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REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL

on the implementation of 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

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1. INTRODUCTION

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"**[1] was adopted by the Council on 26 November 2018, based on the Commission proposal of 22 May 2018. It affirms the Commission's intention to report to the Council within 4 years on the follow-up of the Recommendation, based on Member States' contributions.

Automatic mutual recognition (hereafter: automatic recognition) is key for students to make the best possible use of all learning opportunities across Europe. It is a cornerstone of the **European Education Area**, which the Commission and the Council committed to establish by 2025 (see Commission Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025[2], and the Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European Cooperation in education and training 2021-2030)[3]. It is also a key flagship of the **European strategy for universities**[4], presented in January 2022, and highly relevant for the success of learners' mobility within the enhanced **Erasmus+ programme** (2021–2027).

Recognition of qualifications falls within Member-State competence. It is guided by national legislation and international agreements. At European level, the only binding legal text is the 1997 UNESCO[5] and Council of Europe **Lisbon Recognition Convention**[6]**,** ratified by 54 State Parties, including all Member States with the exception of Greece. In addition, the concept of automatic recognition became a key commitment of the **European Higher Education Area**[7] **(Bologna process),** which involves 49 countries, including all EU Member States, in the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué.

The ambition of the Council Recommendation is to go beyond, by **encouraging and facilitating** Member States to go deeper and faster in their cooperation, in comparison to what they are able to do in the context of the Bologna process, building on the Bologna transparency tools[8].

The **political commitment expressed first in the 2017 European Council Conclusions**[9] **and developed in the Council Recommendation** establishes automatic recognition in the EU context, with a clear definition and necessary steps to accelerate the pace of implementation, in order to make it a reality for learners and graduates, both for those who have gained qualifications and those who have had learning mobility experiences in the EU.

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[1] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32018H1210(01)
[2] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0625
[3] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32021G0226(01)
[4] https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-01/communication-european-strategy-for-universities-graphic-version.pdf
[5] The UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications, adopted in 2019, establishes universal principles for fair, transparent and non-discriminatory recognition for higher education qualifications. The Convention shall enter into force in the first quarter of 2023, as 20 states parties have ratified it.
[6] https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treatynum=165
[7] http://ehea.info/
[8] brosura_v1_v12_vp_120419_text (ehea.info)
[9] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32204/14-final-conclusions-rev1-en.pdf

Four years after the adoption of the Recommendation, the purpose of this report is to analyse the progress made and the lessons learned so as to have all the steps in place by 2025.

This report will **inform the work on new initiatives**, such as the new Learning Mobility Framework planned in the 2023 Commission Work Programme. Indeed, the smooth recognition of qualifications and learning outcomes is the cornerstone of learning mobility. Work related to the implementation of the Recommendation can also inspire and facilitate progress with regard to the recognition of qualifications gained outside the EU as announced in the 2022 State of the Union address by President von der Leyen[10]. Moreover, the report is important for the work towards a joint European degree.

2. THE POLICY OBJECTIVES SET OUT IN THE COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

The Council Recommendation recommends that Member States put in place, by 2025, the steps necessary to ensure that every pupil, apprentice or student who has completed a learning experience in one Member State can have this experience, either in the form of a qualification or of learning outcomes, automatically recognised in the others to continue his or her studies.

Automatic recognition is understood in this context as follows:

- a **qualification at higher education level** acquired in one Member State is automatically recognised at the same level in any other Member State, for the purpose of granting access to further studies.
- the **outcomes** from a **learning period abroad at higher education level in one Member State are automatically and fully recognised in the others**, as agreed beforehand in a learning agreement and confirmed in the Transcript of Records, in line with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. Credits gained during the period of study in another Member State or during a virtual mobility are transferred without delay and counted towards the student's degree without any additional work or assessment of the student.
- an **upper secondary qualification** giving access to higher education in one Member State is automatically recognised in any other Member State, for the purpose of granting access to higher education.
- at upper secondary level, the right to have the **learning outcomes from a learning period abroad in one Member State recognised** in the country of origin, provided that the learning outcomes are broadly in line with those in the national curricula of the country of origin.

The Council Recommendation does not prejudice the right of the other Member States' authorities to **verify the authenticity** and the **level** of the qualification and if it really gives access to higher education in the Member State of issuance. However, this verification does not involve any separate recognition procedure. Automatic recognition does not prejudice the right of higher education institutions to set **specific criteria for admission** to their specific programmes.

In the Council Recommendation, Member States are recommended to ensure the creation of the necessary framework conditions, trust and transparency within their education systems for automatic recognition, namely to:

- Adapt **national legislation,** where relevant, to introduce automatic recognition as defined above for all EU Member States, with the necessary conditions in place.

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10 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_22_5493

- Fully implement the **European and Bologna higher education transparency tools** that can support recognition - the Diploma Supplement and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS); fulfil the **key commitments of the Bologna Process** for higher education (three cycle system, implementation of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, full implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention) and reference qualifications in the **European Qualifications Framework**;
- Develop **national guidance** to support higher and secondary education and training institutions in effectively implementing automatic recognition and develop the capacity and strengthen the role of **National Academic Recognition Information Centres** (NARICs) and credential evaluators, in particular with regard to information dissemination and the use of online tools to improve efficiency, transparency and consistency;
- Improve the **evidence base** by collecting and disseminating data on the extent and nature of recognition cases for the purpose of this Council Recommendation.

3. STATE OF PLAY IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AUTOMATIC RECOGNITION

This report provides an analysis of the steps put in place by Member States four years after the adoption of the Council Recommendation. It also intends to go beyond legislative measures in place and to check de facto implementation on the ground, whenever evidence is available on the practice of recognition.

Below a summary of the key findings of the report (see country assessment in Annex).

In the field of higher education, while **a number of steps have been put in place by Member States** to ensure the necessary framework conditions, trust and transparency within their education systems, more needs to be done by 2025:

- **National legislation for automatic recognition of higher education qualifications** from all EU Member States is **in place in 12 Member States**. 3 additional Member States are in the process of adapting their national legislation. And 9 other Member States makes it available for a limited number of EU countries.
- The **Bologna and EU transparency tools** are in place in most of the Member States. However, there are still **11 Member States** where these tools are **not fully implemented**. This is hampering the necessary trust between Member States and systems.
- **14 Member States** have in place **national guidance** for institutions, together with regular **training** provision and utilisation of **online tools** for recognition decisions.
- **7 Member States** monitor and evaluate recognition decisions through a **central system-level database** that collects and disseminates data on recognition cases, and that is regularly updated. Such lack of data in other Member states hamper the assessment of de facto implementation of automatic recognition on the ground.

While the existence of formal legislation in the field of higher education is a key prerequisite for automatic recognition, available evidence, even if limited, shows that it is a necessary but not a sufficient condition:

- Decision making for automatic recognition is done centrally by a competent body in **3 Member States**. In all other Member States, the decision on recognition of qualifications is decentralised to higher education institutions. Available evidence shows that such a decentralised application of a system-level legal framework increases the risk of inconsistent application of automatic recognition.

