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Proposal for a

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education

{SWD(2024) 74 final}

EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

1. CONTEXT OF THE PROPOSAL

Context and purpose of the proposal

In her 2019 Political Guidelines[1], **Commission President von der Leyen** expressed her commitment to making the **European Education Area[2]** a reality by 2025. The objective is to create a space where everyone has an opportunity to learn or to study abroad.

Higher education plays a key role for Europe's future, its citizens, societies and economies. We need to continue encouraging transnational cooperation and learning mobility in higher education (i.e. going abroad for university studies), as highlighted in the 2022 **European strategy for universities[3].**

The purpose of quality assurance systems is to ensure that higher education meets the needs and expectations of students, employers, society and other stakeholders. It lays the groundwork for **trust** between education systems, which is the condition for the **automatic recognition** of qualifications and ultimately learning mobility. According to a survey[4], one third of higher education institutions check the quality assurance arrangements of other institutions when deciding whether to recognise a qualification.

Quality assurance refers to the processes, carried out by a higher education institution (internal) or quality assurance agency (external), to ensure the quality of a higher education institution. Quality assurance activities have the twin purposes of:

- **accountability**: to assure the quality of the higher education institution's activities and compliance with a set of standards; and
- **enhancement**: to provide recommendations on how higher education institutions improve their performance.

Taken together, **accountability and enhancement form the basis of trust**. In most cases, quality assurance is part of the process whereby national higher education systems grant universities the right to enrol students, award degrees or use public funds.

External quality assurance can take various forms:

- An **institutional approach** means that the institution undergoes a periodic external quality assurance review at institutional level only. It allows the institution to develop and deliver programmes without an additional external quality review.
- A **programme approach** means that each single programme (or group of programmes) by one or more higher education institution(s) needs to go through a periodic external quality assurance review.

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1 Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2024, https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2020-04/political-guidelines-next-commission_en_0.pdf.

2 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on achieving the European Education Area by 2025, 30 September 2020, COM(2020) 625 final.

3 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European strategy for universities, 18 January 2022, COM(2022) 16 final.

4 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, 23 February 2023, COM(2023) 91 final.

– A **combined approach** refers to a situation where a higher education system uses both institutional and programme approaches. This is the approach most used in the EU[5].

Automatic recognition is the right for a qualification holder (for example, of a bachelor's degree) that has been issued by one Member State to enter a higher education programme at the next level (for example, a master's degree) in any other Member State, without a separate recognition procedure[6].

The **purpose of this proposal** is to ensure that quality assurance and recognition systems in higher education support transparency, mobility and transnational cooperation, as well as maintaining high quality and mutual trust. This would benefit students engaging in learning mobility and hosting higher education institutions.

Building on experiences with European Universities alliances[7], this initiative will facilitate partnerships between higher education institutions and help develop more joint programmes and other joint education provision, with the aim of leading to a European degree[8].

The review of quality assurance at EU-level is well-timed, as the Recommendation of the Council and European Parliament on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education[9] dates from 2006. While that initiative brought about progress (notably the set-up of the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies, allowing Member States to choose which one they used), implementation remains uneven[10]. Since 2006, higher education has changed, particularly with the creation of European Universities alliances and the development of more joint programmes and micro-credentials.

There is a strong case for **simplification**. European Universities and other alliances of higher education institutions face obstacles to developing joint education provision. Quality assurance procedures either diverge between Member States (different regulations) or are lengthy and complex (same regulations but varying administrative approaches).

Quality assurance systems can evaluate the extent to which higher education systems respond to societal and economic developments. Stakeholders support an increased focus on this area, in respect of higher education autonomy and Member State responsibility for their systems[11].

Revisiting quality assurance is **an opportunity to link it better with recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad**, which until now have been completely separate areas. The implementation report of the 2018 Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad[12] reveals room for improvement.

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5 According to responses to a 2023 Commission survey (ongoing) on the implementation of the Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation, 14 MS ministries reported that they apply a combined approach to external quality assurance.

6 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).

7 European Universities initiative | European Education Area (europa.eu).

8 See accompanying Commission Communication on a blueprint towards a European degree.

9 Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 February 2006 on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education (OJ L 64, 4.3.2006, p. 60).

