organise their own admission procedures based on the autonomous internal rules in accordance with the above cited Ordinance for admission. The ordinance defines two types of admission procedures according to the citizenship of the applicants:

1. Admission of Bulgarian citizens, citizens of member-states of EU and EEA, persons with humanitarian status and foreign citizens with Bulgarian origins. The admission of this category qualification holders refers directly to a prior recognition of RDEs as a condition for admission.

2. Admission procedures for third country nationals. The procedures here have different state requirements, which are incorporated also with the requirements for issuance of "student" visas. The compulsory educational documents within this procedure are two: A. the secondary education diploma/qualification itself, and B. official document by a competent authority stating the rights of the qualification holder to higher education in the country in which the secondary education had been acquired. The HEIs make preliminary admission approval of the candidates and send their documents to the Ministry of Education and Science for the purposes of student visa issuance, which upon its approval notifies the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior.

During the discussions the HEIs as admission authorities pointed out that the procedure for admission of third country nationals does not directly require submission of a certificate for a recognised secondary education by RDEs along with the two above cited documents, maybe because of the fact that they do not have access to Bulgaria before issuance of a student visa, which may in turn be viewed as a procedure which is closest to the concept for automatic recognition without being really automatic recognition.

Current state of the art of secondary education recognition by RDEs

- The RDEs as authorities for secondary education recognition implement de facto system level automatic recognition of all foreign qualifications for secondary education, as far as fundamental principle is the fair recognition based on the educational level in the country of origin and the rights for further education there.
- The procedures are individual and lead to a final certificate, which is an official written confirmation in Bulgaria of the educational value of the foreign qualification and may be used for any legal purposes, including for access to higher education.
- The individual procedures have maximal duration of one month which is considerably lower than the Lisbon Recognition Convention, with average duration- even shorter.
- In this context, the existing recognition procedures, encompassing system level automatic approach and short individual duration, are not an obstacle to the international educational mobility, which was admitted by all participants in the Bulgarian focus group.
- The short individual duration of procedures is specifically essential for the recognition

of completed grades and periods of studies to children coming to Bulgaria in terms of the national policies for inclusive education and prevention of drop-outs.

- The majority of the holders of secondary education seek recognition for access to higher education, with a substantial number of them- seeking admission to regulated professions (like Medicine).
- Third country nationals also apply for recognition to the RDEs. There is no representative statistics about their purposes for recognition, but the minimal share might be explained to some extent with the admission procedure for them, cited above.
- The share of negative recognition decisions of the RDEs is negligible and accompanied with recommendations for compensatory measures, after which recognition could be granted.

Current state of the art of the admission procedures by HEIs

- The Bulgarian HEIs, which participated in the focus group shared their point of view that they do not find problems with recognition procedures of RDEs, which are prior to their admission procedures and there is a complete trust to the recognition decisions.
- The first category of admission procedures (for the Bulgarian citizens, citizens of member-states of EU and EEA, persons with humanitarian status and foreign citizens with Bulgarian origins) are being made by HEIs on the basis of the recognition certificates of RDEs.
- The HEIs admit very positively the fact that the recognition certificates of RDEs contain converted marks and grades average, as far as it is very helpful for the admission procedures. It is very helpful also in terms of the admission practices which gain popularity lately, i.e., accepting the marks from the final state matriculation exams equal to admission exams. Thus, for example foreign secondary education graduates with matriculation exams in Chemistry and Biology, acquire recognition certificate of an RDE with converted marks in these two subjects, and they may be used by Bulgarian HEIs, which have admission exams in Chemistry and Biology without sitting to admission exams.
- The admission procedures of third country nationals take place as described above. The HEIs discussed that there are no substantial problems despite the fact that there is no compulsory requirement for submitting a recognition certificate of RDEs. As already mentioned above, in this context the procedures of this category applicants are closest to the concept for automatic recognition without being really automatic recognition. The HEIs attribute the lack of obstacles in these procedures to the fact that they are a part of the broader procedure for acquiring a student visa with involvement of different ministries. As it was shared, problem might arise from cases of admitted and approved candidates, who are later denied a student visa.

- As it might be expected the number of Bulgarian citizens and citizens of member-states in the admission procedures is prevailing, with a sustainable share of foreign citizens with Bulgarian origins and a minority of third country nationals.
- The HEIs also implement the approach of fair treating of the acquired education in terms of level and right in their procedures, which covers the definition of a system level automatic recognition of all valid foreign and authentic educational qualifications.
- The duration of the procedures in the HEIs is also shorter than the Lisbon Recognition Convention, i.e., the system level approach and the duration are not obstacle to international academic mobility.
- In this connection there were discussions that international academic mobility should be facilitated not only via the concept of automatic recognition, but in synergy with other mechanisms and procedures, connected to academic mobility, like ERASMUS etc. Especially having in mind the common agreement of RDEs and HEIs, that even the existing recognition and admission procedures and durations are not obstacle to mobility and may have limited potential for optimisation compared to other mechanisms.
- COVID-19 specific aspects were also discussed including the growing importance of fully electronic procedures and other digital solutions and tools.

What is your understanding of the concept of automatic recognition?

What are your thoughts about automatic recognition (do you think that its implementation would be problematic/useful, etc.)

The participants in the focus group **shared their understanding of the concept of automatic recognition**. The discussions showed some common points and some different perceptions of the concept especially its differentiation between **system level** and **individual level** recognition. The common points of agreement were connected to the understanding for the right of qualification holders for fair recognition of their educational level and the right to access to further education as it had been acquired in the country of origin. All participants agreed that each qualification holder has the fundamental right to further education building upon acquired level of education based on a fair recognition. The existing recognition and admission practices guarantee all this, with **procedures being based on a system level recognition** of the education awarded with all rights acquired in the home country. Yet the **concept of automatic recognition is unclear** in terms of its specific scope, extent and limits when it comes from system level to individual level of recognition with all its specifics, having in mind diploma mills, fake and forged documents, etc.

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” states that automatic recognition is a goal to be reached by 2025. How familiar is your institution with this recommendation? What are your thoughts about this recommendation?:

The above cited lack of clarity defines the **challenges with automatic recognition implementation** in practice. The participants agreed that there is no doubt that a working concept of automatic recognition would be useful, and that it should solve education mobility problems **without compromising essential quality and recognition standards** set out in the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

Has your Institution practices for the implementation of automatic recognition in place? Were any practices implemented due to the Council recommendation? Can you describe the practices and comment on whether they are working?

The RDEs as recognition authorities shared the fact that their **current procedures are implementing system level automatic recognition** with individual level average duration of procedures of less than a month, which facilitates to an acceptable extent the incoming mobility in an inclusive way.