- The **available evidence** gathered through a survey to higher education institutions points to a **mixed picture on the implementation of automatic recognition of higher education qualifications at institutional level**, with inconsistencies between institutions, or even within the same institution by different credential evaluators. An important reason is the confusion between recognition and admission, especially that automatic recognition does not mean automatic admission. As most recognition decisions are done by higher education institutions, for being able to make a sound assessment, it would be necessary to have more information about whether and to what extent application is consistent and in line with the regulations in place.
- When it comes to **automatic recognition of learning periods abroad**, the only available data is the one from the Erasmus+ programme. The European average in 2020 was 84.4% of credits automatically recognised, with substantial differences between countries. The new Erasmus+ quality framework for the period 2021-2027 has been set in place to achieve full automatic recognition of learning periods abroad through Erasmus+.
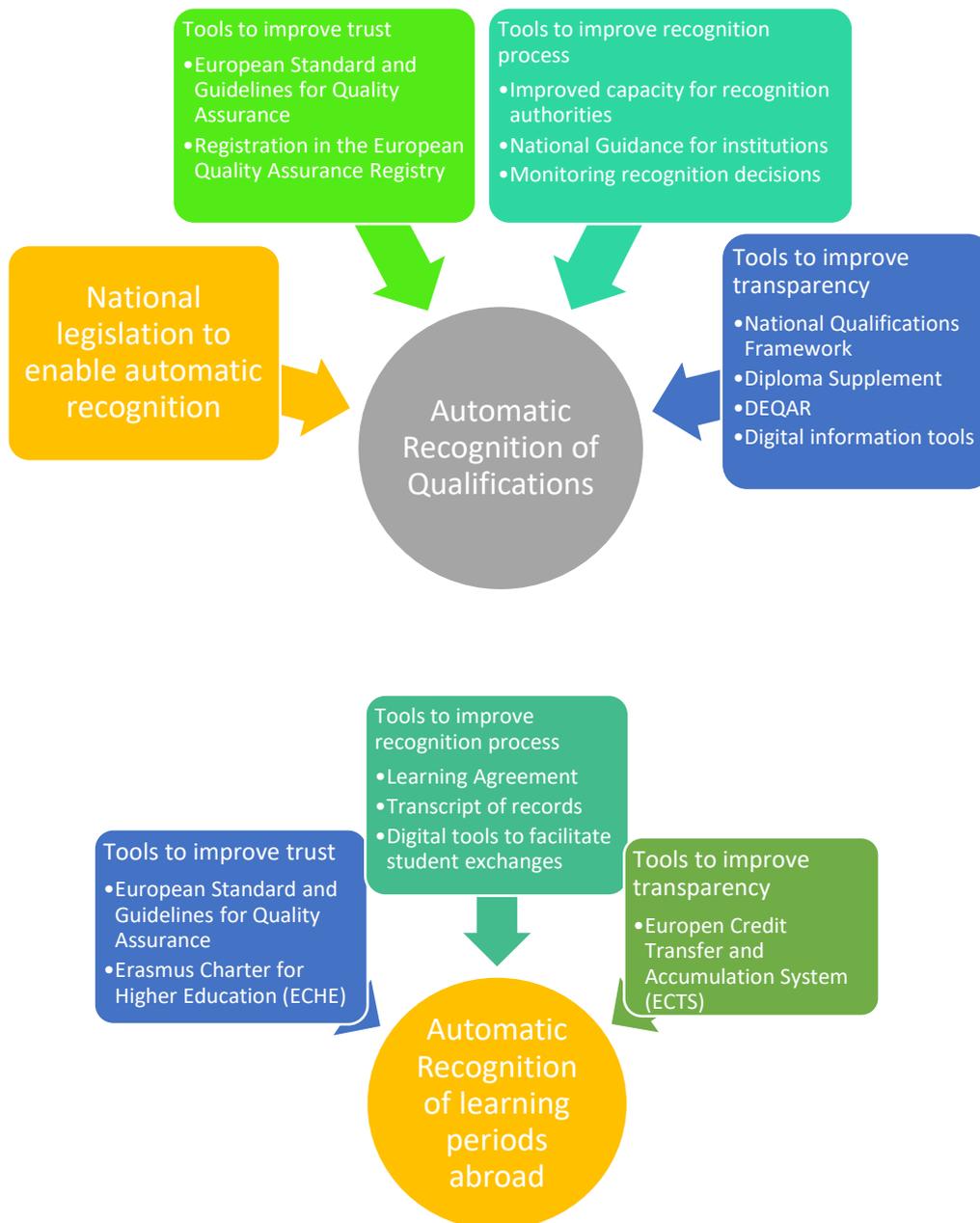
More efforts are also needed in the field of **upper secondary education and training:**

- **Automatic recognition of qualifications in upper secondary education and training** (general education and VET) is rather well developed in **15 Member States** (plus 1 exclusively for general school education) providing automatic recognition or at maximum a check of the qualification against a database of recognition decisions. 6 further Member States have automatic recognition in place for qualifications from a limited number of other Member States (usually through bilateral agreements or unilateral decisions), 5 Member States (plus 1 for VET) have no automatic recognition in place. Challenges in this field remain largely the same as before the adoption of the Recommendation.
- When it comes to the **recognition of outcomes of learning periods abroad for upper secondary education**, 8 Member States offer a form of automatic recognition broadly in line with the Council Recommendation (2 Member States based on equivalence, 6 Member States based on learning outcomes). Beyond this, the situation has not progressed much. A majority of Member States recognises outcomes only based on a de-centralised form of curriculum-matching, a usually long and tedious procedure that often involves extra exams for the learners as well as uncertainty. Additional Member States don't offer any recognition procedures outside of very specific programmes. 10 Member States offer no form of standardised recognition procedure or even a lack of recognition procedure overall.

The Commission sees a continued need to increase efforts towards the implementation of the Council Recommendation and make substantial progress by 2025, based on the main findings of this report.

3.1. State of play for higher education

Automatic recognition in higher education for qualifications and for learning periods abroad both require legislation and supporting tools in place in order to be implemented. In the next chapter, the existence of these enabling factors is discussed.

Tools to improve trust
•European Standard and Guidelines for Quality Assurance
•Registration in the European Quality Assurance Registry

Tools to improve recognition process
•Improved capacity for recognition authorities
•National Guidance for institutions
•Monitoring recognition decisions

Tools to improve transparency
•National Qualifications Framework
•Diploma Supplement
•DEQAR
•Digital information tools

National legislation to enable automatic recognition

Automatic Recognition of Qualifications

Tools to improve recognition process
•Learning Agreement
•Transcript of records
•Digital tools to facilitate student exchanges

Tools to improve trust
•European Standard and Guidelines for Quality Assurance
•Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE)

Tools to improve transparency
•Europen Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)

Automatic Recognition of learning periods abroad

3.1.1. Progress made at national level

3.1.1.1. Adaptation of national law[11]

Relevant national legislation is a prerequisite for automatic recognition, although it does not necessarily mean that it is correctly applied on the ground.

In 2018, at the time of the adoption of the Council Recommendation, **eight Member States** (DE, DK, FI, FR, MT, PL, RO and SE) already had automatic recognition for all EU countries embedded in their national legislation. **Four countries** (AT, HR, IT and ES), which either considered that they apply automatic recognition in practice, or wanted to move towards automatic recognition, adapted their legislation following the Council

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[11] Report on the Implementation of the Council Recommendation on automatic recognition 2023 drafted by ICF S.A as part of the Study on progress the implementation of the 2018 Council Recommendation on automatic mutual recognition of education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad as well as of the feasibility of a European Recognition and Quality Assurance system

Recommendation. To be noted that in Spain, the new law introducing automatic recognition is valid for all EU Member states, except for a subset of degrees.

In addition, **three countries** (CZ, EL and SK) are currently in the process of adapting their national legislation.

Nine Member States introduced automatic recognition for a subset of countries, (for example, by establishing or expanding regional multilateral agreements) or for certain qualifications:

- The multilateral Treaty on Automatic Recognition was signed between the **Baltic and Benelux countries** in 2021. Until now, BE–Fl[12], LV and EE have ratified it. It builds on the **2004 Reykjavik declaration** that promotes automatic recognition of comparable qualifications in higher education between Nordic countries.