10 Provisional data from an ongoing Commission study.

11 See results from Erasmus-funded Quality Assurance Fit for the Future (QA-Fit) project.

12 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, 23 February 2023, COM(2023) 91 final.

The intergovernmental Bologna process[13] involving 49 countries including all EU Member States, has brought about progress in quality assurance and recognition in higher education. The tools it developed include the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)[14] and the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (the European Approach)[15], which seeks to facilitate accreditation and avoid duplication. The latter tool has not been widely used, due to a lack of enabling frameworks at national and regional levels. This initiative builds on existing tools and encourages their full exploitation. Notwithstanding this progress, the vision of the European Education Area is more ambitious.

This initiative is part of a **package** announced in the 2024 Commission work programme[16], under 'Promoting our European way of life'. The package includes a Communication on a blueprint for a European degree and a Council recommendation on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education. The two Council recommendations support the Communication, while covering more than just the aim of developing a European degree.

Structural and operational issues addressed by the proposed Council Recommendation

The initiative is based on consultations with stakeholders and Member States. It seeks to address the following issues:

- **Uncertainty, cumbersome and lengthy recognition procedures** of qualifications and learning periods abroad deter students from pursuing their education in another country.
- Current quality assurance arrangements are complex and can increase **administrative burden**. The uneven use of existing tools, such as the European Approach, is a barrier to transnational cooperation, as a single Member State not allowing its use can have a disproportionate impact on cooperation within an alliance.
- Quality assurance is sometimes **too focused on formal requirements** rather than advising on educational provision improvement, such as through thematic reviews of higher education institution incorporation of cross-cutting issues like the green and digital transitions, academic freedom or social inclusion.

Therefore, the initiative **proposes to**:

- **Simplify**, where possible, the procedures to help deliver on the European Education Area, notably with joint programmes developed by European Universities alliances, Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters, Marie Skłodowska-Curie (MSCA) Joint Doctoral Programmes, European Institute for Innovation and Technology labelled programmes and specialised education programmes funded via the Digital Europe Programme[17].
- Develop specific **enhancement-oriented and thematic reviews** to enhance learning and teaching quality, fully respecting institutional autonomy. Proper follow-up of recommendations made in these reviews by higher education institutions may also improve quality assurance process fitness for purpose.

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13 European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process. (ehea.info).

14 The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area adopted by the Ministers responsible for higher education in the European Higher Education Area in May 2015.

15 The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes adopted by European Ministers responsible for higher education in May 2015.

16 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Commission work programme 2024. Delivering today and preparing for tomorrow, 17 October 2023, COM(2023) 638 final.

17 Regulation (EU) 2021/694 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2021 establishing the Digital Europe Programme and repealing Decision (EU) 2015/2240 (Text with EEA relevance) (OJ L 166, 11.5.2021, p. 1).

- Shift towards an **institutional** approach to external quality assurance. The Recommendation would help to address the problem of bureaucratic, lengthy and costly procedures. In addition, providing **quality assurance of alliances**, such as European Universities alliances, would facilitate cooperation and more rapid response to fast-changing needs.
- Make **recognition procedures automatic**. This depends on credible and trustworthy quality assurance. This initiative sets out a new, integrated approach linking recognition and quality assurance better.

Objectives of the proposed Council Recommendation

This initiative invites Member States and their higher education institutions to scrutinise existing tools and practices with a view to making them **fit for purpose**.

With regard to external quality assurance, joint transnational programmes would benefit from moving away from programme approaches to external quality assurance, to avoid multiple (national) quality assurance procedures. A more efficient solution would be for national quality assurance procedures to use **a single quality assurance procedure** instead. This would cut red tape, avoid duplication, and meet the challenges of increasing international cooperation. For those countries still using a programme approach, however, the Recommendation proposes to make full use of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

In supporting the transition to an institutional approach, the proposal aims to give higher education institutions the possibility to demonstrate the trustworthiness of their internal quality assurance arrangements by going through an institutional external quality assurance. This would then give them the possibility to self-accredit programmes in line with the ESG and become exempt from (external) programme accreditation.