The HEIs as admission authorities confirmed that the recognition procedures of RDEs are not an obstacle to the current admission procedures, but an accelerated recognition might be helpful in some cases.

The duration of procedures for third country qualification holders, being de facto closest to the concept of automatic recognition, without being actual automatic recognition, are not problematic too from admission point of view. From the other hand the HEIs discussed the fact that the different learning outcomes of the qualification holders differentiate them at the admission stage and there is no ground to expect that an accelerated automatic recognition to change the admission procedures in this and other aspects.

Do you cooperate with other institutions/organisations to implement automatic recognition? Is the cooperation formalised or “self-organised”? Would it be useful to rely on the cooperation of a network of professionals/colleagues working in the same field (to share information, good practices, etc)? Under what conditions?

The cooperation among the RDE as recognition authorities and territorial structures of the Ministry of Education and Science can be described as “self-organised” and is not at the desirable level which is why this issue can be addressed by a number of measures, formulated for a possible improvement at national level. Their cooperation with NACID as a national ENIC-NARIC centre, is a fact especially in terms of methodological issues and system level information and assistance, as well as on individual complex cases. The cooperation among Bulgarian HEIs as autonomous admission authorities more effective, their cooperation with NACID is more effective too especially in terms of academic recognition. A restricted web site made available for HEIs by NACID with methodological information on academic recognition, is also accessible by RDEs as recognition authorities. The sections with national grading scales and formulas for grade conversion would be especially helpful to RDEs. A fully operating integrated information system is made available by NACID specifically for individual academic recognition cases (customised for facilitation of recognition of higher education rather than for recognition of secondary education)

Think about your or your colleagues' daily job. What are the most useful tools to support automatic recognition you have at your disposal?

Some of the most useful tools to support daily job on recognition, aside the above mentioned, can be grouped as follows:

At European level: existing information portal sites like EURYDICE, ENIC-NARIC, etc. or web sites with project financing like the Q-Entry project website containing valuable information including:

- Information on the national educational systems of the countries in the European region and other regions.
- Methodological information on recognition in the European region.
- National competent authorities and recognition authorities.
- Directories/lists of schools and educational institutions belonging to the national systems of education of the countries in the European region and other regions with links to them.
- Collections with samples of nationally recognised secondary education qualifications, granting access to higher education with descriptions and links to them.

At national level:

- National databases, registers and information systems with educational institutions, belonging to the national systems of education (for the verification of the educational status of the awarding institution and program).
- National databases, registers and information systems with issued educational diplomas and qualifications which are nationally recognised (for the authenticity verification stage).

In order to implement automatic recognition, what do you need in terms of "capabilities", training, motivation, guidelines, technological tools?

The focus group members agreed on the necessity of a **capacity building group of measures** on recognition including thematic trainings, study visits, workshops for sharing experience on the current structure of recognition, including system level recognition.

What would you like to improve among the above-mentioned tools? For your organisation and generally speaking for the sector?

The improvements of the above cited tools to support daily job on recognition and the way to automatic recognition, can be grouped as follows:

At European level:

- communication campaign for enhanced mutual trust on the way of building European educational area with emphasis on the benefits from the automatic recognition for all + stakeholders.
- Building new information portal sites or upgrading existing ones (institutional like EURYDICE, ENIC-NARIC, etc. or web sites with project financing like the Q-Entry project website) including:
 - Concise and enriched information on the national educational systems of the countries in the European region and other regions.
 - Methodological information on recognition in the European region.
 - National competent authorities and recognition authorities.
 - Up-to-date directories/lists of schools and educational institutions belonging to the national systems of education of the countries in the European region and other regions with links to them.
 - Collections with samples of nationally recognised secondary education qualifications, granting access to higher education with descriptions and links to them.
 - Collections of national grading scales used in countries in the European region and other regions with links to them.
- publicly available web tool/ application for conversion of individual and average grades from the grading system of home country to the grading system of the host country (which would be very usefull for the stages of actual recognition and admission).
- All nationally recognised secondary education qualifications to contain a statement that grant access to higher education in the home country, which would substantially facilitate both current recognition procedures, and automatic recognition.
- System analysis on the possible obstacles to international educational mobility concerning mechanisms and procedures outside the recognition processes, that would have the potential to contribute accelerated and eased educational mobility.
- COVID-specific approaches and tools for facilitation of recognition, including online recognition and admission procedures at all stages.

At national level:

- National publicly available and free of charge databases, registers and information systems with educational institutions, belonging to the national systems of education (for the verification of the educational status of the awarding institution and program) built on a project base with European co-financing.
- National publicly available and free of charge databases, registers and information systems with issued educational diplomas and qualifications which are nationally

recognised (for the authenticity verification stage) built on a project base with European co-financing.

- Networks of national recognition authorities for exchange of approaches, experience etc. and facilitating daily job like Listserv or e-mails built on a project base with European co-financing.
- National information system/register on secondary education recognition including all recognition authorities with their recognition decisions built on a project base with European co-financing.
- Legislative changes for reducing the administrative burden to qualification holders in the current recognition procedures, like reduction of compulsory documents, reduction of legalisations and translations, etc.
- Legislative changes in the current structure of recognition authorities, like granting recognition powers to HEIs for the purposes of access to higher education- upon public consensus and agreement of the stakeholders and interested parties.

Do you identify any law or official guidance that needs to change to enable your institution to better apply automatic recognition? Does your institution have any impact on its shape?

The legislative changes cited above may be initiated by any competent recognition or admission authority, yet they can successfully take place as a result of public discussions among all stakeholders, not only among the corresponding national institutions and administrations or competent recognition and admission authorities.

Do you think digitalisation could support automatic recognition?

The digitalisation is an essential approach and set of tools in support to the current recognition procedures as well as to automatic recognition too. It proved right especially in the COVID-19 situation too. That is why the majority of measures at European and national level require digital approach, including for information provision, fully electronic procedures for recognition and admission etc.

In the light of what we have discussed so far, what are the main benefits of implementing automatic recognition? And what are the main challenges?

All participants in the focus group agreed that **the main benefits of implementing automatic recognition** would facilitate an accelerated access to admission procedures for higher education in a Europe-wide educational area and would serve better to the fundamental right of each qualification holder to further education. Yet the contribution of the concept for automatic recognition would be most effective only in synergy with contribution of other procedures and mechanisms affecting the international educational mobility.

The possible challenges identified by the focus group participants are well known from their daily recognition and admission job and include the issues of mutual trust in the learning outcomes of qualifications awarded by recognised education providers, quality of non-traditional education providers outside the systems of recognised national and/or transnational ones, not to mention diploma mills, fake and forged documents.

What are the main steps needed to better apply automatic recognition in your institution and more in general in the sector?