- Building on **bilateral agreements** existing before 2018 between PL and CZ, a new multilateral agreement is being put into place between 4 countries (CZ, HU, PL, SK). Slovenia has bilateral agreements with its neighbouring countries.

Legislative reforms towards automatic recognition since 2018

Legislative reform towards automatic recognition for all countries since 2018

Automatic recognition for all countries prior to 2018

Legislative reform towards automatic recognition for some countries since 2018

Legislation towards automatic recognition in planning phase

No reform towards automatic recognition since 2018
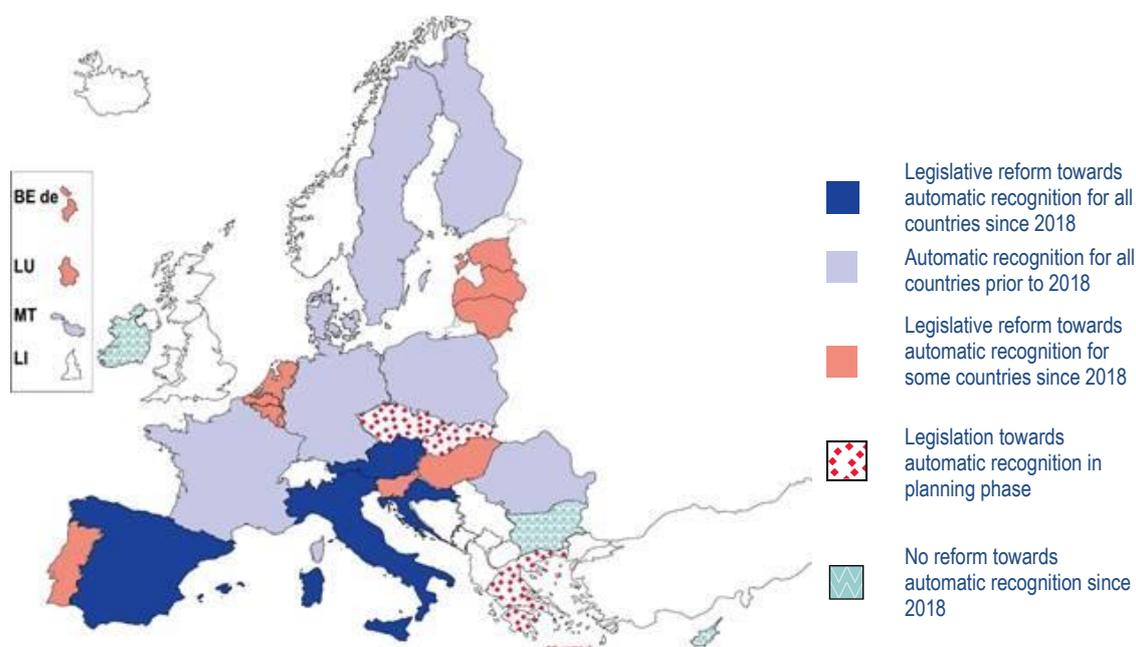
Source: European Commission

The creation of such regional agreements is seen by some countries as a way forward in implementing automatic recognition for all EU Member States that apply the European and Bologna transparency tools. To be noted that Portugal has taken a specific approach for recognition since 2007, which entails applying automatic recognition for the qualifications that are listed in a decree law.

Other countries do not have plans for legislative alignment yet (BG, CY, and IE).

Among the 12 countries having their national legislation adapted for automatic recognition, **decision making for automatic recognition is done centrally** by a

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[12]   Belgium - Flemish community

competent body in **3 countries**. In all other Member States, the decision on recognition of qualifications is decentralised to higher education institutions. This may lead to **lack of consistency** of recognition decisions; practices may vary even between faculties (see section 3.1.1.5).

It raises the question as to whether a system-level decision (the right of an individual to access higher education at any level) should be made by individual higher education institutions, or better kept at system level with national authorities.

3.1.1.2. Implementation of the Bologna transparency tools

The systematic implementation of Bologna tools is indispensable for automatic recognition in the higher education field. Despite long-standing commitments, implementation is still uneven across the EU.

- **The European Quality Assurance Register**[13] **(EQAR)**

Trust in the quality assurance system of a country is a prerequisite for automatic recognition. **Registration in the European Quality Assurance Registry** of the external quality assurance agencies signals that the country's quality assurance agency operates in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)[14]. Currently, of the 27 Member States, 22 use quality assurance agencies registered in EQAR[15]. The five other countries are either currently under ongoing EQAR review (SK and EL) for compliance with the ESG or are considering applying soon (IT, MT and CZ).

In the **Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR),** institutions can upload and users can find information on quality assurance reviews with one click, avoiding duplications of evaluations. National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARICs) from IT, FR, NL and RO are integrating an automatic DEQAR search in their workflows for recognition (with Erasmus+ programme support).

- **The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System guidelines (ECTS)**

ECTS is a student-centred credit system based on the student workload required to achieve specified learning outcomes. As such, it is essential for facilitating the recognition of students' learning achievements during credit mobility[16] periods in a comparable way.

The **effective implementation of ECTS** is highly dependent on the actions of autonomous higher education institutions. However, it is important that the national level also assumes responsibility, supports and incentivises the correct use of ECTS (in line with the 2015 ECTS Users' Guide[17]), beyond the Erasmus+ programme. It is a legal requirement for external quality assurance agencies to refer to the key principles of ECTS in their review in 22 Member States[18]. In the other 5 Member States (IE, LV, SE, SK, SI), it is not included, although ECTS is still widely used. However, the implementation of the ECTS

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[13]   https://www.eqar.eu/
[14]   https://www.enqa.eu/esg-standards-and-guidelines-for-quality-assurance-in-the-european-higher-education-area/
[15]   https://www.eqar.eu/kb/country-information/
[16]   Credit mobility can be defined as a limited period of study or traineeship abroad (in the framework of on-going studies at a home institution) for the purpose of gaining credits. After the mobility phase, students return to their home institution, where the credits are recognised and they complete their studies.
[17]   https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/da7467e6-8450-11e5-b8b7-01aa75ed71a1
[18]   https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c90aaf32-4fce-11eb-b59f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-183354043

Users' Guide 2015 principles is fully monitored by the national quality assurance agency in 6 systems[19] only.

- **Diploma supplement (DS)**

The **DS is a key commitment of the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education** for higher education institutions to be eligible to benefit from the Erasmus+ programme. It contains information on qualifications that enables credential evaluators to understand the level and academic rights of the qualification holder, and it is available in a digitalised format in the Europass Platform[20]. Beyond the Erasmus+ programme, it is issued automatically, free of charge and in a widely spoken language for all graduates in 23 Member States[21]. The Member States that do not issue DS automatically are FR, ES and EL (which does not issue it to first and second cycle graduates), and while IE requires a fee for the additional administrative workload.

3.1.1.3. Development of national guidance[22]

While DK, RO and SE have a fully centralised decision system for recognition, in all other Member States, it is either the decision of the higher education institutions, or the top-level authority delegates responsibility for the implementation to them. In all these countries, **national guidance is key to support higher education institutions** in implementing automatic recognition effectively.

In practice, online services and guidance to support standardised practices among higher education institutions have been produced by **fourteen Member States** (BG, DK, EE, FI, FR, DE, EL, IT, MT, NL, PL, RO, ES, SE).

3.1.1.4. Monitoring and evaluation[23]

Systematic monitoring of recognition decisions is in place in **7 Member States** (BG, IT, LU, NL, PT, RO, SK).

