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Subject:	Draft Council conclusions on promoting trust [...] to make automatic mutual recognition in education and training a reality – <i>Revised Presidency text</i>

DOCUMENT PARTIALLY ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC (23.05.2023)

In view of the meeting of the Education Committee on 11 April 2023, delegations will find attached the above-mentioned draft conclusions as prepared by the Presidency.

Bold (for additions) and [...] (for deletions) are used to indicate changes to the previous version of the document (7550/23). **Bold underline** is used to indicate additions to text in **bold**.

Delegations are kindly invited to send their written comments to the Presidency (**DELETED**) and the Council Secretariat (**DELETED**) by **11 April 2023 cob**.

Draft Council conclusions on promoting trust [...] to make automatic mutual recognition in education and training a reality

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

REAFFIRMS its strong political commitment to make the European Education Area a reality by 2025, and RECALLS the political background as set out in the annex [...].

UNDERLINES that:

- 1. The 1997 Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Recognition Convention), jointly drafted by the Council of Europe and UNESCO, provides the legal framework for the recognition of higher education qualifications, as well as for upper secondary education and training qualifications that give access to higher education. In the area of vocational education and training (VET), Member States have committed to the Copenhagen Process for enhanced cooperation that promotes mutual trust, transparency and recognition of qualifications and competences.**
- 2. Building on this legal framework, the Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad¹ sets ambitious and clearly defined objectives for the Member States to attain by 2025. In particular, the Council recommended that Member States:**

¹ **OJ C 444, 10.12.2018, p. 1.**

- put the necessary steps in place to achieve automatic mutual recognition of higher education qualifications and of the outcomes of learning periods abroad at higher education level;
- make substantial progress towards automatic mutual recognition of upper secondary education and training qualifications giving access to higher education and of the outcomes of learning periods abroad in upper secondary education and training.

3. [...] **The definition of ‘automatic mutual recognition of a qualification’ and of [...] the ‘outcomes of a learning period[...] abroad’[...] both at higher education level and at upper secondary education and training level [...] is set out in the annex to the 2018 Recommendation and is fully applicable to the current Council conclusions.**

[...]

[...]

RECOGNISES THAT:

1. It is not possible to achieve a true European Education Area (EEA) without recognising that automatic **mutual recognition of qualifications and outcomes of learning periods abroad** is one of the fundamental building blocks for fostering learning mobility. When recognition [...] **is not automatic, [...] it can entail administrative burdens for institutions, education providers and learners alike, affecting access to equitable and quality education and training throughout life, hampering mobility [...] and the acquisition of transversal skills and competences needed for personal, civic and professional development as well as for enhanced employability.** For the European Union to retain and improve its competitive edge, it is imperative that full advantage is taken of the potential of the EEA, so that learners can make the most of all education and training opportunities across the Union.
2. Measures to foster transparency, and thereby [...] **enhance** trust, are crucial to promoting automatic **mutual recognition of qualifications and outcomes of learning periods abroad in higher education and upper secondary education and training (including both general education and VET).** [...] The successful implementation of automatic **mutual** recognition depends on accelerating as well as sustaining the progress that has been made within the EEA and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) towards greater transparency and trust.
3. **The Member States and the European Commission have worked together successfully to provide a set of instruments, and significant steps have been taken in the Bologna Process to provide Member States with a toolbox to make automatic mutual recognition a practical possibility in higher education. These tools include the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), the three-cycle higher education system and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).**
4. **Important steps have also been taken in the area of VET, notably through the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET).**

5. The network of National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARICs) is central to the implementation of automatic **mutual** recognition of **qualifications** in Europe, **in particular in higher education**, as they represent an important source of knowledge, information and good practice for all actors dealing with automatic **mutual** recognition.
6. Bilateral, **multilateral** and regional agreements on automatic **mutual** recognition **in the EU** can [...] foster trust and transparency [...] **and support** automatic **mutual** recognition [...] **as well as provide** an inspiration for broader **European** cooperation [...] **with the view of implementing the 2018 Recommendation**.

