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COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT
Accompanying the document

Proposal for a Council Recommendation

on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad

{COM(2018) 270 final}

1. INTRODUCTION

Based on the vision of the European Education Area as proposed in the European Commission's Communication on Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture[1] and the invitation of the European Council[2] to work on mutual recognition of higher education and school leaving diplomas, the Commission has prepared a proposal for a Council Recommendation on promoting the automatic recognition of higher education and upper secondary qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad.

Extensive research and reporting in recent years have concluded that automatic recognition of qualifications and learning outcomes is not only possible and feasible, but also desirable. Experts have identified obstacles that persist and good practices to help overcome them. Despite this and wide support for automatic mutual recognition, problems still persist.

This Staff Working Document provides the analysis and evidence gathered to underpin the proposal for the Council Recommendation. It outlines the results of the consultations carried out and provides information on good practice initiatives in automatic recognition, as well as Erasmus+ projects that have advanced the realisation of automatic recognition throughout the Union.

2. Evidence base of need for Council Recommendation

In order to prepare the Council Recommendation, the Commission conducted: a) an analysis of existing research and reports on recognition issues in order to map out the existing tools and practices that need to be reinforced at national level and b) wide consultations with experts and practitioners across the European Higher Education Area. The Commission also carried out a targeted consultation process between December and February 2018, which consisted of both online surveys and face-to-face meetings. The results are outlined here, along with the results from the Erasmus+ mid-term review.

2.1. Obstacles and barriers to recognition

Various studies and reports have identified several barriers that continue to impede automatic recognition.

i. Lack of awareness amongst potential learners

According to the study *Obstacles to Recognition of Skills and Qualifications,* commissioned by the European Commission in 2016[3], individuals are often unaware of the opportunities that exist to have their qualifications recognised; of the skills that they possess and that could be recognised; or of the cases in which recognition is not

[1] COM(2017) 673 final, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2017%3A673%3AFIN

[2] European Council conclusions of 14 December 2017, EUCO 19/1/17 REV 1, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32204/14-final-conclusions-rev1-en.pdf

[3] European Commission, *Study on Obstacles to Recognition of Skills and Qualifications* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2016), http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=16623&langId=en

necessary[4]. Differences in education and training systems between countries and information often being available in only one language contribute to this lack of awareness[5].

ii. Many recognition tools and frameworks

The same study outlines that there can be inconsistency in the application of national and European transparency and recognition tools amongst Member States. Moreover, a lack of coherence between the components of such tools and of connectivity among them makes it difficult for end users to access the relevant information[6]. On top of this, continuous or major shifts in systems of qualifications and recognition can cause confusion for both potential learners and people responsible for recognising their qualifications[7].

iii. Restricted access and entitlement

The *Study on Obstacles to Recognition of Skills and Qualifications* points out that in some cases there are minimum education requirements for recognition to take place, which affects socially vulnerable groups disproportionately. Most often, this minimum education requirement is linked to language skills required to take part in guidance processes and bridging courses[8].

According to another study commissioned by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)[9], establishing a right to the assessment of foreign qualifications is essential to facilitate successful integration of migrants in their host country. Hence, a legal claim to the assessment of foreign qualifications should extend to any holder of a foreign diploma, regardless of their country of origin and training, commended by the principles of equal treatment. The OECD remarks that even though some countries have established a legal right to such an assessment, this right is frequently limited to particular groups of immigrants or types of qualifications, especially when such right derives mainly or entirely from international acts. This is the case of the Directive 2013/55/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of 20 November 2013 on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications, which facilitates recognition of foreign qualifications among Member States and the European Education Area, but is limited to regulated professional qualifications and does not cover non-EU qualifications, except for those already recognised in another EU/EEA country when their holder has worked at least three years in the other EU/EEA country[10].

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4 Idem, 63-67.
5 Idem, 66.
6 Idem, 75.
7 Idem, 72.
8 In Luxembourg, for instance, people who do not speak more than one of the three official languages cannot get their skills or experience in the field recognised; whereas in Norway, immigrants are required to undergo 300 hours of completed language training within three years before getting their qualifications recognised. See European Commission. *Study on Obstacles to Recognition*, 82-83.
9 OECD, *Making Integration Work: Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications*, 12 (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2017).
10 OECD, *Making Integration Work*, 12-13.

iv. Costs

The costs associated with the recognition process might act as a deterrent to recognition. A survey conducted by the Erasmus Student Network in 2013 as part of the European Higher Education Area Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition, revealed that (degree-)mobile students consider high costs to be the third most important problem for having their learning mobility recognised[11]. Costs can include translation of documents; return trips to country of origin to get stamps on diplomas; potential assessment of competences; bridging courses or exams; and living costs during the time of waiting[12].

The fees for recognition of foreign qualifications vary substantially and may range from anywhere between being free of charge (e.g. Estonia and the Netherlands) to hundreds of euros (e.g. Poland and Germany). An even greater disparity is found in the cost of recognition of prior learning, where the fees might rise up to thousands of euros (e.g. France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden)[13].

v. Complex recognition procedures

Recognition procedures can be lengthy, which means incurring extra living costs before being entitled access to employment. For the OECD, quick recognition procedures are a key lesson countries need to adopt. Even though most OECD members have fixed the maximum admissible processing time for recognition of foreign qualifications in legislation[14], the duration varies greatly across countries, education sectors and professions (from 30 days in countries such as the Czech Republic and Latvia, to 160 days in the Wallonia, in Belgium)[15].

According to the Erasmus Student Network, long administrative procedures are the main problem for recognition identified by mobile students[16], a finding confirmed by the Pathfinder Group, which revealed that procedures for academic recognition of qualifications are often lengthy and burdensome, requiring a large variety of documents to be submitted and steps to be undertaken. The report also showed that it is often far from certain if the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention are correctly applied by credential evaluators in higher education institutions across the European Higher Education Area, and that the potential of the Bologna mobility tools is not yet fully

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[11] EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition, *Report by the EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition* [Presented at the Bologna Ministerial Conference on 14-15 May 2015 in Yerevan, Armenia], 14. Available online at https://www.google.be/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjdnsv15LnZAhVEwxQKHfssDwgQFggnMAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fmedia.ehea.info%2Ffile%2F2015_Yerevan%2F72%2F3%2FEHEA_Pathfinder_Group_on_Automatic_Recognition_January_2015_613723.pdf&usg=AOvVaw14_sKJGK4Tr5xcBDFtU4uV

[12] European Commission. *Study on Obstacles to Recognition*, 84.

[13] OECD, *Making Integration Work*, 77-82.

[14] In the EU OECD members, such legislation usually derives from the Directive 2013/55/EU on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications and the Lisbon Recognition Convention. OECD, *Making Integration Work*, 19.

[15] Idem., 22-23.

[16] EHEA Pathfinder Group, *Report on Automatic Recognition*, 14.

exploited for recognition purposes[17]. Furthermore, since it is often the higher education institutions that take the final decision (due to their need to retain a certain level of autonomy), there is often too little accountability in this area[18].

Moreover, in some countries there are poorly developed recognition procedures for movement within education and training systems, which becomes a particular issue for transition between vocational and academic tracks, as the understanding of competences is significantly different in the vocational education and training system and the higher education sector[19]. In addition, there is often a lack of coordination and division of responsibilities between actors involved in recognition processes. Not only does this create difficulties for end users (individuals and employers) who lack a single point of contact, but also hampers the utility of recognition tools, which depend on the active engagement and commitment of all relevant stakeholders[20].

Since recognition procedures often vary widely across regulated professions, levels and types of qualifications, the OECD recommends one-stop shops to improve the accessibility and transparency of recognition systems. In the European Union, such one-stop shops already exist in countries like Denmark (Danish Agency for Higher Education), Sweden (Swedish Council for Higher Education) and Germany (online portal *Recognition in Germany* and online tool *Recognition Finder*)[21].

vi. Deficiencies in regulation on recognition

Despite the fact that big regulatory steps have been taken to ensure smoother recognition procedures among Member States, challenges are still present.