In the mid- to long-term, once alliances such as European Universities have a well-established common/joint internal quality assurance system, they should be able to **evaluate externally the quality assurance system at cross-institutional level in a European framework**, covering their joint education provisions. This would be a quantum leap in simplification, and a major incentive to develop more joint programmes and move towards the establishment of a European degree. Annex I to this proposal outlines the proposed building blocks of this European framework, as a first step towards co-creating a common framework between the Commission, Member States, quality assurance and recognition authorities and higher education stakeholders. The Commission plans to set up a European degree policy lab as the platform to guide this co-creation process.

Consistency with existing provisions in the policy area

This proposal constitutes a key deliverable of the European strategy for universities. It builds on the Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation[18], which called for the strengthening of 'mutual trust through external quality assurance and accreditation of joint educational programmes and other forms of joint educational offers developed by institutional transnational cooperation models, including European Universities'. Also, the Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and

[18] Council Recommendation of 5 April 2022 on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation (Text with EEA relevance) 2022/C 160/01 (OJ C 160, 13.4.2022, p. 1).

the outcomes of learning periods abroad[19] calls for reinforced quality assurance systems based on trust.

The Council Conclusions on further steps to make automatic mutual recognition in education and training a reality[20] call on Member States to reinforce efforts to achieve automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and note the key role played by quality assurance in building trust by highlighting methods and improving transparency.

The proposal would also support the Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation 'Europe on the Move' – learning mobility opportunities for everyone[21].

Consistency with other Union policies

This Recommendation fosters effective transnational cooperation and supports higher education institutions to deliver on the European Green Deal[22], the Digital Decade[23], and the European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience[24] by promoting quality assurance procedures to cover these aspects and the Skills and Talent Mobility package[25] by boosting automatic recognition.

As part of Global Gateway, the EU supports partner countries with the development of a harmonised quality assurance and accreditation system at institutional level, national, regional and continental level, for example with the initiative on Harmonisation of African Higher Education, Quality Assurance and Accreditation.

2. LEGAL BASIS, SUBSIDIARITY AND PROPORTIONALITY

• Legal basis

The proposed Council Recommendation is based on Article 165(4) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). According to Article 165(1) of the TFEU, the EU is to 'contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of their education systems'. Article 165(2) of the TFEU further specifies that EU action in education is aimed at 'developing the European dimension in education', 'promoting cooperation between educational establishments' and 'at encouraging mobility of students and teachers, by encouraging, the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study'. This proposal respects the responsibility of Member States for the organisation of education systems (including teaching content, and cultural and linguistic diversity), reflecting the supplementing and supporting role of the EU, and the voluntary nature of European cooperation. The initiative does not propose any extension of EU regulatory power

[19] 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).

[20] Council conclusions on further steps to make automatic mutual recognition in education and training a reality (OJ C 185, 26.5.2023, p. 44).

[21] Proposal for a Council recommendation 'Europe on the Move' – learning mobility opportunities for everyone, 15 November 2023, COM(2023) 719 final.

[22] https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en.

[23] Europe's digital decade: 2030 targets | European Commission (europa.eu).

[24] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, 1 July 2020, COM(2020) 274 final.

[25] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Skills and Talent Mobility, 15 November 2023, COM(2023) 715 final.

or binding commitments on Member States that will decide, according to their national circumstances, how they implement this Recommendation.

- **Subsidiarity (for non-exclusive competence)**

The proposal is in conformity with the principle of subsidiarity laid down in Article 5(3) of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) and respects Member States' competence on the organisation of education systems and content of teaching and learning. Facilitating learning mobility and fostering transnational cooperation can be better achieved through joint action at EU level.

- **Proportionality**

The proposal is in conformity with the principle of proportionality laid down in Article 5(4) of the TEU. Neither the content nor the form of this proposed Council Recommendation exceeds what is necessary to achieve its objectives. The actions proposed respect Member States' practices and the diversity of systems across the EU. Any commitments by Member States are voluntary in nature, and each Member State remains free to decide on the approach to take to implement them. This initiative fulfils the TFEU's commitment that 'The Union shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States' (Article 165(1)). The added value of action at EU level is to facilitate and foster deeper transnational cooperation between higher education institutions from different Member States, to improve the functioning of the higher education sector across the EU and increase its global attractiveness and competitiveness.