The main steps to better apply automatic mutual recognition at the level of recognition authorities are those steps, identified above concerning their everyday job within the current legislative framework, such as enhanced digitalisation of procedures, better and wider information provision through access to structured sources of information about national educational systems, about recognised educational institutions and qualifications, publicly available registers of issued qualifications, as well as transparency tools facilitating the variety of different aspects of the current procedures of recognition, which as it was mentioned is automatic on a system level. Their contribution to the current individual level recognition procedures will be a considerable step towards the concept of automatic mutual recognition both at the level of institution and at the level of the sector as a whole. Legislative changes at national level are connected to Europe-wide agreement on a common understanding of the concept of automatic recognition as a prerequisite for its Europe-wide applying as a step towards European Educational Area. The process should build upon the Lisbon Recognition Convention without compromising essential quality and recognition standards set out there.

Italy

Introduction

This focus group was organised in the framework of the Erasmus+ co-funded project *qENTRY+ - International Database on Higher Education Entry Qualifications*, which aims at facilitating the implementation of the automatic recognition of qualifications giving access to higher education by widening the Q-ENTRY Database through the collection of first-hand information about upper secondary school leaving qualifications and the involvement of relevant stakeholders in partner countries. The focus group brought together national institutions dealing with academic recognition of qualifications, focusing on access and/or admission procedures.

Aim and objectives

The main aim of the focus group is to gain a better understanding of the state of art on automatic recognition from the perspective of the main stakeholders in higher education and to identify possible tools to support its implementation.

The above-mentioned general aim will be reached through the following specific objectives:

- Investigating the understanding of the concept of automatic recognition.
- Collecting useful information of the practices for the implementation of automatic recognition that are in place.
- Gaining a better understanding of the main benefits and challenges perceived regarding the concept and the practice of automatic recognition.

The results of the focus group will be analysed and included in a document focused on automatic recognition in practice foreseen in the framework of the qENTRY+ project.

Background

The focus group was held on the 20th of April 2021. During the focus group participants have been involved in a lively discussion on the topic of the implementation of automatic recognition in the national context. Participants were selected with the aim of gathering a heterogeneous sample of Italian HEIs, representative of the geographical variety (Milan, Sassari, Rome, Venice) and their different typologies at the national level (public universities and legally recognised non-public universities). The first hour a half was dedicated to investigating the general experience of the participants and their institutions with the concept of automatic recognition and to identify benefits and challenges related to its implementation. In the second part of the meeting participants suggested ideas to further implement automatic recognition. In this part of the meeting facilitators from CIMEA used a dashboard on Padlet to promote a more participative visual approach.

Understanding of the concept of automatic recognition

When answering the question “What is your understanding of the concept of automatic recognition?”, there was no clear agreement on the definition of automatic recognition among the participants, who individuated the two distinct moments of recognition as “access” and “admission” and highlighted that the automatic recognition should happen in the first part of these two aspects. Among the participants, there is a widespread unawareness of the Council Recommendation on promoting automatic recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad¹⁶ (2018). The document was shared during the focus group for them to read it afterwards. An admission officer within the group stated that she previously used it for the recognition of short periods abroad (Erasmus+).

In general terms, participants to the focus group consider automatic recognition as a set of formal requirements that can be used as a tool for admission officers, but they agreed on the fact that it cannot be considered as fully automatic, since the evaluation of the qualification is still to be carried out by the competent authority.

Participants also expressed the need to look at automatic recognition considering the two stages of the recognition process: access and admission. In particular, they linked the latter to the autonomy of HEIs, finally responsible for the recognition of a qualification according to the purpose. Automatic recognition is considered as a useful tool both to ease the admission officers’ workload and to strengthen HEI’s transparency towards students.

Challenges perceived regarding the concept of automatic recognition

During the focus group, participants highlighted some challenges in the implementation of automatic recognition in their institutions. Among these: the clear information and definition. In fact, according to them, the term “automatic recognition” may generate expectations from the students, who may suppose their qualification will be automatically recognised for the admission therefore, the communication related to it should be as clear and pertinent as possible. In addition to this, another element would need further clarification, being the authority which should be in charge of providing the information on the competence of procedures and what automatic recognition is.

Another challenge perceives is related to substantial differences, transparency of the HEIs towards applicants and the need to define the relation between the objective criteria established by law and the HEIs’ autonomy.

Moreover, among the challenges there is also the need to share information among the countries engaged on the topic of automatic recognition, as well as the involvement of countries less represented, from which HEIs receive files difficult to manage for lacking information. The participants also stated the challenge of verification of authenticity arising in the particular context of increased digitalisation linked to COVID-19 pandemic.

¹⁶ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1568891859235&uri=CELEX:32018H1210\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1568891859235&uri=CELEX:32018H1210(01))

Practices for the implementation of automatic recognition that are in place

Concerning the practices adopted in the HEIs involved, the majority of the participants' institutions have on their official websites the admission criteria applied for the students with a foreign qualification. None of the institutions involved declared to have the expression "automatic recognition" stated on their website. Among the tools used in the recognition process different databases and sources were mentioned: Q-ENTRY, CIMEA's website, the "Procedures for entry, residency, and enrolment of international students and the respective recognition of qualifications, for higher education courses in Italy for the academic year 2021-2022" published by the Ministry for Universities and Research of Italy.

The University of Venice stated that, since last year, the needed documents for the 25 countries they receive most of the applications from, are displayed on their website, as a result of a training course they had with CIMEA (Micro-credential for credential evaluators).

It was particularly interesting to note that practices towards the implementation of automatic recognition of qualifications are in place, but participants were not fully conscious of it. In fact, the example given by the University of Venice and the practice of sharing the evaluation criteria are considered as good practices at European level and are particularly stressed when addressing the topic of automatic recognition.

Suggested responses to the challenges emerged

The final part of the focus group meeting focused on the possible solutions to the challenges related to the implementation of the concept of automatic recognition. The participants stressed the need for training, networking and students' involvement in the process as the main topics for next steps in fostering automatic recognition.

Participants highlighted **students' involvement** as a way to avoid forms of misinterpretation of the concept. According to them, it could be useful in this sense to work more on the academic guidance for students to be supported in the choices of their educational careers; students could be also guided in the knowledge of the recognition procedures and the stakeholders involved, ENIC-NARIC networks among them.

In particular, **training activities** intended both as refresher training course for HEIs' staff and trainings for new resources dedicated to credential evaluation but also on the policy topics such as automatic recognition. This would also include the competence of authorities and therefore, would answer also to the challenge related to information provision (who should provide information and what information should be given to have them understood properly).