WELCOMES the 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 of 23 February 2023² and NOTES in particular that:

1. **Even though automatic mutual recognition of qualifications does not mean automatic admission to further studies**, [...]there are still challenges [...] **on** the distinction between granting access and admission to further studies. [...]At the institutional level, **these challenges may have several reasons, including** [...] that the concept of automatic **mutual** recognition is[...] **frequently misunderstood** [...] **and that recognition and admission are often combined, sometimes** leading to inconsistencies in decision-making. When [...] **there is a lack of consistent approaches to automatic mutual recognition**, the result can be diverse and complex processes that [...] **may undermine** the smooth recognition of qualifications. [...]
2. Guidance from national authorities and the systematic provision of training and information is still not widespread, in part due to the limited national resources dedicated to supporting the implementation of automatic **mutual** recognition and the NARICs. Systematic monitoring of recognition [...] **practices in education and training** is [...] **underdeveloped**.

² COM(2023) 91 final.

3. Automatic **mutual** recognition remains more advanced in higher education than at upper secondary **education and training** level, largely due to the framework provided by the Bologna tools. However, these tools are unevenly applied. This includes the use of the information provided by quality assurance agencies registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), and the use of **Europass** Diploma Supplements.
4. Difficulties persist in achieving automatic **mutual** recognition after learning periods abroad for students in higher education, in part due to a lack of information. Administrative hindrances and [...] **varied** perceptions regarding quality at faculty level add further complications. While within the Erasmus+ programme, higher education institutions committed to fully and automatically recognise the credits obtained during a mobility period, recognition is still far from being the norm.
5. Challenges remain [...] **for the recognition of upper secondary education and training qualifications acquired in one Member State giving access[...] to higher education in another Member State [...] due to reasons including a variety of practices and actors involved as well as a limited use of the tools available.**
6. Likewise, automatic **mutual** recognition [...] **of the outcomes of** a learning period abroad for learners in upper secondary education and training remains underdeveloped. **The reasons for this are complex and include the differences between education and training systems,** [...] differences between recognition procedures and the lack of a common framework.

AGREES THAT:

1. While progress has been made, the lack of automatic **mutual** recognition of qualifications and of the outcomes of learning periods abroad continues to hamper **learning** mobility in the EU.
2. The impetus to lay a solid foundation for automatic **mutual** recognition in the EU based on trust remains strong. Automatic **mutual** recognition increases the attractiveness of European learning mobility, **strengthens education and training institutions** and **promotes their internationalisation. It also** leads to improved education and training, **the** acquisition of transversal skills **and competences**, and labour market options. Learning periods abroad have the potential to be positive, life-altering experiences for young people and can lead to further mobility later in life. They can contribute to the development of key competences such as multilingualism, citizenship and cultural awareness [...].
3. It is imperative that greater efforts are made by all the relevant actors to live up to the 2018 Recommendation **and make sure that all the necessary steps are put in place by 2025.** Most importantly, automatic **mutual** recognition hinges on the Member States working together to foster mutual trust **and transparency.**
4. Building and sustaining mutual trust for the promotion of automatic **mutual** recognition is necessary to future-proof the building blocks of the EEA and the EU as a global actor in education and training. EEA initiatives, such as the European Universities initiative, can be important drivers for automatic **mutual** recognition and call for a holistic perspective.

[...]

5. Trust **and transparency** amongst education and training systems is a key component [...] **to ensure automatic mutual** recognition [...]. Thus, efforts to build a culture of trust [...] **and transparency around** automatic **mutual** recognition must be stepped up at all decision-making levels, **with due respect for subsidiarity**. Quality assurance plays a key role in accelerating trust by highlighting methods and improving transparency. Continuing the important work already accomplished in the context of the Bologna Process **and the EU** is therefore fundamental to trust-based recognition procedures. Likewise, it is equally urgent to **make more systematic use of available support tools, focus on learning outcomes and** continue **to develop**[...] quality assurance instruments in upper secondary education as well as in [...] **VET, in line with EQAVET, to enable automatic mutual recognition.**
6. EU tools and initiatives play a key part in developing more transparency and automating recognition procedures in general. This includes the Erasmus+ programme and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which helps improve the transparency [...], comparability **and portability** of qualifications. In this respect it is important to keep the national qualifications frameworks up-to-date with regard to the EQF. **It is essential to focus on digitalisation processes and** [...]the use of digital tools³[...], as well as the tools developed under the Erasmus+ programme [...] enabl[...]ing easier verification of the authenticity of qualifications, **while allowing efficient fraud prevention.** Together with Diploma Supplements and **with** the Q-Entry database, these tools can add value by decreasing costs and administrative burden.