- **Choice of instrument**

To achieve the objectives referred to above, Article 165(4) TFEU provides for the adoption by the Council of Recommendations, based on proposals by the Commission. A Council Recommendation is an appropriate instrument in the field of education where the EU has a supporting responsibility. It is a frequently used instrument for EU action in this area. As a legal instrument, a Council Recommendation signals the commitment of Member States to the measures included and provides a strong political basis for cooperation in this area, while fully respecting Member-State competence.

3. RESULTS OF EX-POST EVALUATIONS, STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS AND IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

- **Stakeholder consultations**

This proposal for a Council Recommendation has been discussed with relevant stakeholders, both at the time of the creation of the European strategy for universities, and more recently on its specific components. Feedback from these discussions is reflected in the proposal.

– The proposal has been discussed with Member State representatives and key higher education stakeholders in the European Education Area Higher Education Working Group, in four meetings since autumn 2022, and with Directors General for higher education[26] at three meetings since autumn 2022.
– Consultations took place during the annual meetings of National Academic Recognition Centres (NARIC) in November 2023, the network of European National Information

[26] A grouping of senior officials responsible for higher education that meets biannually, organised by the Member State holding the EU Presidency.

Centres and the National Academic Recognition Information Centres[27] (ENIC-NARIC network) in June 2023.
- A targeted session took place at the Second European Universities Forum in Barcelona in September 2023, involving representatives from European Universities alliances, quality assurance agencies and Member States.
- Quality assurance arrangements for the European degree were discussed at the European Education Summit and at the Erasmus Mundus conference in November 2023. Workshops with quality assurance stakeholders also took place in November 2023 and January 2024.
- The Commission has also used the opportunity of participating in external stakeholder events to consult on the proposal. These included events organised by the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE).

- **Collection and use of expertise**

The proposal for a Council Recommendation is based on several studies, reports, results of Erasmus+ projects, and contributions of stakeholder organisations, namely:
- A Commission-contracted study[28] on the state of play of automatic recognition and quality assurance in the EU and the feasibility of a quality assurance and recognition system.
- A Commission survey to analyse the first developments following the adoption of the Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation. The results were then discussed with Ministries representatives.
- A study conducted by the Network of Experts working on the social dimension of Education and Training (NESET) on the incorporation of a social dimension angle into quality assurance systems[29].
- An online peer learning activity on quality assurance in higher education, co-hosted by Austria in May 2023, and another on how to make effective use of the data and intelligence collected from graduate tracking to inform policy developments and quality assurance, organised in Madrid in November 2023 under the Spanish EU Presidency, as part of the activities of the European Network of Graduate Tracking.
- The results of the Erasmus+ funded EUniQ project, involving several quality assurance agencies across Europe, developed a proposal for a quality assurance framework for European Universities alliances.
- The ongoing progress of the Erasmus+ funded IMINQA project supporting the development of quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area, in particular on their work on quality assurance for European Universities Alliances, the implementation of the European Approach for quality assurance of joint programmes and the quality assurance of micro-credentials.
- The ongoing progress of the Erasmus+ funded QA-FIT project, which involves the main stakeholder organisations in quality assurance and aims to gather comprehensive evidence on the state of play of quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area and the need for any reforms to current tools.

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[27] The ENIC network (European Network of Information Centres) and NARIC network (National Academic Recognition Information Centres) cooperate closely and are known as the ENIC-NARIC network. ENICs are recognition authorities of the state parties of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, where the secretariat is provided by the Council of Europe and UNESCO, while NARICs are recognition authorities of the Erasmus+ Programme countries. The two networks have a joint Work Programme, Charter and Board.

[28] Ongoing study.

[29] Linking quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education: literature review and mapping national practices - NESET (nesetweb.eu).

– Results of six Erasmus+ joint European degree label policy experimentation pilot projects.

These studies have been complemented by several contributions prepared by stakeholder organisations, both before and during the call for evidence period.

- **Impact assessment**

An impact assessment was not carried out, given the complementary approach to Member State initiatives, the voluntary nature of the proposed activities and the scope of the impacts expected. The development of the proposal was informed by specific studies, consultation of Member States, the public consultation and numerous dedicated stakeholder consultations.