In secondary education, for instance, there is seldom a recognition problem of short-mobility periods, since there is ample time afterwards to catch up on any perceived deficiencies in learning caused by the absence from home. However, the picture is different regarding long-term mobility in upper secondary education. The time spent on "school years abroad" –learning periods where the participants typically spend one year abroad attending school and living with a host family– is sometimes not recognised as the equivalent of a year at a school in the home country, especially if this does not result in a school diploma corresponding to a European Qualifications Framework[22] level[23]. Even when there is a law on recognition of study periods abroad, a) it is not always used because the country culture towards schooling is not reflected in the law; b) it can actually hinders some kinds of mobility); or c) it is not necessarily implemented by schools and it

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17 Idem, 6.
18 Idem, 9.
19 European Commission. *Study on Obstacles to Recognition*, 87-88.
20 Idem, 88.
21 OECD, *Making Integration Work*, 27-28.
22 European Qualifications Framework.
23 European Commission, *Study on Mobility Developments in School Education, Vocational Education and Training, Adult Education and Youth Exchanges* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2012), https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/70b9de14-a3a4-4623-9d5c-d0e6ced9b280/language-en

takes the efforts of non-governmental organisations promoting mobility and intercultural learning to support schools in its implementation. As a result, the large majority of pupils who go to study in another Member States need to attend one or more additional years of school once back in their home country[24]. Taking into account that in 2010 alone around 150 000 pupils from Member States participated in nationally-funded mobility schemes of any duration (from a few days to one year) and destination (intra- and extra-EU) [25], the problem looms even larger.

Recognition of upper secondary qualifications also faces legal obstacles. Although the Lisbon Recognition Convention covers upper secondary qualifications, their mutual recognition is still underdeveloped. Barriers to admission may be erected by either higher education institutions or specialised agencies. Recognition may also depend on bilateral or multilateral agreements. Apart from language requirements, university admission tests may include knowledge requirements, which are very focused on the country, making it more difficult for foreign students, as opposed to domestic students, to gain admission.

When it comes to higher education, the 2016 Lisbon Convention Implementation Monitoring Report [26], which covers over 50 countries, pointed out that several issues with implementation still persist. Even though one of the key principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention is that holders of qualifications shall have adequate access to an assessment of those qualifications upon request, the procedures and criteria used in the assessment and recognition of qualifications are not regulated at national level in 13 of the countries who signed the Convention, but rather established and regulated by individual higher education institutions, which have full decision-making authority and total autonomy to set up their own criteria and procedure[27]. Despite the fact that 32 countries reported that criteria are regulated at national level, only in 12 cases could the authors of the report confirm that the criteria were indeed reflected in national legislation[28]. Furthermore, only in 25% of the countries surveyed are the assessment criteria and procedures transparent, meaning that the information is easily available for applicants[29].

The Lisbon Recognition Convention states that signatory parties shall recognise the higher education qualifications, periods of study and qualifications giving access to higher education conferred in another Party, unless a substantial difference can be shown between the qualification or period of study for which recognition is sought and the corresponding qualification or period of study in the Party in which recognition is sought. However, only seven countries reported having a definition of the term *substantial*

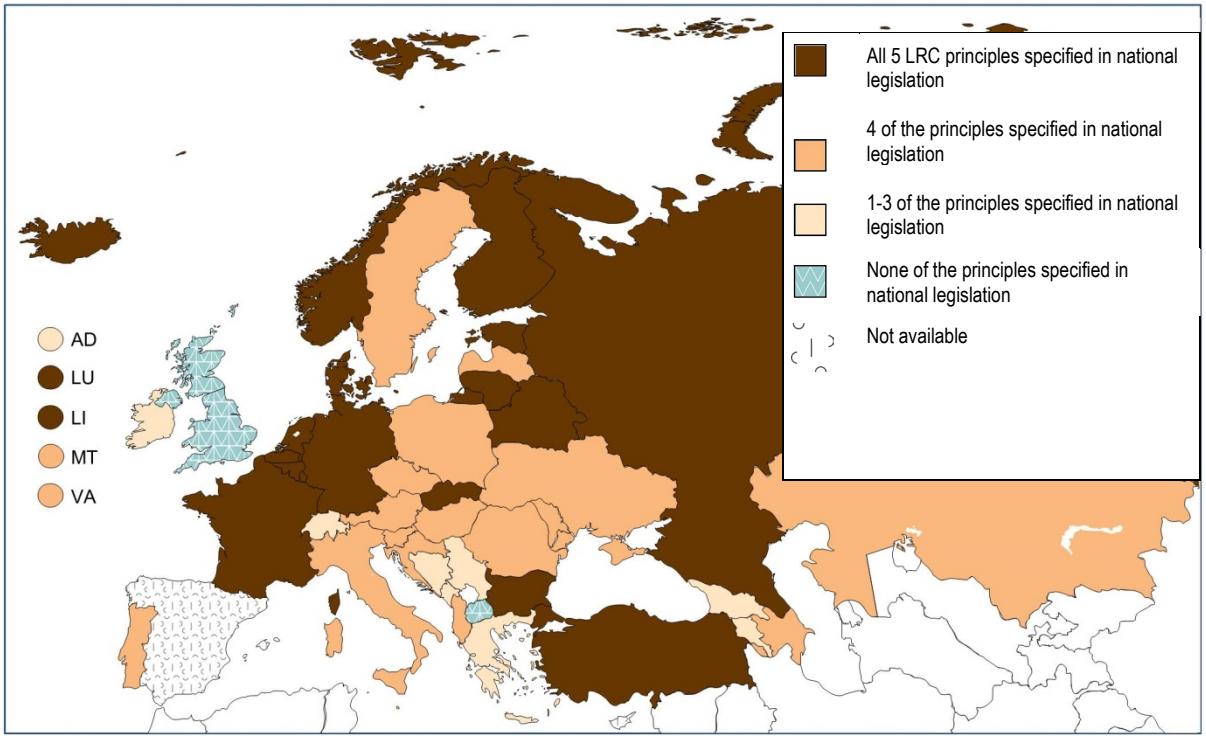
[24] European Federation for Intercultural Learning, *Recognition of school study periods abroad in Europe – an overview and policy recommendations*, 2018, forthcoming.
[25] European Commission*), Study on Mobility Developments in School Education, Vocational Education and Training, Adult Education and Youth Exchanges*, p.38.
[26] UNESCO and The Council of Europe, *Monitoring the Implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention* [Final Report] (Paris: UNESCO/Council of Europe, 2016).
[27] Idem, 15.
[28] Idem, 24.
[29] Idem, 25.

difference at national level[30]; of these, just five submitted documentation in this respect, and only in two cases can it be said that the definition of *substantial differences* is extensive and in compliance with the principles and procedures of the Convention text[31].

The upcoming Bologna Implementation Report[32] provides further insights into the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention among the members of the Bologna Process. Figure 1 shows the extent to which the following five main principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention are specified in national legislation to date:

1. applicants have a right to fair assessment;
2. there is recognition if no substantial differences can be proven;
3. legislation or guidelines encourage comparing of learning outcomes rather than programme contents;
4. in cases of negative decisions the competent recognition authority demonstrates the existence of substantial difference;
5. applicant's right to appeal the recognition decision.

Figure 1. Principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in national legislation, 2016/17



Source: BFUG questionnaire.
Spain: No answers provided on the relevant questions for this indicator

[30] Idem, 33.
[31] Idem, 40.
[32] To be published in May 2018.

In line with the above conclusions, an upcoming Commission mapping study[33] of 170 collaborative partnerships of European higher education institutions highlighted the importance of recognition of learning outcomes in overcoming barriers to cooperation.

The lack of government policy and frameworks also affects the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, which in turn leads to discretionary recognition and further complex recognition procedures for education and training providers. As pointed out by the European Parliament's comparative study on higher education entrance qualifications and exams in Europe, failure to recognise prior learning beyond secondary school qualifications (skills, competencies and qualifications of non-traditional learners) is a particular challenge to equity in access to higher education[34], whereas in the work arena, this may lead to people being employed at lower ability levels (*brain waste*)[35]. Discretionary recognition can also emerge when qualifications from certain private training or education establishments are not automatically recognised in some systems, often due to a lack of agreed accreditation of education or training bodies[36]. This might also take the form of partial recognition, sometimes justified and formalised in bureaucratic language difficult to interpret[37].

Furthermore, the situation of those who hold qualifications form third countries and whose qualifications have been recognised in a Member State should be taken into account. Indeed, they may face hurdles in studying or working in another Member State, even when their qualification has been recognised by a first Member State of residence. The 2005/2013 Professional Qualification Directive already provides for recognition decisions to be "portable" to another EU country. In addition, the 2016 Recast Directive on Students and Researchers[38] aims to facilitating intra-EU mobility for (third-country) researchers and students.

vii. Limited resources of recognition bodies

In a number of countries, intermediary organisations lack the human and physical resources to take on the tasks associated with recognition. In addition, individuals working in these organisations are often not specifically trained to provide guidance on recognition[39].