³ **Such as the pilot project for European Digital Credentials for Learning and the Europass Mobility template and Certificate Supplement, as part of the Europass platform.**

7. Beyond taking full advantage of the tools available, it is essential to foster, sustain and further develop trust among staff involved in the decision-making process **as well as provide them with relevant training**, so that they have the knowledge and an understanding of relevant tools and frameworks for recognition **and the skills to use them appropriately**. Considering that decisions are often taken at institutional or local level, the development of relationships between teachers, trainers, learners, leaders and administrators can play a key role in making automatic **mutual** recognition a practical possibility. Enabling individual participation in transnational cooperation projects and mobility for stakeholders, such as teachers, trainers and leaders, may play a positive role in furthering automatic **mutual** recognition.
8. The autonomy of higher education institutions is fundamental to the creation of a successful EEA. Simultaneously, consistent national approaches to automatic **mutual** recognition [...] **in line with the 2018 Recommendation** and monitoring recognition decisions at the national level [...] **would** reduce unnecessary divergence in approaches and complexity. This could [...] improv[...]e predictability while reducing the administrative and financial burden for authorities and learners. The involvement of all relevant actors, such as higher education institutions, NARICs and quality assurance agencies, can play a key role in these efforts, including in training, information provision, monitoring and developing national guidance. In this context, peer learning [...] may play an important role in spreading best practices, both in higher education and upper secondary education and training, [...] **to deliver** more consistent national approaches across Member States.
9. **Work related to the implementation of the Recommendation can inspire and facilitate progress with regard to the recognition of qualifications gained outside the EU, in line with national circumstances. Full advantage should be taken of the UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, since it facilitates international student mobility, puts the development of recognition issues into a global context and thus unlocks potential for the internationalisation of European higher education.**

INVITES THE MEMBER STATES, with due regard for institutional autonomy and academic freedom and in accordance with national circumstances and legislation, to:

1. Consolidate and reinforce their efforts to [...] **ensure** automatic **mutual** recognition of qualifications and of learning periods abroad in their respective education and training systems, in accordance with the 2018 Council Recommendation.

[...]
2. **Make further efforts to establish the mindset that a qualification giving access to a certain level of higher education awarded by one Member State is automatically recognised for access to higher education at the same level in another Member State, in order to allow citizens to be mobile across the Union.**
3. Support higher education institutions to apply automatic **mutual** recognition [...] **as defined** in the 2018 Council Recommendation. Where higher education institutions are responsible for automatic **mutual** recognition [...], support them in facilitating consistent national approaches [...].
4. Ensure that external quality assurance in higher education is carried out by independent quality assurance agencies registered with EQAR operating in line with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), to promote transparency and thereby foster **mutual** trust for automatic **mutual** recognition.

5. **Foster synergies within the EHEA and the EEA to ensure transparent and efficient environments for automatic mutual recognition processes.**
6. [...] **In this context**, ensure that full advantage is taken of the tools of the Bologna Process and the EU, **including the Copenhagen Process**, to facilitate automatic **mutual** recognition **as appropriate**. These tools include, but are not limited to, the ECTS, the ESG, the EQF, the Q-Entry database, the European Digital Credentials for Learning, the European Learning Model, Europass, the Diploma Supplement, the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE), the Europass Mobility Supplement, the Europass Certificate Supplement and the European Student Card Initiative, as well as other tools developed with the support of the Erasmus+ programme and those originating from the Bologna Process for higher education.
7. **Cooperate at EU level to exchange best practices and support peer learning and exchange of information in order to build trust and transparency among education and training systems and bolster automatic mutual recognition in higher education as well as in upper secondary education and training, including through the Centres of Vocational Excellence.**