- **Fundamental rights**

This proposed Council Recommendation respects the fundamental rights of the EU. It promotes the principles recognised by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union[30], namely the right of education under Article 14, the right to academic freedom under Article 13 and the right to the protection of personal data under Article 8.

4. BUDGETARY IMPLICATIONS

While this initiative will not require additional resources from the EU budget, the measures in this Recommendation will mobilise sources of funding at EU, national and regional level.

5. OTHER ELEMENTS

- **Implementation plans and monitoring, evaluation and reporting arrangements**

To support implementation, the Commission proposes to develop, in cooperation with Member States, specific guidance material, handbooks or other concrete deliverables, based on evidence, peer learning activities and identification of good practice. The Commission intends to report on the use of the Recommendation through relevant EU monitoring and reporting frameworks.

- **Outline of the specific provisions of the proposal**

The proposed Council Recommendation suggests a differentiated approach that considers the diversity of quality assurance and recognition systems that exist in the European Education Area. The recommendations support a gradual shift towards stronger institutional external quality assurance and further steps to ensure automatic recognition based on trust. It builds on what has already been achieved in higher education, but with a more ambitious and EU-driven approach.

The Council Recommendation proposes actions that can be pursued by Member States to improve higher education systems. It sets out the Commission's commitment to support and complement Member-State actions in this area. The accompanying staff-working document describes various recent research evidence and European stakeholder opinions and experiences to support the proposed Council Recommendation.

[30] Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (OJ C 326, 26.10.2012, p. 391–407).

2024/0079 (NLE)

Proposal for a

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Article 165(4) thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas:

(1) Quality assurance systems are instrumental to establishing high quality standards for education and building trust among higher education systems and institutions across the European Education Area and beyond. They constitute a key building block of transnational cooperation. Ensuring quality is the foundation for mutual trust that enables transnational cooperation and seamless learning mobility.

(2) The main responsibility for the quality of their educational provision lies with higher education institutions, which should make the attainment of the highest standards a key institutional priority and develop quality assurance strategies and processes to ensure the achievement of that objective.

(3) The implementation of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)[31] has been a fundamental step in the consolidation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), supporting the creation of a quality culture in higher education systems and institutions across Europe; however, they have not yet been fully implemented.

(4) Societies across Europe are experiencing dynamic transformation, such as the green and digital transitions, additionally heightened by artificial intelligence. Higher education systems should be able to react to this transformation. Quality assurance processes should support higher education institutions in this transformational journey by providing expert reviews to enhance their educational offer.

(5) The need to make quality assurance processes more agile, internationalised and fit for purpose should be tackled while ensuring that these processes remain focused on ensuring the highest quality standards. Obtaining feedback from graduates on their learning and career pathways and the relevance of their skills acquired through this learning constitutes a valuable monitoring tool for ensuring quality and relevance at institutional and system level. The European Graduate Tracking Initiative[32] has contributed to making such tracking more systematic and comparable.

(6) Diverging national quality assurance arrangements still create complexity for transnational cooperation in higher education, hampering the development of joint

[31] Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

[32] Council Recommendation of 20 November 2017 on tracking graduates (OJ C 423, 9.12.2017, p. 1).

educational programmes by alliances of higher education institutions and limiting educational opportunities for higher education institutions and students. Specific requirements or standards are sometimes more focused on process and not clearly linked with learning outcomes, limiting the quality enhancement impact.

(7) National external quality assurance requirements at the level of higher education study programmes tend to be especially challenging for the creation of joint educational opportunities between different countries. These quality assurance processes can be too costly, too lengthy, and sometimes contradictory, preventing higher education institutions from responding quickly enough to emerging needs and developing new educational opportunities for students.

(8) Existing instruments, such as the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (European Approach)[33], are highly valued by the higher education community and Member States, but implementation remains scarce due to divergent national approaches.

(9) The Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation[34] encourages the use of the European Approach as an important step towards supporting the shift towards a stronger role for external quality assurance of institutions, rather than of individual study programmes.

(10) Joint programmes have become a hallmark of the European Education Area, highly valued by all higher education stakeholders. Adequate quality assurance arrangements are a pre-requisite to ensuring these joint programmes can be widely implemented across the Union. The establishment of a European degree, based on co-created European criteria and delivered at national, regional, or institutional level, could tackle existing issues related to quality assurance and accreditation of joint programmes by providing a framework that could be incorporated in Member State legislation.