Networking is also considered to be a key aspect in fostering automatic recognition: conferences for credential evaluators of different HEIs at national and international level, agreements among HEIs, opportunities for formal/informal meetings are among the activities suggested in the focus group. In this light, cooperation among national HEIs and relevant stakeholders is considered to be an essential element for the participants to the focus group;

all of them are involved in informal networks, which they consider particularly useful. On the topic of cooperation, participants have stressed the need for further cooperation within EU countries, specifically among universities. Further cooperation among EU countries would also help to have access to information, specifically with regards to extra-EU institutions.

Finally, participants also suggested a database where all information regarding comparability among different levels and type of qualifications may be found, as a tool where latest information on national legislation in the field of education may be gathered.

Netherlands

About the participants

The focus group was conducted through an online meeting of 1.5 hour. There were 7 participants, representing 7 different institutions:

- Breda University of Applied Sciences
- Eindhoven University of Technology
- HAN University of Applied Sciences
- HZ University of Applied Sciences
- Leiden University
- University of Amsterdam
- Utrecht University

Together they represented the 2 types of HEIs in the Netherlands; i.e. research universities and universities of applied sciences

Automatic recognition & Council Recommendation

All participants showed a solid understanding of the concept of automatic recognition. They stress that automatic recognition of secondary school leaving qualifications concerns the right to access higher education in general. It does not concern actual admission to a specific higher education programme.

The implementation of automatic recognition is thought to be feasible. To a large extent de facto automatic recognition already exists in the Netherlands. One participant noted that automatic recognition is only one part of the admission process and that one would still have to take a closer look at a qualification during later stages of the admission procedure.

The Council Recommendation regarding automatic recognition is not well known. However, all participants are familiar with earlier developments such as automatic recognition in the EHEA and the Benelux Agreement on automatic recognition. In principle, it seems like a good idea to develop this further for the EU member states. As already mentioned, automatic recognition of secondary school leaving certificates would be relatively easily to achieve in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, participants also questioned the additional value of the recommendation compared to the existing methodology offered by the LRC.

Practices

Current practices are based on the provisions found in the national Law on Higher Education and Research. The LRC and substantial differences are important aspects of the higher education act. In addition, HEIs have to adhere to the Code of Conduct for enrolling international students. The Code of Conduct enables transparency by providing guidelines to institutions on clear communication to international students. It can therefore be considered as good practice.

For access to undergraduate degree level, the institutions involved process all qualifications at central level to establish whether the qualification in question meets the general entry requirements. One participant mentioned a list the HEI published on its website to inform applicants which foreign qualifications meet the general entry requirements. This can be considered as a form of automatic recognition. Some institutions use a database to enable standardised evaluations for a large set of foreign qualifications. In some cases, a HEI might admit an applicant with a certain type of qualification that would possibly be insufficient in order to learn whether the qualification might still meet the learning outcomes required for admission.

The admission procedures for postgraduate level programmes are generally not centralised with the exception of one HEI. Another HEI conducted a pilot to centralise the admission procedure to master's programme. However, this required specific knowledge on the entrance requirements for a wide range of programmes which was not available to the admission officers. Moreover, some academic staff members were reluctant to delegate their part in the admission process.

Cooperation

There are two national admissions officers networks: one for the universities of applied sciences and one for the research universities. Together they form an important type of cooperation within the Dutch higher education. In addition to regular meetings, the networks sometimes organise specific discussion sessions (e.g., on substantial differences and on automatic recognition). For some HEIs, the international network through TAICEP can also be useful since it provides different perspectives.

The interaction with the Dutch ENIC/NARIC is also considered important. The Dutch centre organises annual meetings to enable admission's officers and credential evaluators of the Dutch ENIC/NARIC to meet each other in person. The annual meeting also includes workshops which provide admission officers with the opportunity to participate in discussions on good practices and new methodology with the Dutch centre.

Lastly, some HEIs also participate in national working groups organised by DUO (the executive agency of the Ministry of Education) and *Studielink* (the organisation responsible for the national online admissions procedures).

Tools

There are several tools available that are useful to admission officers:

- Online admission tool [Studielink](#) and its lists of foreign qualifications.
- Osiris, a digital tool to process applications.
- Services offered by the Dutch ENIC/NARIC: country profiles, Wizard (for generic evaluations) and tailor-made evaluations.
- Online verification databases from various countries.
- Information offered by other ENIC/NARIC centres.
- Statements issued by schools/institutions with the name of the qualification to be awarded.

There were also requests for improvement:

- A wide range of examples of authentic diploma's would be useful for verification.
- Regular updates of country profiles.
- A database with the specific learning outcomes for various secondary school subjects from different countries.
- Sessions on specific qualifications and countries within the national networks of admission officers.
- Expanding the new type of service in which admission officers of one HEI meet the country experts of the Dutch ENIC/NARIC to include other HEIs in the same session.

As for laws or official guidances, there are none that would need to be changed to improve automatic recognition. In fact, the current higher education act does not seem to be problematic at all.

As for digitalisation, that would indeed be useful to apply automatic recognition. Especially if digitalisation would also enable automatic verification of foreign qualifications.

Benefits and challenges

Automatic recognition would benefit both the applicants and the HEIs. It can offer the applicant a more fair, consistent and transparent admission procedure. It can also enable admission officers to process foreign qualifications more easily.

The differences between education systems might pose challenges to automatic recognition in practice. For example, the Dutch binary system in higher education is reflected in its secondary education system since there are two types of secondary school qualifications with different rights regarding access to higher education. Other differences would be the use of entrance examination in some countries or the difference between open admission and a more selective system.

Lastly, one of the challenges could be that initiatives such as the Council Recommendation are often developed by European policy makers who might not have much practical experience with recognition and admission procedures. This could result in recommendations that are not always clear and/or lead to unrealistic expectations with regard to the practical outcomes.

Poland

Introduction

Participants selection

Following the project guidelines, in order to select a representative sample, the Polish ENIC-NARIC invited for participation:

- Representatives of institutions involved in recognition (ministry responsible for legal framework, regional education authorities).
- Both public and non-public HEIs.
- Institutions from different geographical locations (regions), representing big and smaller academic centres.
- HEIs specialised in different academic areas (medical, economic, technical, art studies, multidisciplinary universities) - both research-oriented and professionally oriented.

The ENIC-NARIC team used their network of contacts (e.g., HEIs interested in training sessions by NAWA or sending questions about foreign candidates' qualifications to ENIC-NARIC) as well as internet research to reach staff actually dealing with recognition topics in their institutions. Each of the invited HEIs informed at their websites about requirements and/or procedure for candidates with foreign qualifications (a proof they do provide service to foreign candidates and will have some internal experience), but with different degree of detail.

The invitation was directed to staff who deal with recruitment of international candidates to first cycle or long cycle studies (either directly for a faculty or in the HEI's "international" unit supporting the process). Each HEI was free to decide whom they send as their representative.