The lack of monitoring of recognition decisions makes it **difficult to identify the most problematic issues and to take appropriate measures to address them**.

Lack of data makes it also difficult to assess the extent to which automatic recognition is de facto implemented in an education system.

3.1.1.5. Implementation at institutional level

Automatic recognition of qualifications is linked to the **access rights of individuals** for a set of learning provisions[24]. While a specific qualification may give formal/general access to all programmes at the next level of study, it does not automatically ensure the right of admission to a specific programme. Each higher education institution or competent national authority has the right to set specific admission criteria.

A survey[25] carried out among higher education institutions shows a **mixed picture** regarding practice on the ground concerning the **automatic recognition** of **qualifications**.

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[19] Mobility scoreboard 2019 - BE-Flanders, FR, IT, LT, NL, FI
[20] https://europa.eu/europass/en
[21] Bologna Implementation Report 2020
[22] "ICF Report on the Implementation of the Council Recommendation on automatic recognition" 2023
[23] "ICF Report on the Implementation of the Council Recommendation on automatic recognition" 2023
[24] The Triangle of Automatic Recognition
[25] "ICF Report on the Implementation of the Council Recommendation on automatic recognition" 2023; sample size: 441

The understanding and implementation of automatic recognition by higher education institutions also varies within the same country.

The main reasons for non-automatic recognition were: case-by-case comparison of workload and learning outcomes; general system-level conditions (European qualifications frameworks level); admission criteria.

It shows that there is still a **confusion on the definition of automatic recognition**, including that it does not mean automatic admission. The confusion also comes from the fact that recognition and admission processes are often combined at institutional level: 38% of respondents said they handle them together. In addition, one third of the institutions check the quality assurance processes of the other institution when deciding on whether to recognise a qualification.

It is to be noted that only 53% of the institutions said that they keep a record of recognition decisions.

Self-assessment of higher education institutions automatically recognising BA and MA degrees
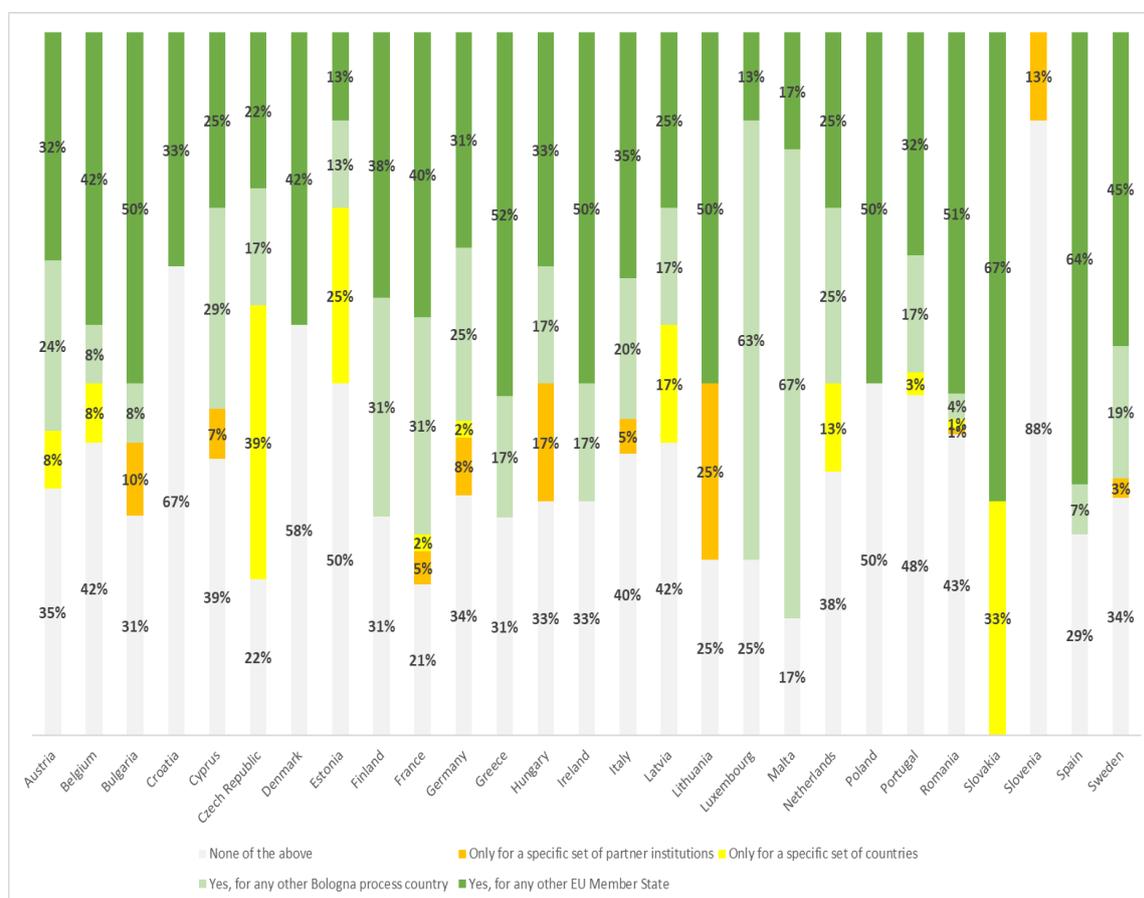
N=421   Source: ICF/3s

Recognition decisions of **learning periods abroad** are taken by institutions, and in most cases at faculty level.

According to the survey carried out among higher education institutions, only 47% of higher education institutions keep a database on recognition decisions for learning periods abroad, which makes it difficult to assess the level of implementation of the Council recommendation.

Studies show that remaining bottlenecks are linked to the **perceived quality concerns at faculty level by some professors**. Over 10% of mobile students are dissatisfied with the process of recognition of their credits and a slightly higher share are dissatisfied with the information they receive on grade and ECTS transfer. The absence of a 'mobility window' in study programmes increases the level of uncertainty for mobile students.

In the EU, most learning mobility (53%) takes place within the framework of the Erasmus+ Programme. Erasmus+ mobility data, based on the feedback from Erasmus+ students, show that the share of students[26] who received in 2020 full recognition of all credits obtained was 84,4% on average, with **significant differences between Member States**.
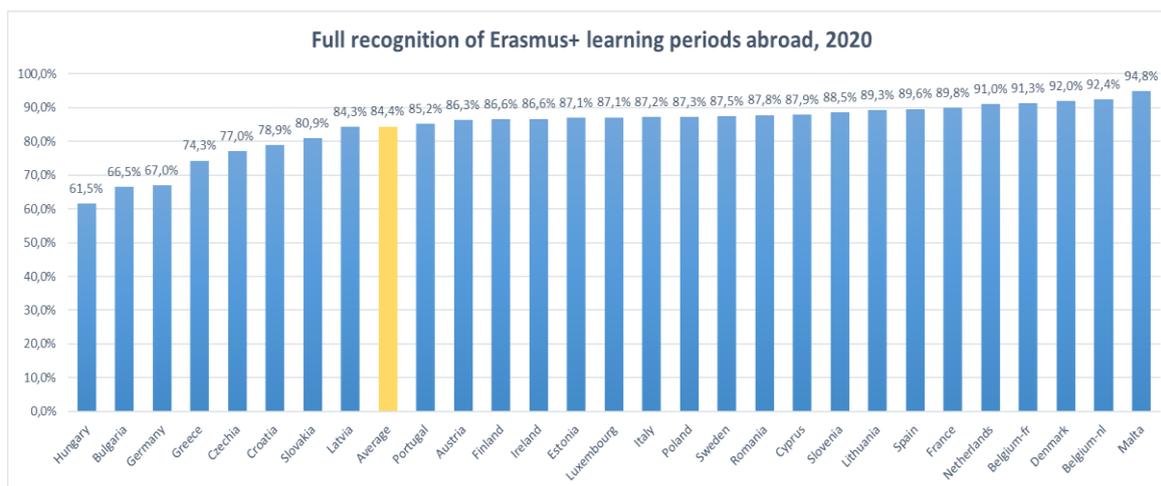
Source: European Commission

The new Erasmus+ quality framework for the period 2021-2027 has been set in place to achieve full automatic recognition of learning periods abroad across the EU through Erasmus+.