3. Good practices in recognition of qualifications and outcomes of learning periods

3.1. Higher Education or qualifications giving access to higher education: international agreements

Benelux Union

[33] To be published at the end of April 2018.

[34] European Parliament, *Higher Education Entrance Qualifications and Exams in Europe: A Comparison* [Study by the Directorate-General for Internal Policies] (Brussels: European Union, 2014), 12, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL-CULT_ET(2014)529057

[35] European Commission. *Study on Obstacles to Recognition*, 91.

[36] Idem, 97.

[37] Idem, 98.

[38] Directive (EU) 2016/801 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2016 on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purposes of research, studies, training, voluntary service, pupil exchange schemes or educational projects and au pairing (recast).

[39] Idem, 94.

In January 2018, the five ministers in charge of higher education in the Benelux Union agreed to automatic mutual generic level recognition of all higher education degrees, including short cycle and doctorates, in Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. The road to this agreement began with an agreement on automatic recognition of higher education qualifications between Flanders and the Netherlands in 2010. Progress within Benelux was gradual, with the agreement reached first on the automatic recognition of Bachelor and Master degrees in 2015.

Flanders

In addition to its Benelux Union commitments, Flanders is soon to conclude automatic recognition agreements with Denmark, Poland and Portugal.

In Flanders, automatic recognition is regulated in article 255 of the Codex Higher Education, which states the Flemish government can stipulate automatic recognition at system level.

Following the legislation, automatic recognition should be based on the following criteria:

- The presence of a quality assurance system that complies with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. The quality assurance should guarantee that the learning outcomes are fulfilled;
- The presence of an education structure which is accepted within the European Higher Education Area and integrated in one or both of the European qualification frameworks.

Having well-defined criteria for applying automatic recognition provides a solid framework to enter negotiations and find agreement with other countries for bi- and multilateral agreements. Mutual trust is also key in Flanders' success.

Baltics

An agreement on the automatic recognition of higher education qualifications, and qualifications giving access to higher education, is expected to be signed later this year by the states of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia. The agreement covers European Qualification Framework Levels 4, 6, 7 and 8 but not level 5, as there are no level-5 courses in Estonia or Lithuania. It brings into law what was already common practice and builds on the previous Agreement on the Academic Recognition of Educational Qualifications in the Baltic Educational Space, signed in 2000.

Nordics

As far back as 1971 (with the signing of the Agreement on Cultural Co-operation*)*, the Nordic region has put in place robust cooperation to facilitate smooth mobility for higher education students and mutual recognition of diplomas. The Agreement on Admission to Higher Education is between Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, and was signed in

1996[40]. It guarantees admission to higher education e.g. article 1 of the Nordic agreement states that "the parties undertake a reciprocal obligation to grant to applicants domiciled in another Nordic country admission to their respective public courses of higher education on the same or equivalent terms as applicants from their own countries. An applicant who is qualified to apply for admission to higher education in the Nordic country in which he/she is domiciled is also qualified to apply for admission to courses of higher education in the other Nordic countries."

This agreement also addresses any confusion between access and selection in article 4 of the agreement, where it is stated that "*if admission to courses of higher education is limited, the selection of applicants from other Nordic countries shall be conducted in accordance with the same or equivalent rules as those applied to applicants from the host country. The parties shall thereby endeavour to apply admission rules which, to the greatest extent possible, accord applicants from the other Nordic countries parity with applicants from the host country.*"

The Nordic Declaration on Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education (the Reykjavik Declaration), signed in 2004 and revised in 2016[41], had 8 Ministers of Education, Research and Culture (the 5 countries + Greenland, Faroe Islands and Aland) commit to ensuring that:

- higher education qualifications from the region are recognised in the other Nordic countries;
- Nordic countries work together in pursuit of the goal of adopting systems for automatic recognition of comparable qualifications in higher education in the region, as per the aims of the European Higher Education Area;
- Nordic countries continue to strengthen administrative and methodological co-operation on the evaluation of qualifications obtained in Nordic and other countries, such as by establishing working groups and the ongoing exchange of information and good practices in higher education. The relevant ministries, authorities and higher education institutions in the Nordic region will be actively involved in the co-operation and information exchange; and
- national bodies continuously review the way in which the Declaration is implemented and applied, identify topical or actual developments that require special attention, and actively involve relevant stakeholders in this work.

The countries see this as an establishment of an open Nordic Education Area with a unique opportunity to position itself as a pioneer in the field of automatic recognition.

[40] https://www.norden.org/en/om-samarbejdet-1/nordic-agreements/treaties-and-agreements/education-and-research/agreement-concluded-by-denmark-finland-iceland-norway-and-sweden-on-admission-to-higher-education

[41] https://www.norden.org/en/om-samarbejdet-1/nordic-agreements/treaties-and-agreements/education-and-research/nordic-declaration-on-the-recognition-of-qualifications-concerning-higher-education-the-reykjavik-declaration-revised-2016

Nordic-Baltic Manual

The Nordic Baltic Manual developed in 2016 is another example of best practice. It features a table showing which shows what national qualifications are comparable in level. If an applicant holds qualifications in the table, he should be eligible for programmes at the next level within the region. The manual also includes general information about the education system in each country, provides degree titles in English and also includes a recommendation that upper secondary certificates that give access to higher education in one country should give access in all countries[42].

Italy-France bilateral agreement

The 1949 Cultural Agreement between Italy and France provides for full mutual recognition of upper secondary qualifications (*Baccalauréat* in France and *Esame di Stato* in Italy) for accessing higher education in the other country.

European Schools – recognition of the European Baccalaureate diploma

European Schools[43] for over sixty years now constitute an excellent example of the cooperation between Member States in the field of education, including the recognition of secondary school-leaving qualifications. In fact, the European Baccalaureate, the diploma awarded at the end of the secondary cycle of the European Schools, is officially recognised as an entry qualification for higher education in all Member States, as well as in a number of other countries. European Baccalaureate diploma holders enjoy the same rights and benefits as other holders of secondary school-leaving certificates in their countries, including the same right as nationals with equivalent qualifications to seek admission to any university or institution of higher education in the European Union.

3.2. Higher Education or qualifications giving access to higher education: national legislation on automatic recognition

Portugal

Portugal introduced a law on automatic recognition of bachelor, master and doctoral degrees back in 2007, which states that foreign qualifications that are identical to the Portuguese Licenciado, Mestre and Doutor in terms of level, nature and objectives, entitle their holders to all academic rights in Portugal[44]. The law currently refers to 36 countries, mainly from the European Union.

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[42] https://norric.org/nordbalt/nordbalt-about

[43] European Schools are governed by the cooperation between all the EU Member States and the EU under the Convention defining the Statute of the European Schools. See *Official Journal L 212 , 17/08/1994 P. 0003 – 0014*.

[44] Decree-Law nr. 341/2007: http://www.dges.mec.pt/en/files/naric/academic_recognition/Quadros_Deliberacoes%20-%202016_EN.pdf

Hungary

The Hungarian legislation stipulates that upper secondary qualifications from a Member State that give direct access to higher education in that country have the same legal effect as Hungarian upper secondary qualifications; therefore, no recognition process is needed.

Poland

According to Polish legislation, certificates, diplomas or other educational documents that confirm the completion of upper secondary education in the European Union, European Economic Area or OECD member states as well as the right to apply for higher education programmes in the country of issue shall be automatically recognised in Poland. The owners of such documents have a right to apply directly for studies at a Polish higher education institution.

Finland

The principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention are incorporated in legislation governing higher education institutions. According to it, a person who has access to higher education in the country where she got her upper secondary qualification has access to higher education in Finland too. This applies to qualifications from all countries, including from outside the European Union.

3.3. Learning periods during secondary education[45]: regional and national good practices

Although mutual recognition processes of study periods abroad at secondary education level are underdeveloped, some examples of national practices show that cooperation at Union level in this area is feasible.

Nordic Agreement on Pupil Mobility

This agreement grants recognition for any period of secondary school undertaken by a pupil from Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland to one of these countries, if duly documented.