Participants, dates, structure

Out of 17 HEIs and institutions invited, 8 agreed to take part in the Focus Group. Finally, the test sample consisted of 6 participants - 5 HEIs and one Regional Education Authority (*kuratorium oświaty*, the institution supporting Regional Education Superintendent).

Polish ENIC-NARIC organised two online meetings, **24 and 25 March 2021**, to involve all experts eager to participate (which turned out impossible on the same date). The talks took place online, on a web meeting platform.

The structure of both meetings was the same and included:

- Introduction with presentation of the qENTRY+ project, qEntry database and basic information on the EU policy context (relation between the project action and the Council Recommendation on promoting automatic recognition).
- Group discussion aimed at sharing information - based on the 15 questions agreed in the project.

Wrap up to organise and sum up the results.

Meetings were conducted in Polish, but the questions were presented to participants both in Polish translation and in the original English version.

An advantage of division into two groups was more time for each participant to voice their views, which resulted in less stress and quite detailed insights. There was also opportunity to compare reactions of both groups to the same questions and topics (e.g. if similar issues arise independently in both meetings). A main disadvantage was the fact that participants from one group could not react to insights by participants from the other group.

Although the division was random (choice of the more comfortable date), the second group turned out to be made of bigger HEIs with more substantial resources and experienced experts. The first group represented mostly HEIs with smaller student numbers and more limited human resources and included an experienced expert representing Regional Education Authority.

Still, certain ideas and comments appeared in both groups independently - which is additional evidence that certain solutions or challenges are similarly perceived by most stakeholders.

Legal background: the Polish law on recognition**Automatic recognition:**

The Polish law already provides a basis for automatic recognition of (upper) secondary school certificates which give access to higher education in their country of issue for the purpose of applying to higher education programmes in Poland (93-93h of the *Act of Education System dated September 7, 1991 and Regulation of the Minister of National Education dated March 25, 2015 on the proceedings for the recognition of a certificate or other document or confirmation of the educational qualifications or the entitlement to continue education, acquired in a foreign education system*).

Certificates, diplomas or other educational documents that confirm the completion of secondary education in the European Union, European Economic Area (EEA) or OECD member states as well as the right to apply for higher education programs in the country of issue shall be recognised in Poland by operation of law. The owners of such documents have the right to apply for studies at a Polish HEI. The documents may be filed directly with a university, HE institution or employer without asking any other Polish authority for an additional recognition confirmation or proceedings. Such regulation has been valid from 31 March 2015.

Upper secondary certificates or other documents which allow for access only to specific higher education programs in the state of issue, also in Poland give the right to apply for admission only to such higher education programs in Poland which are identical or similar in terms of curriculum.

Automatic recognition also applies to:

- International Baccalaureate (IB).
- European Baccalaureate (EB).
- Certificates, diplomas and other documents issued abroad by schools or educational institutions in accordance with the principles laid down in bilateral agreements on mutual recognition.

The Polish law does not give any institution the task of checking and officially confirming that a particular foreign certificate actually meets the conditions of automatic recognition. The competence of the national ENIC-NARIC centre (NAWA) is limited to higher education diplomas and academic titles and it cannot assess documents on secondary school level.

The verification of authenticity, validity and assessment if the certificate entitles to access to all or only particular types of programmes in the country of issue is done by HEIs themselves as part of their admission procedures. Therefore, in case of doubts or complex situations, the burden of proof is often on the candidate's side (e.g., they may be asked to provide attestation from home country competent institution, that their certificate gives access to higher education there).

Each Polish HEI has the right to define its own admission requirements. This includes the rules of counting the results of foreign upper secondary school final examinations or graduation marks or additional entry exam requirements for subjects/skills not covered in the certificates or diplomas.

Non-automatic recognition:

Certificates from countries that do not belong to the abovementioned groups require official recognition by *kurator oświaty* (regional (provincial) education superintendent) - the head of regional education authority (*kuratorium oświaty*). The authority officially confirms the right to apply for admission to a higher education program, taking into account the scope of rights granted to the document holder in the state of issue. To be recognised in Poland, the certificate must be recognised by the state within the territory of which or in the education system of which the issuing institution operates.

The educational superintendent may confirm (in official procedure) the level of educational qualifications obtained abroad by persons in a refugee-like situation who have significant difficulty with the provision of an original (or duplicate) of a certificate or the authentication of such certificate. This includes their right of access to higher education.

Practical implications:

In practice the Polish HEIs deal with two groups of candidates:

- Those who are automatically entitled for access (while the HEI takes responsibility for verification of their documents and rights resulting from them).
- Those whose entitlement for access is based on official decision of regional (provincial) education superintendent (so the HEIs need to take into account the time needed for them to complete the procedure).

This context is important for interpretation of the focus group results in Poland, as the participants, based on their experience, compared the benefits and challenges resulting from both situations. The role of Regional Education Superintendents and its supporting institutions inspired also our decision to invite one kuratorium oświaty (Regional Education Authority) to the Focus Group.

Insights**Who are you and what is the role of your organisation in access and/or admission procedures?**

5 out of 6 participants of the Focus Group were representatives of HEIs and 1 represented a Regional Education Authority.

First meeting participants represented:

- Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny w Poznaniu (Poznań University of Economics and Business) – a public university specialised in programmes and research in economics, management and finance.
- Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Zawodowa w Koninie (State University of Applied Sciences in Konin) – a public HEI situated in smaller academic centre, offering applied programmes sought on the job market.
- Wyższa Szkoła Informatyki i Zarządzania z siedzibą w Rzeszowie (University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszów) – a non-public HEI offering programmes in IT, logistics, health sciences, management and philology and conducting own research.
- Kuratorium Oświaty w Katowicach (Regional Education Authority in Katowice) – regional state authority supervising all types of schools, responsible for official recognition of foreign certificates up to post-secondary non-tertiary level (apart from cases where automatic recognition applies).

Second meeting participants represented:

- Gdański Uniwersytet Medyczny (Medical University of Gdańsk) – big public university specialised in medical and life sciences programmes and research.
- Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie (Jagiellonian University in Kraków) – the oldest Polish

HEI, large public university with programmes and research activity in all types of scientific disciplines.

The representatives of HEIs are professionals responsible for admission procedures at their institutions who had experience of recruitment of international candidates with foreign credentials: holders of certificates from EU/EEA/OECD countries and countries covered by recognition agreements (with automatic right of access) as well as certificates from other countries (requiring official recognition from regional education superintendent).

The regional education superintendent issues decisions on the right of access to higher education for holders of foreign (upper) secondary education certificates. The representative of the regional education authority (institution supporting the superintendent) is a professional with substantial experience in recognition of school certificates, who does the research and prepares the decisions and its justifications for individual recognition cases; they also provide support to HEIs on the foreign education systems as much as their resources allow.