3.1.1.6. Conclusions

Decisions on recognition are most often left to the discretion of the higher education institutions themselves, which leads to inconsistencies in the implementation of automatic recognition. As institutional practices vary, it is often difficult to determine whether the recognition practice is fully automatic within a country, even if the national legislation allows for automatic recognition. One of the difficulties lies in the fact that recognition and admission processes are often combined at institutional level. This has led to confusion about the implications of automatic recognition, and raises difficulties in ensuring that a coherent (automatic) approach is used in all higher education institutions.

More fundamentally, it raises the question as to whether it makes sense for a system-level decision to be made by individual higher education institutions. The higher education landscape, governance structures and personnel responsible for recognition change continuously. Moreover, the absence of central guidance and the lack of monitoring of recognition decisions makes it difficult to detect inconsistencies.

When adapting national legislation, **Member States might consider ensuring consistency of implementation by giving the competence for automatic recognition decisions to a dedicated body** (for example a NARIC), while higher education institutions

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[26] Number of respondents is 589.484 over 4 years

would keep their autonomy in selecting and admitting students to their programmes. Thus, the distinction between recognition and admission would become clearer in practice.

Member States may also encourage higher education institutions to **integrate recognition processes into their internal quality assurance procedures**, including full implementation of the 2015 ECTS Users Guide. It would improve the transparency and consistency of recognition practices within institutions for learning periods abroad.

Consistent decision making could be supported with digital solutions such as databases. A systematic approach for the monitoring and evaluation of recognition decisions for qualifications and individual learning mobility would improve transparency and contribute to evidence-based decision-making.

3.1.2. Support from the Commission since 2018

The Commission provides support and has developed tools to reinforce Member States' efforts to implement automatic recognition.

3.1.2.1. Fostering mutual trust and peer learning among Member States and institutions

The Commission facilitated the regular exchange of good practices between Member States as part of the working groups of the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020)[27] and the subsequent strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the EEA and beyond (**EEA strategic framework for 2021-2030**).

Since 2018, automatic recognition has been discussed at each working group meeting and has also regularly been on the agenda of meetings of the Directors General for higher education. In addition, a **peer learning seminar** dedicated to the implementation of automatic recognition took place in 2019, organised by the Commission together with the Norwegian government.

The European Education Area[28] portal acts as a hub for information on the Council Recommendation and provides support for its implementation.

3.1.2.2. The Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE)

Every higher education institution wishing to benefit from Erasmus+ funds needs to have an ECHE[29] accreditation. So far, 5206 higher education institutions are accredited with an ECHE for 2021-2027. It means that about 95% of students in the EU are studying at a university that participate in the Erasmus+ Programme.

In the new ECHE for the new Erasmus+ Programme (2021-2027), **holders commit to ensuring full automatic recognition,** according to the definition provided in the Council Recommendation, of all credits gained for learning outcomes satisfactorily achieved during a period of study/training abroad. The correct use of ECTS and the automatic issuance of the Diploma Supplement are also key commitments of ECHE-holders. The implementation is monitored by Erasmus+ National Agencies.

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[27] Education and training 2020 - Publications Office of the EU (europa.eu)
[28] https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/automatic-recognition-of-qualifications
[29] https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/erasmus-charter-for-higher-education

3.2. State of play for upper secondary education

3.2.1. Progress made at national level

3.2.1.1. State of play of recognition of upper secondary education and training qualifications giving access to higher education

The Council Recommendation called for substantial progress towards automatic mutual recognition, so that an upper secondary education and training qualification giving access to higher education is automatically recognised also in other Member States.

About half of the Member States have **systems in place that meet this objective**; 5 Member States don't have any form of automatic recognition in place. To highlight a few of the positive examples, in PL, the assessment/statement of comparability is generated automatically via the NARIC's Kwalifikator online tool (for general education, but not VET). FR offers direct online applications to universities without the need for further recognition process. In a few Member States, some form of automatic recognition, either required by law or applied in practice, is based on bilateral or multilateral agreements with other Member States (e.g. AT, CZ for SK, SK for CZ and EE/LT/LV for each other), or unilateral decisions (SI for HR).

In **many Member States**, the **responsibility for recognition lies with higher education institutions**, with practices varying within the Member State. Some NARICs offer online (and offline) services and guidance on the assessment of equivalence (AT, BE-Fr[30]), DE, EE, ES, IE, IT, NL, PL, PT and SI) in some Member States in the form of (public) online databases (e.g. DE and IT). In SE and ES, experts on specific countries are based at higher education institutions and support the decision-making process.

Some Member States are developing procedures to **assess curricular convergence, comparing study programmes individually**. Some require additional exams (CZ, HU and SK). However, upper secondary education and training is not included in proposed legislative changes in several Member States working on recognition (e.g. CZ, ES, EL and LT) whose initiatives focus on higher education qualifications[31].

Some countries have **differences between general upper secondary education and VET**. For example, in PL, automatic recognition is in place for general upper secondary education qualifications, but not for VET qualifications.

In summary, some initiatives, such as central databases, including with public access, stand out as good examples of progress towards automatic recognition. However, many of them were already launched before the adoption of the Recommendation. The limited recent progress is often due to lack of initiative by higher education institutions rather than a central system provided by Member States. **Challenges in this field remain largely the same as before the adoption of the Recommendation**

3.2.1.2. Recognition of learning periods abroad

The Council Recommendation highlights that automatic recognition should be provided as long as 'the learning outcomes [are] broadly in line with those in the national curricula of the country of origin'.

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[30] Belgium- French-speaking community
[31] 'ICF Report on the Implementation of the Council Recommendation on automatic recognition" 2023

For **short learning periods abroad**, referring usually to periods between several days and up to 3 months, there is usually no need for recognition as a condition for a pupil to be reintegrated into the sending school, due to the short duration and the direct involvement of the schools.

For **long-term learning periods abroad**, usually between 3 months and an entire school year, there are three approaches in line with the Council Recommendation that can be described as automatic recognition:

- **Recognition based on equivalence**

The period abroad is considered as equivalent to the same period in the home country, regardless of any differences in curricula between the sending and host schools, and the pupil is readmitted to the corresponding grade or admitted to next grade, if a limited number of principles and criteria are respected.

  o In AT, recognition is based on school attendance for a minimum 5 months and a maximum of 1 year.
  o In PT, learning periods abroad of one year are automatically recognition based on successful completion of the school year.

- **Recognition based on learning outcomes determined to be broadly in line with the sending institutions curriculum**

Member States have established an official system-level procedure that identifies the outcomes of a learning period abroad and determines whether they are broadly in line with those of the national curriculum of the country of origin. This is the case in BG, DK, FI, FR in VET, IT and RO, with different practices in each of the Member States.