Austria

Austria was the first European country to adopt a decree on the accreditation of periods of study abroad undertaken by pupils. Every year, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture sends out a letter to the schools, to underline the benefits of exchange programmes and to ask regional school counsellors to inform the schools about the decree. Every student that goes abroad from five months to full school year gets full recognition of the study period

[45] European Federation for Intercultural Learning, *Recognition of school study periods abroad in Europe – an overview and policy recommendations*; Recognise Study Abroad website , *Best Practices*, http://recognisestudyabroad.eu/

abroad. The student just needs to provide to the school a confirmation of attendance; no transcription of grades or list of school subjects of the hosting school are required.

Italy

Individual student exchanges abroad are recognised and foreign school reports are valid for the readmission into the Italian school system. They must be evaluated based on their compatibility with the educational goals of the Italian school system. In practice, before departure, students discuss with the teachers any subjects not present in the hosting school that are necessary before entering the next year. Upon return, the students need to provide to the school the documentation released by the hosting school. The teachers proceed to a 'global assessment of the students' competences' on the basis of an interview. Some schools still require exams for some specific subjects. Generally, all students are admitted to the next year.

Romania

The educational system recognises the outcomes of periods abroad if the pupil who went to school abroad proves with documents or a diploma that he/she attended a recognised school in the host country and that he/she passed the school year or semester. The needed documents or diploma can be provided only when the pupil is admitted in the foreign school as a "regular student" (who is thus passing exams and receiving grades), not as a "visiting student". An important condition for recognition of the study period abroad is that the student has attended the same school grade s/he would have attended in Romania. In general, no additional exams/tests are requested.

France

France recognises a year abroad in Germany for all French pupils in years 10/11 provided this year is also recognised by the German host institution[46].

3.4. Online tools to support recognition

National Academic Recognition Information Centre[47] Ireland offers a Foreign Qualifications Database where standardized statements can be downloaded free of charge[48]. A compendium of upper secondary qualifications and requirements for access to higher education is available online. This document is based on a combination of information available from international qualifications recognition databases, historical data for admissions standards for entry in the past and examination performance statistics where available.

[46] http://www.education.gouv.fr/pid25535/bulletin_officiel.html?cid_bo=57077

[47] The network of National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARICs) comprise all Member States, European Education Area countries and Turkey. The European Network of Information Centres in the European Region (ENIC), comprise 53 states parties, including all Member States apart from Greece. Together, these two networks are known as the ENIC-NARIC network.

[48] http://qsearch.qqi.ie/WebPart/Search?searchtype=recognitions

The purpose of this document on Entry Requirements for EU students presenting with qualifications, other than the Irish School Leaving Certificate Examination, is to provide a framework for comparisons of European Union and European Free Trade Association qualifications for entry to undergraduate Degree Programmes in Irish Universities. This facilitates applicants in understanding the factors that determine the minimum entry requirements and the competitive entry requirements that equate with achievements in the school leaving qualifications in their country[49].

Nuffic (the National Academic Recognition Information Centre for the Netherlands) publishes online descriptions of foreign education systems, including a standard comparison with the Dutch education level[50].

3.5. Vocational education and training

The European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training Learning Agreement supports the quality of vocational education and training mobility experiences, from preparation to monitoring and finally recognition. As a document signed by sending and host body and the mobile learner, indicating the expected learning outcomes to be achieved through the experience, it increases the quality of the three phases of mobility – before, during and after.

According to a 2014 external evaluation[51], its added value was mostly visible in improving the quality of mobility and cross border cooperation. The majority of projects included transnational mobility of individuals and the results showed a variety of positive effects on quality of mobility. Due to documents such as Memorandum of Understanding, learning agreement and transcript of records, it was possible to define, record and recognise learning outcomes acquired during mobility periods and integrate the mobility into individual learning pathways.

The approach, based on structuring vocational education and training qualifications in smaller units of learning outcomes that can each be assessed and validated, is considered as having a positive impact on mutual trust. The issue of mutual trust in the quality and consistency of qualifications is one of the most influential factors in the success of its implementation, and it has been recognised by a variety of stakeholders, experts and practitioners.

3.6. Erasmus+-funded projects to support recognition practices

PARADIGMS project on automatic recognition

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[49] http://www2.cao.ie/downloads/documents/Guidelines-EU-EFTA.pdf

[50] https://www.nuffic.nl/en/diploma-recognition/foreign-education-systems

[51] European Commission,, *Implementation of the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)*, Final Report (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2014), https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ae216efd-c653-11e5-a4b5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

The conclusion of the recent Paradigms project, led by NUFFIC, the Dutch National Academic Recognition Information Centre, identifies four models of automatic recognition:

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

Based on these findings several recommendations to achieve full automatic recognition were made:

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

IMPACT project

Recommendations for improving the effectiveness of recognition centres include:

- the remit of each ENIC-NARIC centre should be precisely and publicly stated, and the centres should ensure that the information they provide is regularly and accurately updated;
- networks should provide centres with greater opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and for inter-centre staff mobility;
- networks and centres should pay constant attention to the needs of higher education institutions;
- the ENIC-NARIC networks should explore a collective reporting and feedback mechanism to enhance the quality of service delivery;
- centres should be encouraged to undertake regular customer satisfaction surveys as part of their quality assurance cycle; and

- centres should engage in specific procedures for evaluating the qualifications of refugees, but should not distinguish the outcomes from those of other clients[52].

4. Targeted consultation and survey

The European Commission carried out an online targeted consultation in February 2018. The objective of the consultation was to determine whether the obstacles uncovered in research were still relevant, to understand the severity of the obstacles and to get ideas on how to overcome them. The consultation asked separately about issues and ideas for recognition of higher education qualifications and school leaving qualifications in order to get a clear picture of which problems are general and which are sector specific. The survey was sent to various higher education networks, school networks, expert groups and Erasmus+ National Agencies who assisted the Commission in promoting the consultation at national level to educational institutions and other relevant organisations. 960 responses were received from individuals and organisations active in recognition, education and research across Europe and beyond[53].

The main obstacles to achieving full automatic mutual recognition according to the respondents were a lack of transparency and varying rules and procedures, comparability of learning outcomes, lengthy and complex administrative procedures and language and translation issues. There is a need to enhance the capacity of recognition authorities, extend the scope of recognition authorities and build more trust across the European Higher Education Area.

The consultation confirmed that the necessary framework and tools to ensure recognition exist, but further support is needed to ensure their full and automatic implementation across the European Higher Education Area. There is much and equal support for action at either Union or national level to enhance trust, quality and transparency in recognition. Furthermore, the consultation revealed support for an ambitious Council Recommendation, dates and targets.

The outcomes of the online targeted consultation were reaffirmed at a dedicated meeting of stakeholders and Member-State representatives on 23 February.

4.1. Recognition of higher education qualifications and study periods abroad

Overall, responses showed strong evidence that the recognition of higher education qualifications and study periods abroad is still perceived to be a problem by relevant stakeholders. Specifically, 63% of respondents agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) that the recognition of foreign higher education qualifications was still a problem across the Union.

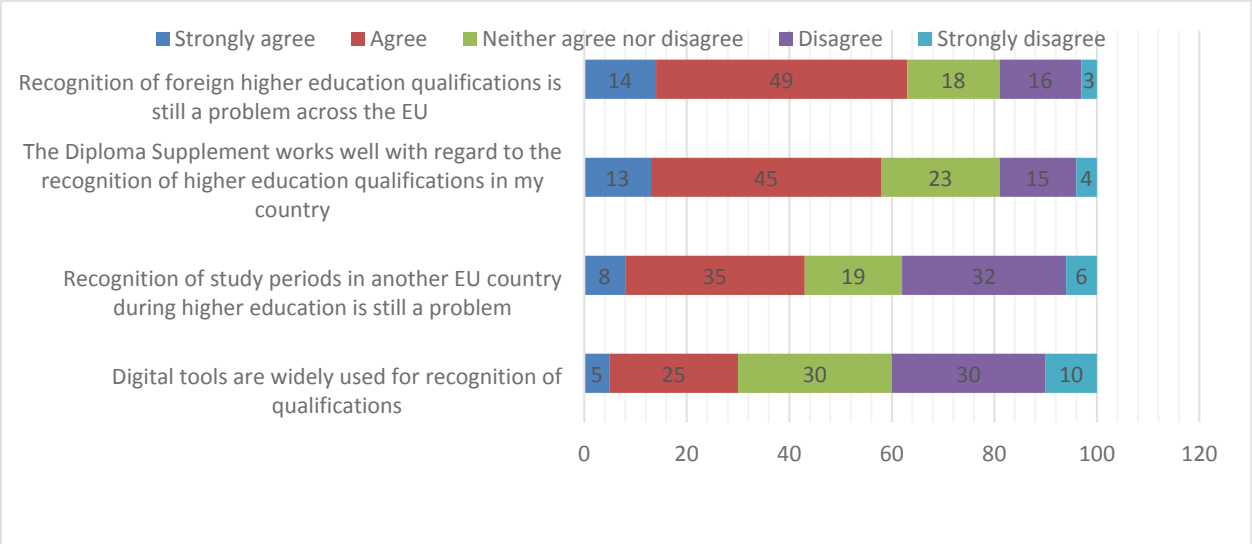
[52] IMPACT Project Hub 3: Evaluating the impact of the ENIC-NARIC networks (draft not available online).