Most of represented HEIs have separate admission routes for programmes offered in the Polish language (recruiting mainly Polish nationals, but usually attracting also a certain number of candidates who have completed secondary education abroad) and for the programmes offered in English (recruiting high percentage of international candidates with certificates from a variety of countries).

What is your understanding of the concept of automatic recognition?

Both groups provided similar replies, defining automatic recognition as the right of access to higher education based on analysis of the candidate's foreign certificates, without requiring additional administrative procedures or confirmation from other institutions. The rule of automatic recognition is that a certificate giving access to higher education in the country of issue gives access to higher education also in Poland. The verification includes checking if the holder actually has access to similar type of studies or study fields in their country.

One HEI mentioned that candidates from countries with no legal basis for automatic recognition in Poland (e.g., India) are allowed to enter admission procedure after similar de facto automatic verification, on condition that they later provide official confirmation of recognition from the relevant Polish authority – kurator oświaty (to avoid making their admission more difficult).

Introducing automatic recognition for more countries (not only EC/EEA/OECD members and those with recognition agreements) would simplify and shorten the procedure in Poland for new groups of candidates.

However, some HEIs imagine automatic recognition as a process based on an automatised, centralised system which would let them check the rights of access resulting from a foreign qualification just in one database without the need of further research or verification.

What are your thoughts about automatic recognition (do you think that its implementation would be problematic/useful, etc.).

Participants compared their experiences with the process applicable to candidates covered by automatic recognition provisions in Poland to the situation of those who need official administrative recognition. For the latter group the process is demanding and time consuming for candidates (authentications, translations, requirement to stay in Poland to conduct the procedure).

Implementing automatic recognition is useful, however, on the condition of access to reliable tools for checking the value of foreign qualifications. For instance, for countries like Belgium with multiple regional education systems, even the basic verification of right of access to higher education in the country of issue is complicated. Sometimes the candidate is asked by the HEI to provide evidence from their own country institutions that their documents meet the conditions.

Still, most of the EU qualifications are not very problematic to verify. However, applying automatic recognitions to some countries - with a variety of ways to acquire secondary education - would be problematic, as the access to information on the value of the qualifications is limited. Also, the trust in quality of education in some countries is an issue. Still, there are countries now not benefitting from automatic recognition for which the solution would bring more advantages than problems.

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” states that automatic recognition is a goal to be reached by 2025. How familiar is your institution with this recommendation? What are your thoughts about this recommendation?

The participants from HEIs admitted that they had not been aware of the recommendation before they received the Focus Group invitation. They do not follow all EU policy initiatives on daily basis, unless prompted by education authorities (they assumed that someone higher in hierarchy at their HEIs would be familiar with it). However, based on what they learned from the material and during the meeting, they welcome the initiative as potentially useful and indicating the right direction.

The pandemic situation, which pushed many countries towards digitalisation and even unification of their documents, might even help in achieving this goal till 2025, although the date should be treated as a motivation tool rather than a strict deadline.

The regional education authority is obliged to follow EU initiatives and legislation, so they are familiar with the recommendation. They see its potential as a basis for developing tools that can simplify the work of both education authorities and HEIs.

Has your Institution practices for the implementation of automatic recognition in place? Were any practices implemented due to the Council recommendation? Can you describe the practices and comment on whether they are working?

Responses to these two questions are best considered together.

At Polish HEIs, the practices were not a consequence of the Council recommendation but of the national legislation which had to be implemented earlier for groups for candidates with certificates from EU/EEA/OECD countries and where mutual recognition agreements apply, as well as for EB and IB.

Practices mentioned by the participants:

- presenting a list of countries whose documents are automatically recognized on the HEI's website.
- dedicated website content with admission requirements explained in detail (documents accepted as sufficient, how the foreign national exams or graduation results are converted into recruitment points, etc.) for a number of countries from which the HEI has biggest numbers of candidates; for "less popular" countries links to ENIC-NARIC with information on rules the HEI will follow for recognition; - using NAWA website content on recognition as a resource for dealing with documents from education systems the HEI staff are less familiar with.
- HEIs (especially those more experienced in recruitment of international candidates) follow each other's websites, to compare resources and solutions for assessment of certain qualifications; - using opportunities such as ENIC-NARIC events and webinars to learn but also exchange experiences with colleagues from other HEIs.
- some HEIs do not recognise any specific practices introduced because of automatic recognition but they do follow the rule of law and do not require additional recognition procedures from holders of EB, IB or documents issued in EU/EEA/OECD countries or those covered by mutual agreements.

Clear, detailed and updated information on access and admission requirements helps to automatise the submission of applications and facilitates communication with candidates (it actually helps to let them know clearly what to expect). The information updates are made based on experience with candidates and HEIs' resources are constantly developed. However, not learning on time about changes and reforms in foreign education systems makes it difficult to always keep such guidance for candidates up to date.

If candidates see that the rules of recognition are consequently applied (e.g., results calculation and document requirements are similar at different Polish HEIs for the same type of programme) they have more trust in the national system of higher education.

Atypical elements of foreign education systems which require deeper inside knowledge (e.g., atypical organisation or names of school subjects, regional diversity within one country) bring difficulties when encountered for the first time.

The regional education authority represented, as an institution dealing with certificates to which automatic recognition provisions of the Polish law do not apply, does not have practices based on the recommendation. However, they have an established methodology and set of internal practices to keep recognition procedures consistent.

When it happens that the authority is contacted by holders of documents to which automatic recognition applies by the operation of law, they issue an explanation why no official recognition procedure is necessary, referring to concrete provisions. This also clarifies situation for HEIs - whenever they have doubts.

Do you cooperate with other institutions/organisations to implement automatic recognition? Is the cooperation formalised or “self-organised”?

Participating HEIs mentioned NAWA, as the Polish ENIC-NARIC, in the first place, as the institution they cooperate with.

Apart from that, instances categorised as **formalised cooperation** concerned institutions that are responsible for conducting or presenting results of final examinations at (upper) secondary school level:

- *Krajowy Rejestr Matur - KReM* (an official, reliable, tool available to Polish HEIs to verify the results of Polish maturity exams) – it would be useful to make it available in future also to interested foreign HEIs, perhaps starting with the EU.
- International Baccalaureate (and its IBIS system which allows HEIs to verify the issued documents and results);
- BioMedical Admissions Test (*BMAT*) offered by Cambridge Assessment – a HEI who has an official agreement with it can access test results;

As forms of **informal cooperation**, the HEIs mentioned:

- Following websites of organisations responsible for examinations and/or databases of certificates in other countries and regions, e.g. *NECO* examinations, West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), Indian examination boards.
- Using websites of Nuffic and NAWA (especially profiles of foreign education systems) – as a resource.
- Checking websites of other Polish HEIs to compare resources and admission requirements for foreign candidates.