- **Recognition based on a signed learning agreement**

Before the learning period abroad, sending school and hosting school as well as the learner jointly discuss what learning objectives need to be met to fulfil the learning requirements in both educational systems. After returning, the achieved learning outcomes are measured against the learning agreement and, if in line, automatically recognised. This approach is in the spirit of the Council Recommendation and is widely implemented in the Erasmus+ programme but has not seen widespread use in learning mobilities outside the Erasmus+ programme.

However, in most Member States, recognition is still **not automatic**:

- Almost half of the Member States have an official procedure based on **curriculum matching** performed by a variety of actors (schools, individual teachers, local authorities) and usually require an assessment on subjects not followed abroad: this applies to one third of Member States (BE-Fr, CY, CZ, DE, HR, HU, IE, LT, LV, PT for learning periods of less than 1 school year, SI, SK and ES).
- Some Member States have an assessment by both the sending and host school as part of a **school-to-school partnership** to bypass any formal recognition procedure in this case (e.g. in FR in school education).
- Many Member States (e.g. BE-De, BE-Fl, EE, EL, LU, MT, NL, PL and SE) have **not implemented any unified recognition procedure or guidelines**. An expert network set up by the Commission as part of a preparatory action initiated by the European Parliament, also found that in many Member States, schools lack the necessary skills

to recognise learning periods abroad within their school system and curriculum due to the lack of system-level procedures[32].

In addition to the recognition procedures, the status **of mobile learners** during a mobility period remains an issue. In several school systems, pupils going abroad for long-term mobility are no longer registered in a school in their country of origin, neither do they have a clear status in their host school, making it difficult to record or assess learning outcomes.

To sum up, **progress** has been achieved for the automatic recognition of outcomes of **learning periods abroad in upper secondary education**, but it has been **more limited** than progress for qualifications. A total of seven Member States (AT, BG, DK, FI, IT, PT for periods of one year and RO) have a system or procedure in place that qualifies as automatic recognition in line with the Council Recommendation. In a majority of Member States, recognition depends on decisions of local authorities or individual education and training institutions based on curriculum-matching or is even impossible. The challenges remain largely the same as the ones that led to the adoption of the Council Recommendation. Comparison between curricula, discrepancies between recognition procedures (often even a lack of standardised procedures at national level), and the absence of a status or framework for mobile learners still need to be tackled.

Member States that have not made progress recently could be inspired by legislation in Member States that are supportive of pupil mobility and that encourage it through automatic recognition, including provisions in binational or multinational agreements.

Recognition would also benefit from Member States continuing their work on increasingly developing their curricula in upper secondary education and training on the principles of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and attitudes).

3.2.2. Support of the European Commission since 2018

3.2.2.1. Establishing an EU level online information service

The new **Q-Entry database[33], launched in 2018** under the Erasmus+ programme, and run by NARIC centres, provides stakeholders and the general public with up-to-date and standardised information on final school leaving qualifications for 55 countries (27 EU Member States + 28 non-EU countries) that allow students access to higher education in their home country.

3.2.2.2. Support for the recognition of outcomes of learning periods abroad

- Fostering mutual trust and peer learning between Member States and between institution: As a follow-up to a preparatory action initiated by the European Parliament, **the Commission created an expert network** of 25 members from 16 Member States who developed a proposal for a **European Framework for**

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[32] Expert network on recognition of outcomes of learning periods abroad in general secondary education - Member States analysis (2021) | European Education Area (europa.eu)

[33] https://www.q-entry.eu/

recognition of outcomes of learning periods abroad[34], setting out key principles for automatic mutual recognition of the learning outcomes of study periods abroad for **general upper secondary pupils** based on an analysis of the situation in Member States[35]. This suggestion to the Commission will be used as a basis for developing the initiative further with Member States.

- **The Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience**[36], adopted in 2020, reiterated the importance of learning mobility, also by setting a European level target[37], and recognition of the acquired knowledge, skills and competences. Furthermore, the Commission explored the concept of the European Vocational Core Profiles with a view to facilitate mobility of learners and workers and the transparency and recognition of qualifications.In vocational education and training, Cedefop developed methodologies to support the comparison of qualifications[38] and the related education and training programmes and curricula. Based on data collected in 2021 from Cedefop's ReferNet network for the mobility scoreboard, CEDEFOP issued a briefing on the recognition of the learning outcomes acquired abroad by IVET learners[39]. The publication on the 'Enablers and disablers of cross-border long-term mobility of apprentices'[40] also refers to recognition practices focusing on apprentices for a few case studies.

- **The Erasmus+ programme** has been designed to increase pupils' mobility opportunities with the goal of changing the landscape of long-term pupil mobility in Europe, which until now has mostly been driven by organisations outside of the programme. It will do so by increasing the share of mobility directly managed between schools and following the Erasmus+ quality standards. Moreover, the learning outcomes of participants involved in mobility activities abroad will be recognised by their sending organisation, thanks to a new accreditation scheme[41]. Accredited organisations and more particularly accredited consortia should support the development of VET mobility with recognition of learning outcomes by the sending organisation.

3.3. An enabling ecosystem for automatic recognition

Implementation of automatic recognition requires the creation of proper conditions for trust and transparency between education systems. It also requires sufficient capacities available for national recognition authorities to develop the necessary tools for automatic recognition, and to support institutions to implement automatic recognition. The following

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[34] Proposal for a European Framework on recognition of outcomes of learning periods abroad in general upper secondary education (2021) | European Education Area (europa.eu)

[35] Expert network on recognition of outcomes of learning periods abroad in general secondary education - Member States analysis (2021) | European Education Area (europa.eu)

[36] EUR-Lex - 32020H1202(01) - EN - EUR-Lex (europa.eu)

[37] 8 % of learners in VET benefit from a learning mobility abroad by 2025

[38] https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/d7fe617d-e541-11ec-a534-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

[39] Recognising the learning outcomes acquired abroad by IVET learners | CEDEFOP (europa.eu)

[40] Enablers and disablers of cross-border long-term apprentice mobility | CEDEFOP (europa.eu)

[41] https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/opportunities/organisations/learning-mobility-of-individuals/erasmus-accreditation

chapter outlines those elements that are indispensable for both higher education and for upper secondary education and training.

3.3.1. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

The European Qualifications Framework (**EQF**)[42] facilitates the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications of different national systems. Through referencing National Qualifications Frameworks to the EQF, it is possible to **compare all types and levels of qualifications from the national systems**. Currently, 26 EU Member States have referenced their National Qualification Frameworks to the EQF, with ES in the process of doing so. Of the 27 Member States, 21 (all except BG, ES, FI, HR, IT and LU) indicate EQF levels in national qualifications databases and registers. This helps education and training institutions to check if the applicant has the proper level of qualification (for example, if the diploma is indeed at Bachelor level for applying to Master studies) in case of automatic recognition.

In addition, 16 Member States share data on qualifications through the Europass platform by connecting national qualifications databases or registers[43] to that platform. A particular challenge relates to recognition between level 5 (e.g. short-cycle tertiary education) and 6 (Bachelors' or equivalent level). Level 5 qualifications can belong to either higher education or post-secondary systems, or even both[44].

Most countries that have referenced to the EQF have done so through a single report that includes the self-certification for the qualifications framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). This has been done in all Member States, except CZ, EL, NL and SK[45].

3.3.2. The National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARICs)

NARICs aim to facilitate the access to accurate information on education systems and qualifications for EU and non-EU nationals. Their competencies vary according to national legislation. Some issue only recognition advice/recommendations (EE, IT, IE, SI and DE) while others provide legally-binding recognition decisions (BG, BE-Fl, DK, MT, HU, SK, LT and RO). They are crucial for checking that a qualification is genuine and at the correct level.