[53] Out of the 960 responses, 296 (31%) came from *individuals* (of whom 32% were teachers/trainers; 24% higher education administrators; 10% researchers; and 34% other people working or involved in education). Another 633 responses (66%) came from individuals representing an organisation (of whom 68% represented education and training institutions, including higher education, vocational education and school education institutions; 9% public authorities; 7% civil society organisations; and 5% youth and work organisations).

Some 42% of respondents agreed that recognition of study periods in other Member States during higher education was still a problem.

Respondents agreed that the Diploma Supplement[54] works well with regard to the recognition of higher education qualifications (62% either strongly agree or agree). Respondents were split as to whether they agreed that digital tools were widely used for recognition of qualifications with a split of 30% and 40% of respondents who agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) and disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed) respectively. As digital tools have the potential to have a discernible impact on the efficiency, consistency and cost of recognition, this is an area that warrants further exploration and consideration.

Figure 2. To what extent do you agree with the following statements[55] (%)



4.2. Main obstacles to the recognition of foreign higher education qualifications

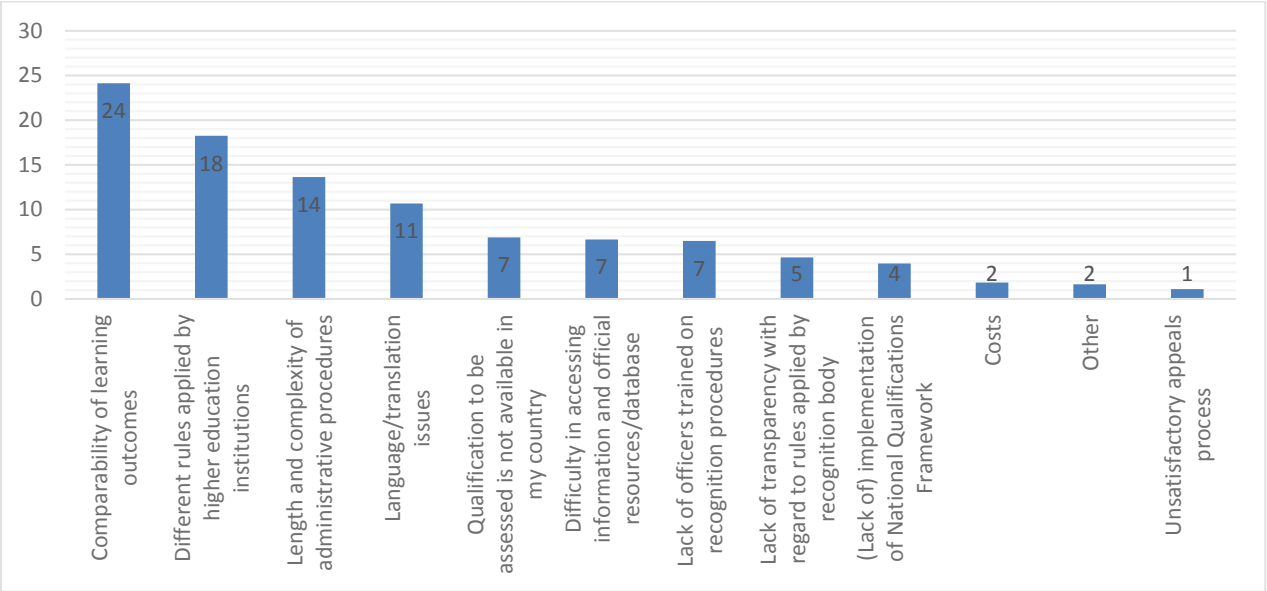
Main obstacles highlighted by respondents to the survey mirror what was uncovered in the desk-research. Comparability of learning outcomes, varying rules between higher education institutions, access to clear information and complex recognition procedures were all highlighted. There is a need to further train recognition experts, streamline procedures and reference national qualifications frameworks to the European Qualifications Framework to have better transparency and mutual trust.

Where respondents provided an 'other' response, this was typically used to provide more detailed information on the listed obstacles. Beyond this, 'other' responses most commonly listed were lack of information, subjectivity, or the lack of willingness of national agencies or higher education institutions to recognise foreign qualifications.

[54] Diploma Supplement: a document attached to a higher education diploma, which provides a detailed description of the holder's learning outcomes, and the nature, level, context, content and status of individual study components.

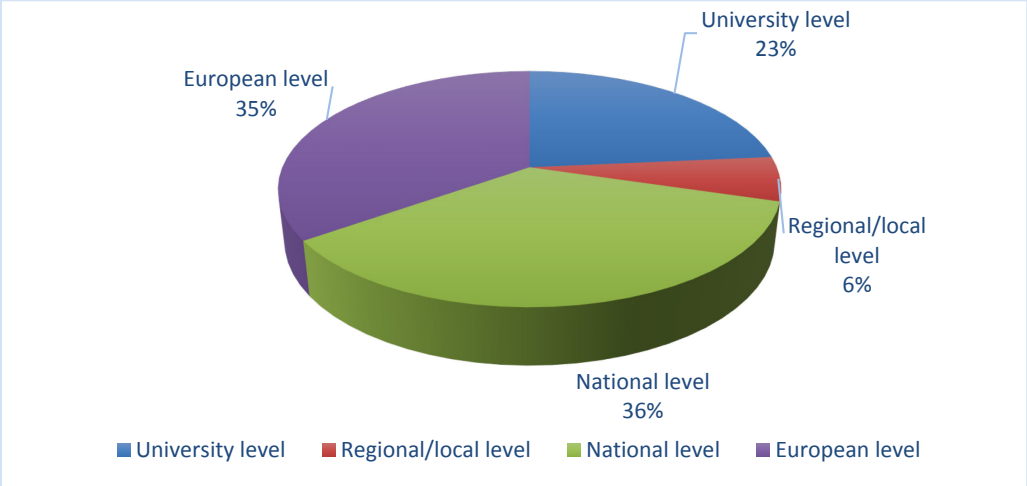
[55] Number of respondents was 739, 816, 743 and 848 (top to bottom).

Figure 3. Main obstacles to the recognition of foreign higher education qualifications in your country (%)[56]



Interestingly, when asked at which level it would be best to tackle such obstacles, almost equal numbers of respondents answered that the remaining obstacles should be tackled at the national level and the European level. Just under a quarter of respondents felt they should be tackled at the university level (23%) and only 6% that the regional and local level was the appropriate level for action.

Figure 4. Best level to tackle obstacles to recognition of foreign higher education qualifications (%)[57]



Solutions proposed by respondents to tackle the main obstacles to recognition of higher education qualifications encompassed four major categories:

[56] Number of respondents: 960.
[57] Number of respondents: 806.

1. the design of a faster, simpler and cheaper recognition process, involving reduced paperwork, digitalisation of processes, and the issuing and acceptance of qualifications in English to avoid costly and lengthy translation procedures;
2. providing better information and training to all actors involved in recognition procedures. The creation of an online platform in the cloud containing descriptions of countries' education systems and requirements for recognition, as well as concrete examples of recognition decisions, was suggested, as well as the promotion of existing European tools such as the European Qualifications Framework, Europass and the Diploma Supplement;
3. the establishment and appropriate resourcing of national or regional bodies or contact points for recognition; and
4. the introduction of national legislation or standardised guidelines setting out a clear procedure for recognition and explicitly outlining its criteria and the steps to be followed. It was suggested that such regulation could be based on a unified system for describing European learning outcomes, as is the case with language skills and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

At the EU level, respondents advocated:

1. EU support to Member States to recognise qualifications issued by other countries, to adopt common procedures, and to improve their use of recognition tools, such as European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System catalogues, recognition platforms and methodologies;
2. improvement and promotion of existing recognition tools, and consideration of new ones; and
3. the establishment of a European body whose function could range from centralising and providing information on the recognition of higher education qualifications, to quality assurance responsibilities whereby such an institution could audit practices of national agencies for the recognition of qualifications, and potentially even assess Member States' recognition policies.