- Occasionally informal contacts with colleagues from other HEIs (especially within the same city) to check if someone has already dealt with a similar document/situation.
- Some HEIs used occasions such as education fairs to exchange expertise on recognition solutions informally with colleagues from other HEIs and institutions.
- Some HEIs expressed their lack of satisfaction with cooperation with the Regional Education Authorities in their regions when candidates need official recognition; they see the procedure as long and cumbersome and the authorities' staff as not always helpful or having sufficient expertise; some HEIs help their potential students to submit applications for official recognition; some mentioned that broadening the rule of automatic recognition to other countries would allow to cancel this procedure.

The Regional Education Authority represented mentioned:

- cooperation mainly with embassies or official representations of other countries in Poland; where it is not possible - with Polish embassies abroad (in countries whose certificates are being assessed),
- exchanging information on recognition with other Regional Education Authorities and sharing expertise through informal channels (there is no organised, formally established process).

Would it be useful to rely on the cooperation of a network of professionals/colleagues working in the same field (to share information, good practices, etc)? Under what conditions?

One of the participants mentioned that currently there is more competition than cooperation between HEIs.

However, both HEIs and Regional Education Authority agreed that it would be useful to have a network of professionals who deal with recognition to be able to share solutions and expertise, ask questions when in doubt and discuss solutions. It was mentioned that much of the knowledge is earned based on individual cases and certain HEIs or certain Regional Education Authorities have more expertise on certain types of documents.

When asked to consider conditions or forms of cooperation that could be successful, the participant came up with the following ideas:

- Access to a common an online space, forum, or platform only for authorised participants who professionally deal with recognitions (HEIs, authorities).
- A Wikipedia-like structure that would allow recruitment and recognition specialists add their content on foreign documents but the content would then be verified by moderators (not necessarily employed by a state institution but recognised by the community for their expertise or experience);

- Idea to have ENIC-NARICs (e.g., NAWA) share their recognition statements on particular documents (with electronic copies of those documents) on such a platform to avoid sending questions from different HEIs on similar diplomas/documents to ENIC-NARIC.
- A database of documents that would also contain up to date contacts to competent people in other countries, to be able to seek advice in case of more complex dilemmas; this would be especially important when one is looking for information on older certificates (e.g., issued before year 2000), as it is rarely available online and documents are much more difficult to verify.
- Direct international cooperation between HEIs was seen as more complicated to achieve; however, one of the participants, based on own experience, mentioned that to build a really fair, detailed system of assessment for foreign certificates contact with experts from the issuing country is indispensable. It would be useful if Polish experts who had such an opportunity could share expertise on national communication platform, but still direct international communication would be more effective and faster.

According to participants, better cooperation could help achieve the following goals:

- Help unify the interpretation and treatment of foreign education certificates by different HEIs.
- common voice and common solutions could be reached at least on national level, which means more certainty for foreign candidates.
- people who deal with foreign candidates on daily basis can bring to the network the awareness of the difficulties those young people meet.

This could help create more candidate-centred recognition procedures – in HEIs and other institutions.

Think about your or your colleagues' daily job. What are the most useful tools to support automatic recognition you have at your disposal?

The two first, most often mentioned and first-to-consult tools were:

- Institutions' own resources based on previously resolved recognition cases – those mentioned that, if well prepared and maintained, such material can help resolve even 90% of recognition cases).
- Information provided by national ENIC-NARIC centre online (NAWA's recognition page, KWALIFIKATOR tool, education profiles) or after direct contact with ENIC-NARIC (emails, recognition statements).

Other resources mentioned by participants as very useful were:

- ENIC-NARIC website (international).
- Education systems profiles or descriptions published by other ENIC-NARICs (Dutch Nuffic and Swedish ENIC-NARIC).
- Official websites of other countries presenting their education systems (to check access and admission criteria applicable in the country of issue of a foreign certificate; to consult accredited institutions lists for a country and “blacklists” if available).
- Official pages of education boards allowing to verify exam results.
- Websites of foreign (e.g., British) HEIs who have experience in international recruitment and well described admission requirements for foreign candidates.
- SCOLARO website (description of education systems and [scolaro.pro](https://www.scolaro.pro) paid service which compares foreign credentials to those from American system).

In another dimension, participants mentioned as a basic and useful tool the **knowledge of foreign languages apart from English** (especially languages of countries from which a HEI recruits numerous candidates, e.g. Ukrainian in Poland). As not all information is available in English, staff (or even students) who are native speakers of such languages may be a priceless human resource in recognition.

Some participants also mentioned that they see their presence in Focus Group meeting as one more chance to learn about additional tools and resources.

In order to implement automatic recognition, what do you need in terms of “capabilities”, training, motivation, guidelines, technological tools?

The participants mentioned solutions from different spheres:

- Meetings, conferences and initiatives which bring opportunity to collaborate and exchange information with the Polish ENIC-NARIC team and colleagues from other institutions (“Direct to recognition” conferences by NAWA were referred to as such initiative).
- Trainings for HEIs’ staff enabling personal contact with experienced experts (even if offered online due to pandemic), based on real documents and cases, practical examples; they should be focused on countries with complex education systems (e.g., India) and on document verification (offering advanced level knowledge e.g., on checking authenticity of certificates/diplomas).

- Integrated database with browser which would collect information on qualifications enabling access to higher education in all countries kept up to date (the representatives wish to spare time and effort, being able to find all information in one place, including examples of documents and links to examination boards to verify results).
- Cooperation with Polish embassies abroad on checking authenticity and validity of certificates (at least in countries where verification is difficult); official possibility to claim some kind of confirmation from the embassy where verification cannot be done with any other tool.

What would you like to improve among the above-mentioned tools? For your organisation and generally speaking for the sector?

The participants identified the following improvements **on sectoral level**:

- Creating an online space or tool to collect information on countries' (or HEIs') requirements for specific types of study programmes (e.g. medicine, architecture); HEIs could use it to compare which results of their upper secondary school exams and/or which combination of subjects is required by for such programmes from candidates educated in their own country (e.g. what results are required from by Dutch universities from candidates educated in Dutch education system wishing to study medicine).
- Clear and up-to-date information on legalisation or authentication procedures in other countries (which form of authentication is officially provided in which country and which authorities have the legal right to legalise/authenticate certificates (issue problematic for countries which are not a party to the Hague Convention of 5 October 1961 Abolishing the Requirement of Legalisation for Foreign Public Documents); this information could be covered in databases such as Q-ENTRY or KWALIFIKATOR.
- Collected information on types of documents that are issued as electronic originals of certificates (situation where all printed documents are copies) – Polish HEIs are required to view the original document at some point of admission process whenever possible and want to be sure which documents and from which issuers do not have paper originals.
- Collected information on “old” exams and documents (what they entitled to in the country of issue and what were access criteria at the time of issue); this include 1990s or even earlier documents, as such information is often difficult to find online, which makes access more complicated for their holders; although there are not so many cases (but at least one each year according to participating HEIs), the candidates tend to interpret HEIs' difficulty in confirming the value of their documents as age-related discrimination.