8. Support the promotion and dissemination of relevant information about automatic **mutual** recognition procedures to all relevant actors and stakeholders, e.g. learners, higher education institutions, **upper secondary education and training institutions**, NARICs [...] **and** quality assurance agencies [...]. **This will allow citizens and learners [...] to understand** the possibilities that automatic **mutual** recognition gives them for studying abroad, and to support a consistent approach by the competent recognition authorities.
9. Consider within this context the recognition of prior learning and permeability between education and training sectors, in particular [...] **enabling access from VET to** higher education, where possible, to avoid dead ends and to ensure that full advantage can be taken of mobility opportunities.
10. Explore appropriate ways to better monitor and evaluate recognition [...] **systems**, using the expertise of the NARICs **and other competent bodies and institutions** where relevant, in order to understand if further action is needed [...].

[...]
11. Encourage cooperation between [...] decision[...] **makers** on recognition and the NARICs to avoid [...] inconsistencies, and to make automatic **mutual** recognition more effective and resource efficient **as well as correctly apply established tools and instruments**.

12. Engage in trust-based, mutually beneficial and generous **cross-border** cooperation [...] to [...] **improve** and support mobility opportunities. [...] [...] **Particular efforts should be made to facilitate** long-term learning periods abroad in upper secondary education and training [...] **as well as** exchanges between staff, institutions, authorities, and other relevant actors [...]. In this context, [...] **greater** use **should be made** of the Erasmus+ programme for enhanced cooperation and exchanges.

INVITES THE COMMISSION, with due regard for subsidiarity and national circumstances, including institutional autonomy, to:

1. Support and work with the Member States including in the context of the Bologna Process and the Copenhagen Process, by promoting **cooperation and** mutual learning on the best ways to implement automatic **mutual** recognition in higher education and upper secondary education and training, in particular on those areas in which the report from the Commission to the Council of 23 February 2023 shows that challenges still remain, including targeted support to actors and stakeholders when relevant.
2. Consider, in close consultation with the Member States, ways to enhance support to the Member States in order to [...] **progress in** the implementation of automatic **mutual** recognition of qualifications and of learning periods abroad in higher education and upper secondary education and training. The objective should be to **promote best practices and** facilitate the provision of training and peer support to Member States and education and training providers, including teachers and trainers **when appropriate**. [...] **Such support** should build on the expertise of the NARIC network and involv[...]e quality assurance agencies **and other competent bodies and institutions** when relevant. In this context, explore how the expertise of the NARICs can be [...] **used** to further automatic **mutual** recognition in upper secondary education as well as in [...] **VET, where relevant**.

3. Continue supporting Member States, including the NARICs, through the Erasmus+ programme, the Technical Support Instrument and other EU financing programmes **and instruments** with a view to advancing the work on automatic **mutual** recognition. Furthermore, support the Member States in their use of existing tools to further develop automatic **mutual** recognition in higher education and upper secondary education and training, as well as in the development of common channels for information and exchanges of best practice.
4. Continue supporting the EQAVET peer review process at [...] **VET** system level with a view to reinforcing trust **and transparency** and thereby fostering automatic **mutual** recognition between Member States.
5. Take a holistic approach towards supporting Member States in achieving automatic **mutual** recognition in higher education and upper secondary education and training by considering how upcoming strategic EEA initiatives to be proposed by 2025 can in coherence with existing tools, structures and frameworks support the achievement of the targets set out in the Recommendation of 26 November 2018, and especially how these initiatives can be used to promote trust **and transparency**.

Political background

1. Council Resolution of 19 December 2002 on the promotion of enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training, OJ C 13, 18.1.2003, p. 2.
 2. European Council conclusions of 14 December 2017 (EUCO 19/1/17 REV 1).
 3. Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, OJ C 444, 10.12.2018, p. 1.
 4. Council Resolution on further developing the European Education Area to support future-oriented education and training systems, OJ C 389, 18.11.2019, p. 1.
 5. Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, OJ C 417, 2.12.2020, p. 1.
 6. Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030), OJ C 66, 26.2.2021, p. 1.
 7. Council Recommendation of 5 April 2022 on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation, OJ C 160, 13.4.2022, p. 1.
 8. Council conclusions on a European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future of Europe, OJ C 167, 21.4.2022, p. 9.
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