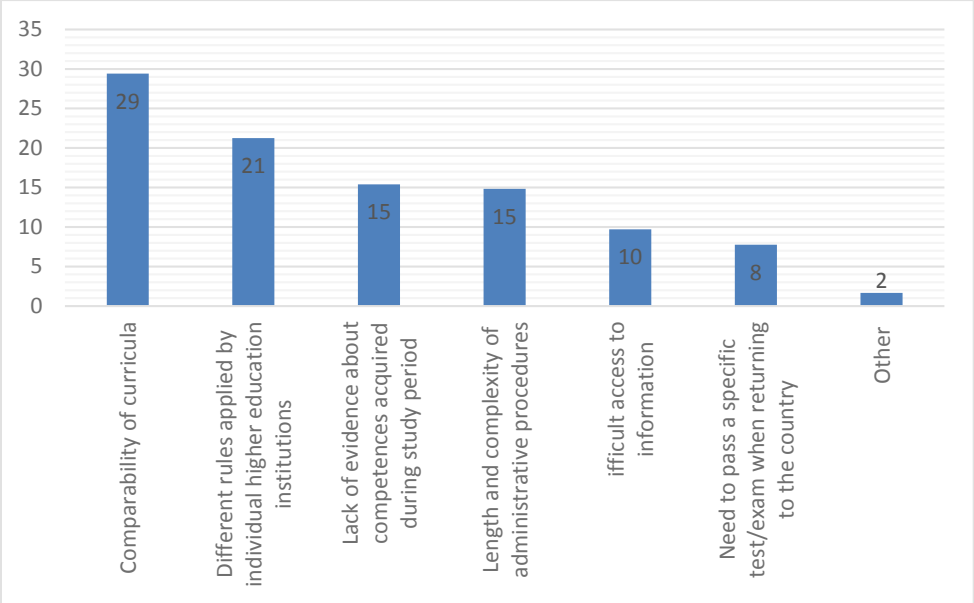
4.3. Main obstacles to the recognition of study periods abroad during higher education

The obstacles to the recognition of the outcomes of learning periods in Member State during higher education most frequently selected by respondents were the comparability of curricula, followed by the differences in rules applied by individual higher education institutions, which was also identified as a key issue for the recognition of higher education qualifications. The lack of evidence of competences acquired during study period and the length and complexity of administrative procedures were both reported by an equal number of respondents. The obstacle that respondents mentioned the least was the need to pass a specific test or exam when returning to the country.

A variety of additional obstacles to recognition of study periods in other Member States in higher education were mentioned by respondents as an 'other' response. The most common were a lack of resources or a lack of funding. Other obstacles mentioned were differences in grading systems or difference in credit distribution for courses, or conditions on the amount of

credits students must pass in order to get recognition. Another difficulty was incompatibility in grouping of courses, meaning that when students miss a course, they may need to complete it later upon their return to their home university.

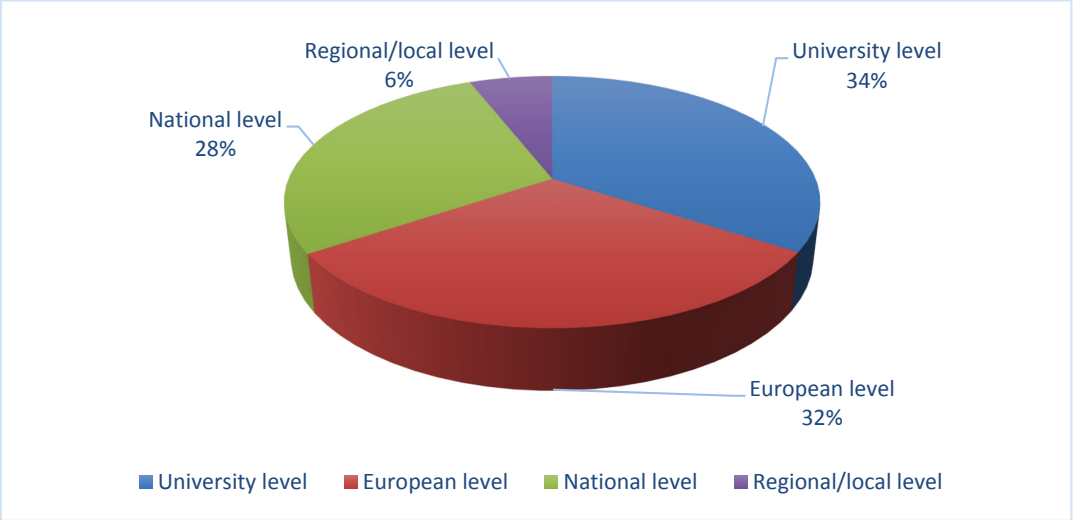
Figure 5. Main obstacles in your country to the recognition of study periods abroad during higher education (%)[58]



In the case of recognition of the outcomes of learning periods abroad in higher education, around a third of respondents considered that the remaining obstacles should be tackled at the university level, closely followed by the European level and the national level (28%). There was much less emphasis placed on the regional or local, with only 6% of respondents reporting that that the remaining obstacles should be tackled at this level.

[58] Number of respondents: 960.

Figure 6. Best level to tackle obstacles to recognition of study periods abroad (%)[59]



Respondents provided a wide variety of suggestions for actions which could be taken at national/regional level to improve the recognition of the outcomes of learning periods abroad:

1. establishing or improving national rules, guidelines and requirements, with the possibility of developing a national framework or law to ensure the validation of learning outcomes;
2. higher education institutions should have clearly defined agreements with the institutions in which learning periods abroad are carried out, and should make students aware of requirements for full transparency;
3. raising awareness of the value of learning periods abroad among teachers to overcome institutional resistance to recognition, and improving available information on recognition of study periods abroad;
4. agreeing regional automatic recognition arrangements, in order to speed up recognition; and
5. creating national IT platforms which could allow for the automatic validation of study periods abroad, the translation of course contents/outcomes achieved and more information on courses abroad.

At EU level, respondents advocated:

1. ensuring a higher degree of harmonisation, or greater comparability, between the courses or modules studied in different countries and improving Learning Agreements between universities;
2. improving, adapting and promoting the existing tools (European Qualifications Framework, Diploma Supplement, European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, Europass and European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training) and providing training on its use. The Bologna Process and the Lisbon Recognition Convention were also mentioned as useful frameworks; and

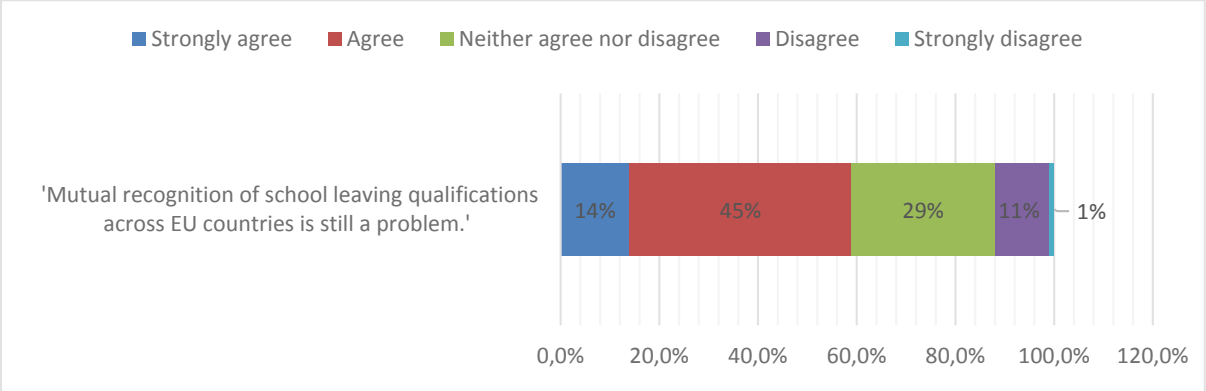
[59] Number of respondents: 734.

3. the development of an online platform that would include access to syllabi of all courses across the EU, lists of courses/universities offering recognised courses/modules, European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System mapping, digital register of all mobility/study periods abroad, and/or the possibility of gaining some form of automatic recognition by entering details of course/institution and getting confirmation of having completed the course.

4.4. Recognition of school leaving qualifications from other EU countries to access tertiary education

The consultation results suggest a broad consensus that mutual recognition of school leaving qualifications across Member States is still a problem, (59% combining responses for strongly agreed and agreed). Only 12% disagreed that it is a problem (combining responses for strongly disagreed and disagreed) and 28% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed.