Supported by the Erasmus+ programme, the network of NARICs has published a number of guidelines[46] to facilitate the implementation of automatic recognition by credential evaluators. Since the adoption of the Council Recommendation, two thirds[47] of the centres have simplified the recognition processes and four (MT, DK, NO, EE) report a decrease in recognition requests thanks to the Council Recommendation.

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[42]   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615(01)
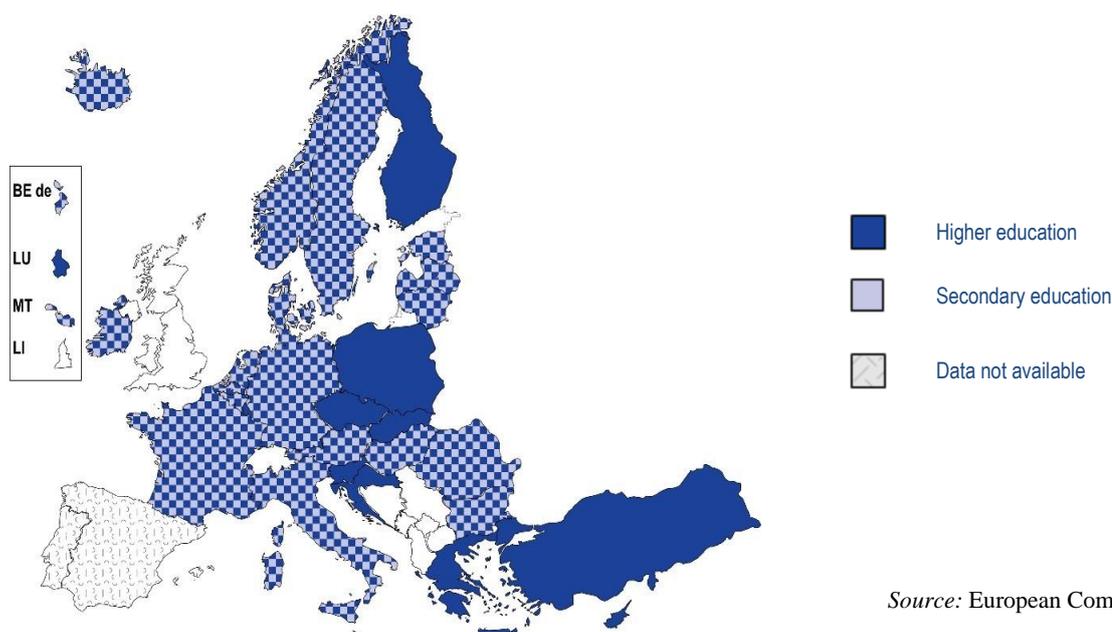[43]   https://europa.eu/europass/en/find-courses
[44]   "ICF Report on the Implementation of the Council Recommendation on automatic recognition" 2023
[45]   Bologna Implementation Report 2020
[46]   https://www.enic-naric.net/page-recognition-tools-projects
[47]   NARIC survey 2022

NARIC competences for higher and upper secondary education

Source: European Commission

The Council Recommendation calls for the role of NARICs' to be strengthened, by means of additional national resources. Extending NARICs to cover upper secondary education and training (general education and VET) would increase awareness on recognition of upper secondary qualifications and support the recognition of outcomes of learning periods abroad.

The Commission supports the NARIC network[48] by facilitating exchanges of best practices. The Erasmus+ budget for developing their capacity and strengthening the role was increased from EUR 1.2 million in 2018 to EUR 3 million in 2022. This led to the development of supporting tools[49], guidelines[50] and training to those responsible for evaluating credentials ('credential evaluators') in higher education institutions. Since 2020, the Erasmus+ programme has been funding a 'Technical Support Team' to help the network fulfil its increased ambitions. The increase of available resources revealed significant capacity differences at NARICs, with only 3 centres (IT, NL, LV) coordinating more than one Erasmus+ project.

Further work on digital tools, such as Q-Entry and other qualifications databases, may further facilitate recognition processes, also for institutions. Developing the interoperability of national databases at European level, and (building on best practice, as in the case of the Polish Kwalifikator database) issuing personal Recognition Statements on automatic recognition could further remove administrative burden for applicants and institutions.

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[48]   https://www.enic-naric.net/
[49]   https://www.enic-naric.net/page-recognition-tools-projects
[50]   https://www.nuffic.nl/sites/default/files/2020-08/the-triangle-of-automatic-recognition%20%281%29.pdf

By covering also non-European qualifications, these interoperable databases could facilitate quick, fair and transparent recognition of third-country qualifications (which is outside of the scope of the Council Recommendation). Supported and facilitated by the Commission, this is in line with the ambitions of the 2022 State of the Union address, which called for progress in this area.

3.3.3. European digital tools for recognition

Automatic recognition requires qualifications to be easily verifiable (validity, format, and accreditation). The use of European digital tools to issue, store, share and verify credentials facilitates the automatic recognition of individual qualifications and outcomes of learning periods abroad, and decreases costs and administrative burden for all parties.

The **new Europass platform**[51], launched in July 2020, facilitates automatic recognition by providing validated information on qualifications, qualifications frameworks, and mobility learning outcomes through tamper-proof Europass documents[52]. By September 2022, Europass had 4.3 million users and on average two million people visit the platform every month.

In cooperation with DEQAR[53], an accreditation feature, European Digital Credentials for learning (EDC)[54] are being piloted in the new Europass tool. When the Diploma Supplement (for higher education) is viewed and shared, the EDC immediately shows the related accreditation data. This will make authenticity checks automatic.

The digitalisation of the **Europass Mobility** template**,** currently under development, will support the recognition of the outcomes of learning mobility periods gained abroad in various levels of education, including traineeships and volunteering.

4. SUPPORT FOR FURTHER EFFORT TO IMPLEMENT AUTOMATIC RECOGNITION

While limited progress has been made since the adoption of the Council Recommendation, achieving full implementation by 2025 will require considerable additional efforts. In order to boost implementation, the Commission proposes the following actions:

4.1. Continue developing trust among national education systems

- **Developing a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System**

Automatic recognition is closely related to building mutual trust among national systems, and the development of a true quality culture at higher education institutions. A Quality Assurance and Recognition System would help creating a closer link between quality assurance and recognition at European level, as well as a fit-for-purpose quality assurance system for deeper transnational cooperation, as announced in the Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025 and the European strategy for universities. While the objective of such a System is much broader than automatic recognition only, it will contribute to its realisation.

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[51] https://europa.eu/europass/fr
[52] Diploma Supplement, Certificate Supplement for VET and Europass Mobility
[53] https://www.eqar.eu/about/projects/deqar-connect/
[54] https://europa.eu/europass/en/european-digital-credentials-learning

The Commission will encourage Member States, NARICs and education and training institutions to increase their efforts in implementing automatic recognition through stronger and more agile quality assurance systems.

While such an initiative will have an EU focus, it has the potential to inspire and further boost progress on automatic recognition and quality assurance in all countries in of the European Higher Education Area.

- **Automatic recognition accelerator teams reviews**

The Commission will set-up, with the support of Erasmus+ and NARICs, new automatic recognition accelerator teams reviews. The objective will be to accelerate the implementation of the automatic recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad, by sending experts on site to provide the necessary coaching to facilitate recognition in all fields. It will build on the NARIC network's expertise to organise peer support and peer counselling between countries that are more advanced in automatic recognition and countries that need further support.

4.2.   Development of tools for automatic recognition

- **Provision of information on recognition via online platforms**

The Commission will provide more guidance to schools on recognition on the European School Education Platform.