On internal level, some HEIs wish to find a way to incorporate into the HEI's own admission process the results of exams like MCAT, SAT , which are widely used in some parts of the world. While, according to a Polish court ruling, such exams cannot replace the maturity exam (or equivalent) nor are considered as a title sufficient for access in itself, there is a will to acknowledge skills confirmed this way in the HEIs admission procedures (e.g. they could replace internal examinations which are part of the admission process). This could attract a group of promising international candidates.

Do you identify any law or official guidance that needs to change to enable your institution to better apply automatic recognition? Does your institution have any impact on its shape?

The ideas were presented:

- Both HEIs and Regional Education Authority pointed out to the need of clarifying national provisions on recognition of foreign school certificates (93-93h of the Act of Education System dated September 7, 1991), or at least preparing more specific guidelines; now the provisions are seen as very general and interpretation in actual, real cases is not easy; clarifying the forms of documents authentication was specifically emphasised (with possibility of rejection if no verification is possible).
- Two HEIs (independently in each group) admitted the preference to resign from recognition procedure by regional education superintendent and apply the rules of automatic recognition also for documents from countries for which official recognition is still required; another HEI mentioned that, as the official recognition procedure can be started only after coming to Poland and has long deadlines, they decided to admit students based on conditional offer and oblige them to provide recognition decision within reasonable deadline.
- Requirement for students from countries not covered by automatic recognition to submit original documents to HEIs is in conflict with the need to submit the same original documents at the same time for student visa application - the issue should be solved;
- Deadlines and requirements based on Code of Administrative Procedure, which apply to the recognition procedure conducted by Regional Education Authorities to prepare recognition decision of Regional Education Superintendent, do not allow to conduct recognition smoothly.
- Reconsidering the list of documents that HEIs can accept as evidence of the level of English (or other languages) for admission purposes (currently based on a reference to the national regulation: Rozporządzenie Prezesa Rady Ministrów z dnia 16 grudnia 2009 r. w sprawie sposobu przeprowadzania postępowania kwalifikacyjnego w służbie cywilnej); currently the results of maturity exams in English as a foreign language passed in non-English-speaking countries are not recognised as sufficient proof and passing additional international exams is required to confirm the language level; the documents confirming language knowledge matter also for student visa requirements.

While HEIs do not have direct impact on national legislation (established by the Parliament or the Ministry), HEIs representatives can express their views on ministry regulations in the process of sectoral consultation or through collaboration with other bodies such as rectors conferences (KRASP, KRAUM). One participant had direct experience with such a process.

Do you think digitalisation could support automatic recognition?

All participants readily agreed that digitalisation can and will support automatic recognition. As especially supportive for automatic recognition they mentioned such digital tools as:

- Electronic documents (certificates/diplomas issued in original in electronic form but also simple solutions like scans of paper documents).
- Online verification tools.
- Electronic apostille which can be verified online (a solution implemented in Moldova).
- Electronic signatures.
- Possibility of direct contact by electronic means with institutions that issue certificates.

In the light of what we have discussed so far, what are the main benefits of implementing automatic recognition? And what are the main challenges?

Participants referred to their experiences with automatic recognition procedures available for candidates for EU/EEA/OECD/mutual agreements countries as compared to recruitment of candidates from countries for which official recognition is still required.

Main benefits of implementing automatic recognition identified:

- Making work easier for people engaged in recruitment (HEIs, recognition institutions, students).
- Shorter time for document verification.
- Easier and quicker admission processes.
- Reduced cost of admission for candidates.
- Conditions of access equal for everybody, regardless of the country of their previous education, thanks to simplification and unification of admission procedures.
- More clarity which translates into better experience of candidates (HEIs' potential customers).
- Potential to encourage international students (rather than discourage with complicated procedures), based on more trust in the HEI itself (if the university can deal with recognition on their own it is probably prepared to meet foreign students' needs also in other aspects) and in country's education system as such.

Main challenges mentioned:

- Ensuring access (preferably in one place) to full, reliable, up-to-date information on education systems and documents confirming right of access from all countries to which automatic recognition would apply.
- Constant update of information on everchanging education systems (based on participants' own experience of keeping their admission requirements for international students up to date); this is especially visible in current pandemic situation when many countries take "last minute" decisions on secondary school final exams.
- Taking responsibility for the verification of candidates right of access by HEI staff, i.e., taking valid recognition decisions based on available tools (it is always easier to question than to accept a document with minimal verification to avoid accusations of no due diligence in case of a legal action against HEI).

What are the main steps needed to better apply automatic recognition in your institution and more in general in the sector?

The participant identified those steps as necessary on the **sectoral level**:

- Access to reliable, up-to-date resources (preferably one database covering all necessary information in one place).
- Dissemination of trusted sources of information and popularisation of useful, reliable tools – to let all HEIs adopt already verified good practices rather than "reinvent the wheel" (this would support comparable criteria and recognition approaches and could also facilitate international students' transfers between HEIs in the same country).
- Quality training for HEIs admission staff (including theory and lots of practice).
- Promoting application of the same recognition approach and results calculation rules for admission throughout the country, in relation to the same type of foreign documents/ exams.
- Creating a more official network of cooperation between HEIs, Regional Education Authorities and other institutions involved in recognition (to give visibility and support to current bottom-up initiatives).

The following steps were identified on **internal level**:

- Clarification of certain provisions within the institution.
- Appointing a "recognition advisor" in Regional Education Authority who would cooperate with HEIs outside formal procedures.

- Appointing a “recognition expert” in each HEI who would undergo complex training and collect information; they could be reached for advice by the rest of staff but would also become a point of contact for outside institutions for recognition issues.

List of institutions, which participated in the Focus Group:

- *Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny w Poznaniu (Poznań University of Economics and Business)*
- *Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Zawodowa w Koninie (State University of Applied Sciences in Konin)*
- *Wyższa Szkoła Informatyki i Zarządzania z siedzibą w Rzeszowie (University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszów)*
- *Kuratorium Oświaty w Katowicach (Regional Education Authority in Katowice)*
- *Gdański Uniwersytet Medyczny (Medical University of Gdańsk)*
- *Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie (Jagiellonian University in Kraków)*

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