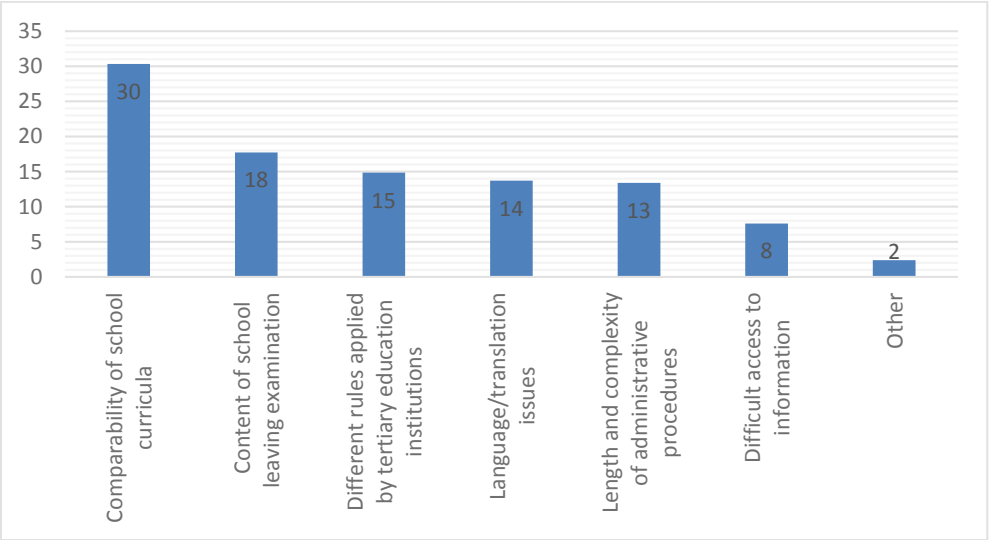
Figure 7. Level of agreement with 'Mutual recognition of school-leaving qualifications across the European Union is still a problem' (%)[60]



According to respondents, the main obstacle to the recognition of school-leaving qualifications from other Member States to access tertiary education was the comparability of school curricula, which was selected by just under a third of respondents, which was also identified as the main obstacle to recognition of higher education qualifications and learning periods. Other obstacles provided as options in the consultation did not emerge as strong issues. For instance, content of the school-leaving examination is mentioned by 18% of respondents, followed by different roles applied by tertiary education institutions and then language and translation issues. The obstacle that gives respondents overall the least concern is the difficulty of access to information, with only 8% of respondents selecting it as an obstacle. Some additional obstacles to recognition of school leaving qualifications provided as other responses are the lack of a clear conversion of final grades and the differences in the language of instruction.

Figure 8. Main obstacles to the recognition of school leaving qualifications from other Member States to access tertiary education in your country (%)[61]

[60] Number of respondents: 960.



A number of respondents emphasised that there was no good practice to draw on nationally, as there is either no mutual recognition of secondary school leaving qualifications to access tertiary education or that the system for mutual recognition is too complex, especially for the recognition of non-EU qualifications.

The most frequent recommendation for action at national level revolved around the issue of national legislation or guidelines on recognition of school leaving qualifications to access tertiary education. Respondents advocated common standards and recognition procedures at the national level. A large number of respondents stressed the need for greater information sharing. Generally, respondents felt that clear information should be provided and disseminated in all European Union languages about recognition rules, foreign education systems, official lists of recognised secondary institutions, and updates in qualification and grading structures. They suggested that the provision of training for recognition staff and the creation of an online user-friendly database or a central website would constitute a good starting point. Finally, respondents emphasised the need to make the most of the existing guidelines and tools such as the European Qualifications Framework, the Diploma Supplement and the Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

As regards action at Union level, recommendations particularly emphasised the need for greater implementation of existing European instruments, the need for collaboration between Member States and national actors, and the role that the European Union can play in the process. Respondents suggested that the European Union should further support the Member States in implementing the European Qualifications Framework and the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Some respondents considered that the European Union should further support Member States in exchanging information and best practices. A number of respondents felt that it would be helpful to organise more peer learning activities about the similarities and differences of school leaving qualifications across Member States, in order to foster greater

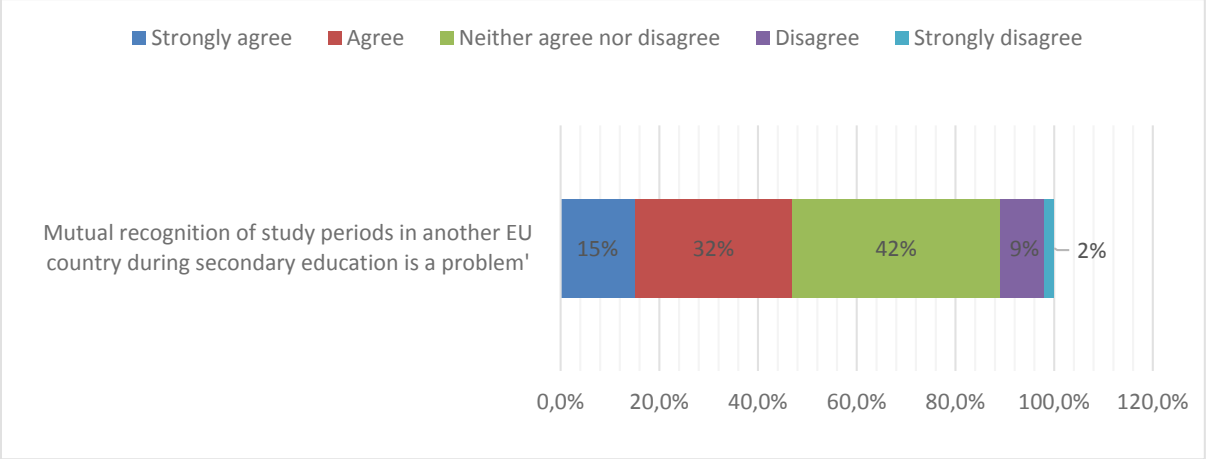
[61] Number of respondents: 960.

understanding and widen the perspectives of national officials working in the field of education.

4.5. Recognition of learning periods of up to one year in another EU country during secondary education

Almost half of respondents agreed that the mutual recognition of study periods in other Member States during secondary education is a problem (47% strongly agreed and agreed); only 12% disagreed or strongly disagreed. It is worth noting, however, the large proportion of responses of 'neither agreed nor disagreed' (42%). This suggests it is perhaps an issue where respondents overall have less knowledge on which to base a view.

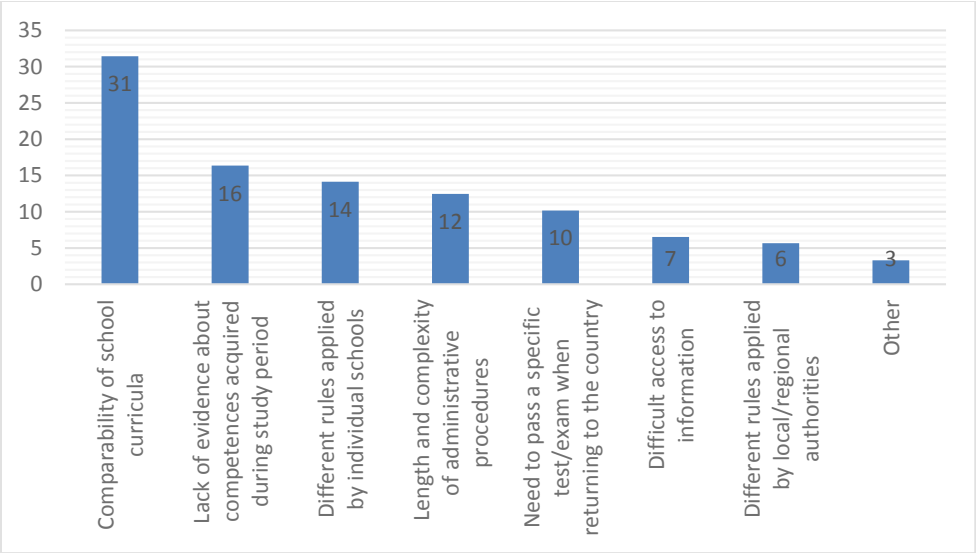
Figure 9. Level of agreement with 'Mutual recognition of study periods in another Member State during secondary education is a problem' (%)[62]



Similar results emerged in respect to the main obstacles to the recognition of school leaving qualifications from other Member States, as for the other themes of the consultation. The main obstacle to the recognition of study periods abroad in other Member States in secondary education is again the comparability of school curricula by respondents. There is no clear second main obstacle, with a similar percentage of responses received for: lack of evidence about competences acquired, differences in rules applied by schools, length and complexity of administrative procedures and the need to pass an exam. The least selected obstacles by respondents are the difficult access to information and the differences in rules applied by local and regional authorities.