- **Standardisation of learning agreements and learning outcomes certificates**

Building on the experience in the higher education sector, the Commission will explore potential links between Erasmus+ tools for outcomes of learning periods abroad and the Europass Mobility template to provide secure, user-friendly and trusted documentation in the school education and VET sectors.

4.3.   Support implementation by building capacity in Member States

- **Financial support for automatic recognition**

As called for in the Council Recommendation, Erasmus+ calls dedicated to **NARICs** will continue to provide support to national authorities to implement automatic recognition and the Bologna transparency tools. The Commission will explore options to increase participation by NARICs from each Member State. This effort requires support from Member States to increase capacity building efforts.

While the implementation of the Bologna transparency tools has improved since 2018, further effort is needed, especially on registering national quality assurance agencies in EQAR, issuing the Diploma Supplement (DS) and making full use of the ECTS Users' Guide. The Commission will provide a further boost to implementation through the Erasmus+ programme **European Higher Education Area** call.

Member States may also request technical support to design and implement reforms in the area of automatic mutual recognition through the **Technical Support Instrument** (TSI). The TSI is an EU programme that provides tailor-made support in various areas, including in the area of education and training, upon request from Member States, on a bilateral or multi-country basis. The support is demand-driven and does not require co-financing from Member States.

- **Training and information provisions**

There is an increased demand for the amount of training Member States provide to relevant staff on automatic recognition. Training should also be provided to schools and teachers on assessing the competences of pupils after a learning period abroad, rather than focusing on school subject equivalence. The Commission will support this under the Erasmus+ programme through Transnational Cooperation Activities and Peer-Learning Activities, and provide information online.

- **Facilitate dialogue between Member States**

The Commission services will explore existing Commission policy processes in the school education and VET fields to discuss, exchange good practices and establish the opportunity for peer learning between Member States to build trust and transparency in upper secondary education systems.

Annex I - Overview[55] of the implementation of the Council Recommendation

This table provides a colour guide on the level of implementation per Recommendation area, for each Member State, based on best available information. It reflects the ongoing process of implementing the Council Recommendation and shows directions and trends.

Member State	Transparency tools	Support for institutions and agencies	Monitoring and evaluation	Higher education qualifications	Upper secondary qualifications	Learning periods abroad – higher education	Learning periods abroad – secondary education
Austria	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Light green	Green	Yellow	Green
Belgium	Green	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Red	Green	Red
Bulgaria	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	Red	Light green
Croatia	Green	Orange	Green	Light green	Green	Orange	Orange
Cyprus	Green	Yellow	Red	Orange	Green	Yellow	Orange
Czechia	Yellow	Orange	Yellow	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange
Denmark	Green	Green	Yellow	Green	Green	Green	Light green
Estonia	Green	Green	Yellow	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Red
Finland	Green	Green	Red	Light green	Green	Yellow	Light green
France	Light green	Green	Green	Orange	Green	Green	School (Red) / VET (Green)
Germany	Green	Green	Red	Light green	Green	Red	Orange
Greece	Red	Green	Red	Red	Red	Yellow	Red
Hungary	Green	Yellow	Red	Orange	Green	Red	Orange
Ireland	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Orange	Green	Yellow	Red
Italy	Light green	Green	Green	Light green	Green	Yellow	Light green
Latvia	Light green	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange
Lithuania	Green	Yellow	Orange	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Yellow
Luxembourg	Green	Yellow	Green	Orange	Red	Yellow	Red
Malta	Light green	Green	Red	Light green	Red	Green	Red
Netherlands	Green	Green	Green	Orange	Green	Green	Red
Poland	Green	Green	Orange	Light green	School (Green) / VET (Red)	Yellow	Red
Portugal	Green	Yellow	Green	Light green	Green	Yellow	Green (*)
Romania	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Yellow	Light green
Slovakia	Orange	Yellow	Green	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Orange
Slovenia	Light green	Orange	Red	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Orange
Spain	Yellow	Green	Orange	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Orange
Sweden	Light green	Green	Yellow	Green	Green	Orange	Red

*PT: For periods of 1 school year only

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[55] These indications are based on an analysis of the information made available in the context of the study "ICF Report on the Implementation of the Council Recommendation on automatic recognition" 2023.

Compliance with European and Bologna transparency tools

🟩	The country fully implements the EU and Bologna transparency tools
🟩	One of the tools is not fully implemented
🟨	Two of the tools are not fully implemented
🟧	Three of the tools are not fully implemented
🟥	Four or more of the tools are not fully implemented

Measures for capacity building and support for institutions and agencies

🟩	The following measures are applied: - National guidance in place for institutions - NARICs disseminate information and provide training for all institutions - Applicants receive a decision on system-level recognition through online tools
🟨	Two of the above measures are applied
🟧	One of the measures is applied
🟥	None of the measures is applied

Monitoring end evaluation

🟩	A central, system-level database is in place for collecting and disseminating data on recognition cases, which is regularly updated
🟨	Data on recognition cases are systematically collected by a central body made up of higher education institutions upper secondary education institutions
🟧	Data on recognition cases are available from some institutions, but data are not collected and disseminated at system level
🟥	No data available

Automatic recognition of higher education qualifications

🟩	System-level automatic recognition for qualifications issued for all EU Member States with decision-making responsibility delegated to a competent system-level body
🟩	System-level automatic recognition for all EU Member States with decision-making responsibility delegated to higher education institutions
🟨	System-level automatic recognition for a subset of EU Member States with decision-making at a system-level body
🟧	System-level automatic recognition for a subset EU Member States with decision-making delegated to higher education institutions
🟥	No automatic recognition

Automatic recognition of upper secondary education qualifications

■	Qualifications from upper secondary education (both general education and VET) are automatically and fully recognised for nearly all other EU Member States (over 75% of Member States)
■	Qualifications are automatically recognised for a majority of other EU Member States (between 50% and 75%)
■	Qualifications are automatically recognised for a minority of other EU Member States (under 50% but more than 0%)
■	No automatic and full recognition of qualifications (recognition process in place, but not automated)

Automatic recognition of learning periods abroad – higher education

■	Outcomes from a learning period abroad are automatically and fully recognised for all other EU Member States, with a full recognition rate of over 90 % reported by Erasmus+ students Internal and external quality assurance in place to ensure full implementation of European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System 2015 (ECTS) Users' Guide principles
■	Outcomes from a learning period abroad are recognised, with a full recognition rate of over 85% reported by Erasmus+ students And/or Internal and external quality assurance in place to ensure full implementation of the 2015 ECTS Users' Guide but it is not systematically applied (only for some programmes or levels, for example)
■	Outcomes from a learning period abroad are recognised, with a full recognition rate over 70% reported by Erasmus+ students Or No quality assurance measures in place to ensure full implementation of the ECTS Users' Guide
■	Outcomes from a learning period abroad are not recognised automatically with a full recognition rate of below 70% reported by Erasmus+ students No quality assurance measures in place to ensure full implementation of the ECTS Users' Guide

Automatic recognition of learning periods abroad – upper secondary education

■	Outcomes from a learning period abroad are automatically and fully recognised from all EU Member States and for almost all learning periods of up to 1 year through equivalence
■	Outcomes from learning periods abroad are recognised after an official procedure established at system level, based on learning outcomes determined to be broadly in line with the sending institutions' curriculum and confirmed in the Transcript of Records
■	Most (parts of) learning periods abroad are recognised but some additional exams might be necessary
■	Recognition is granted after an official procedure based on curriculum matching as confirmed in the Transcript of Records
■	No automatic and full recognition, with the exception of school-to-school partnerships or clearly defined programmes such as Erasmus+