Figure 10. Main obstacles to the recognition of study abroad periods in another Member State in secondary education (%)[63]

[62] Number of respondents: 960.
[63] Number of respondents: 960.



The most frequent recommendation for action at national level advocated the adoption of national legislation or guidelines on the mutual recognition of study periods in another EU country during secondary education, with the aim of developing a common set of rules and criteria. Some respondents stressed the importance of having a detailed set of rules to prevent divergence of interpretation and implementation from one school to another, and ensure that students are treated fairly across the country. Such a regulation could encompass the recognition of study periods abroad based on grade transcripts and/or additional exams. Alternatively, some respondents pointed to the Austrian and Italian models as a valuable source of inspiration.

A large number of respondents underlined the importance of properly recognising the transversal skills developed by students through informal and non-formal learning during their study exchange. They suggested doing so as part of learning agreements and through the accredited organisations running exchange programmes. They claimed that in general, the recognition of the school period abroad implies that education systems shift from a traditional content-based curricula to a competence-based approach, which recognises 'real-world learning' through non-formal and informal learning, and promotes the development of pupils' attitudes and skills, in addition to subject knowledge.

The third most important stream of recommendations concerned the need for better information, awareness raising and promotion of the possibilities for recognition of study periods abroad during secondary education. As part of this effort, respondents suggested that schools, and in particular their leadership staff, should be made aware and provided with detailed information on the possibilities for recognition. Additionally, training was suggested for all relevant staff involved in recognition, from school staff, stakeholders to education ministry officials. More generally, respondents advocated the implementation of information campaigns. Such campaigns should positively raise awareness about the opportunities for studying abroad during secondary education; promote positive case studies of recognition; and raise awareness about the existing standards and tools across Europe.

Mirroring what they recommended at the national level, a vast majority of respondents advocated for European guidelines, with the aim of developing a common set of rules and criteria on the recognition of study periods in another Member State during secondary education. Such guidelines should take into consideration the specificities of school systems in each Member State, and be based on the principle of appreciation of different school systems.

5. National Academic Recognition Information Centres consultation and survey

The ENIC-NARIC network is responsible for cooperation in recognition. It consists of two networks: the National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (NARIC), which includes all Member States, EEA and Turkey, and the European Network of Information Centres in the European Region (ENIC), which comprises all signatories to the Lisbon Recognition Convention (Including non-EU members like Australia, Canada and the United States) and therefore includes all Member States apart from Greece, which has not signed the Lisbon Recognition Convention. All Member States, other than Greece, therefore, are members of both networks.

The consultation of consisted of an online survey carried out by the European Commission in January 2018, followed by a face-to-face discussion at the National Academic Recognition Information Centre meeting on 2 February. In total, 27 responses were received: 24 from National Academic Recognition Information Centres and 3 from European Network of Information Centres in the European Region (Israel, Armenia and Bosnia Herzegovina). Respondents showed strong support for European Union action in this area and highlighted preconditions for automatic recognition, weaknesses in the current system and good practice.

As key preconditions for successful recognition procedures, respondents highlighted national implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, cooperation between higher education institutions and National Academic Recognition Information Centres, and the availability of competent staff in recognition centres.

The recent Benelux Union agreement on automatic recognition, the Nordic Co-operation Agreement on Admission to Higher Education and the upcoming Baltic Agreement on Automatic Academic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications, together with the Nordic-Baltic admission manual and database for automatic recognition, were all praised as good practices.

On the other hand, respondents signalled some weaknesses in the current situation of recognition procedures in Europe, such as the difficulty of recognising older qualifications, time-consuming recognition procedures, the need for training of credential evaluators, and persisting differences in status among qualifications in country of origin. Among existing challenges, the centres pointed out that not all quality assurance agencies are registered in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, the challenge posed by diploma and accreditation mills or by non-academic qualifications issued by accredited higher

education institutions, and difficulties in assessing vocational education and training qualifications.

Among the recommended steps forward, respondents advocated a full implementation of both the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the three-tier Bologna process, better transparency tools and databases, improved peer counselling, training and support to National Academic Recognition Information Centres, the possibility of educational institutions offering bridging courses or partial recognition, and consideration of establishing a Vocational Education and Training National Academic Recognition Information Centres network.

Regarding secondary education, respondents considered themselves responsible for recognition of qualifications, as opposed to higher education diplomas, whose recognition, they considered, was a responsibility of higher education institutions. However, they pointed out that recognition of the outcomes of learning periods abroad is –and should remain– the competence of schools. Difficult access to information (sometimes available only in one language) and comparability of curricula were the main obstacles identified. Again, the Nordic and Baltic agreements, along with bilateral agreements on mutual recognition signed between some Member States (e.g. Austria, France and Italy) were praised as good examples in this area. Respondents recommended the creation of databases on school systems and school leaving qualifications and supported the idea of a more active role in providing education and training.

With regard to a cross-sectoral approach to recognition, respondents voiced their willingness to be strengthened, empowered and integrated with other networks (e.g. Euroguidance and Europass) in order to make their presence stronger and better understood in the recognition process. A further suggestion for strengthening the role of National Academic Recognition Information Centres was to involve them in the development of education policies.

6. Erasmus mid-term evaluation, 2017

The recent mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme, drawing on a variety of sources, found positive and sustainable results for all individual learners taking part in mobility. The case studies confirmed the strongly positive influence the programme has on the personal development and maturity of young people. Different sources frequently outline that learners gain in confidence, independence, ability to cope with new environments and open-mindedness through their mobility. Participation in the programme also leads to the development of learners' social capital. The evaluation highlights the strong European added value of Erasmus+ and its predecessor programmes.

Despite widespread acknowledgement of the benefits of participation in the programme, some participants continue to have difficulties with recognition of their learning outcomes. In the period from 2014 to 2016, formal recognition of participation in Erasmus + ranged from 80% in vocational education and training to 83% for higher education. However, that nearly 20% of participants have issues with recognition in a programme as established as Erasmus+ is

worrying and is indicative of the need for action in general on the recognition of the outcomes of learning periods abroad.

7. Conclusions

The Staff Working Document concludes that recognition of qualifications in higher education and upper secondary education is still problematic. The results of the desk-research show that despite a good framework and legal commitments of national authorities, problems persist, and this was also confirmed by the targeted consultation. During the consultations and subsequent discussions, it also emerged that a vast majority believe the necessary tools and framework to enable automatic recognition have been developed, but uneven implementation has hindered them being used to their full potential.

The consultations showed a clear support for a Council Recommendation. There was a general agreement on what the key issues that hinder recognition are and how they can be tackled at institutional, national and Union level. The main obstacles defined are rooted in uneven implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Process and three-tier Bologna process across the Member states; lack of transparency and access to information about recognition procedures; the (lack of) comparability of learning outcomes; and the high level of complexity of recognition procedures. There is a need to further train recognition experts, streamline procedures and develop national qualifications frameworks linked to the European Qualifications Framework to improve transparency and mutual trust.

There was also great consistency between the desk-research and the consultations on what best practices should be built upon to achieve mutual automatic recognition by 2025. There is a clear consensus that it is now the time to set ambitious targets in the Council Recommendation to improve recognition of qualifications as a step towards creating a European Education Area.

Based on these findings, the Council Recommendation aims to achieve full automatic recognition of higher education and upper secondary education qualifications as well as outcomes of learning periods abroad by addressing key issues. To build more trust that facilitates automatic recognition, we must ensure that national qualifications frameworks are linked with the European Qualifications Frameworks; that external quality assurance is improved; and that transparency is increased, both at national and institutional level. Cooperation between recognition authorities and higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies and other relevant stakeholders needs to be enhanced to improve the flow of information and the quality and streamlining of procedures. In cooperation with member states, the scope of recognition authorities should be examined to maximise their impact and improve their efficiency. The Commission must also provide more targeted support at institutional, regional or national level and facilitate good cooperation and exchange of best practices to achieve automatic recognition, thus facilitating the creation of a true European Education Area.