(11) In accordance with the Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation, several Member States are gradually moving towards more institutional external quality assurance systems. Stakeholders have called for swifter solutions that support their commitments within their higher education alliances and other cooperation models. Reinforcing internal quality assurance systems could be an important step towards speeding up processes while ensuring the highest quality standards.

(12) Alliances of higher education institutions, such as European Universities alliances[35], are at the forefront of transnational cooperation. These alliances commit to taking their cooperation to the next level by setting up European inter-university campuses where joint educational provision becomes the norm. As a key step in the creation of these campuses, alliances are building internal quality assurance systems that ensure that the quality of their joint educational provision is to the highest standards. There is a need to create a quality assurance framework that enables them to have their quality assurance system evaluated at the cross-institutional level, across all the joint educational activities of the alliances, to consolidate the identity of these alliances, to

[33] The approach, approved by EHEA ministers in May 2015, aims to 'dismantle an important obstacle to the development of joint programmes by setting standards for these programmes that are based on the agreed tools of the EHEA, without applying additional national criteria', European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

[34] Council Recommendation of 5 April 2022 on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation (OJ C 160, 13.4.2022, p. 1).

[35] https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative.

provide assurance to their stakeholders and to facilitate the joint provision of education. Key building blocks have been identified that provide initial steps to develop such a framework.

(13) Automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad is necessary to make learning mobility a reality for all, to support brain circulation, and foster competitiveness. Member States agreed in the 2018 Council Recommendation on automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad[36] that holders of a qualification of a certain level that has been issued by one Member State have the right to be considered for entry to a higher education programme in the next level in any other Member State, without a separate recognition procedure. Robust quality assurance systems are the foundation for building the necessary trust to ensure automatic recognition.

(14) In support of this Recommendation, the Commission intends to set up **a European degree policy lab,** an expert group involving Member States, higher education institutions, quality assurance/accreditation agencies, student representatives, and economic and social partners, to accelerate action and any necessary national reforms. The aim of the initiative is to provide guidance to the Commission and stakeholders on moving towards a European degree and on the implementation of a cross-institutional framework of alliances of higher education institutions. The policy lab would work closely with Erasmus+ recognition accelerator teams to support and accompany the process.

(15) The Commission intends to set up an annual **European degree forum[37]**, in synergy with the European Higher Education Area and in cooperation with stakeholders in quality assurance and recognition, including Member States, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)[38] the organisations making up the E4 Group[39], the network of European National Information Centres and the National Academic Recognition Information Centres[40], representatives from National Qualifications Frameworks, economic and social partners, in order to provide guidance and monitor progress, at political level, on moving towards a European degree, including through the European degree policy lab, and on the follow-up of implementation of this Recommendation.

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36 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).

37 As proposed by the Communication on a Blueprint for a European degree.

38 The European Quality Assurance Register in Higher Education (EQAR) is the official register of quality assurance agencies operating in substantial compliance with the Standards and Guidelines on Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

39 The E4 Group comprises the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the European Students' Union (ESU). The E4 group were founding members of EQAR.

40 The ENIC network (European Network of Information Centres) and NARIC network (National Academic Recognition Information Centres) cooperate closely and are known as the ENIC-NARIC network. ENICs are recognition authorities of the state parties of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, where the secretariat is provided by the Council of Europe and UNESCO, while NARICs are recognition authorities of the Erasmus+ Programme countries. The two networks have a joint Work Programme, Charter and Board.

(16) The Commission intends to support the further development of the **Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR)**[41], managed by EQAR, building on good practice by recognition information centres that use it for automatic recognition.

(17) The Commission intends to continue its support to the development and promotion of **graduate tracking practices** to enhance quality and relevance of higher education, as well as improving its comparison and benchmarking across countries and institutions.

(18) The Commission intends to continue sharing with the Member States and the wide higher education community the accumulated experience of transnational cooperation initiatives such as European Universities alliances and programmes like Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters, MSCA Joint Doctorates or the specialised education programmes funded via the Digital Europe Programme[42].

(19) The Commission intends to encourage Member States to use the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) to receive tailor-made technical expertise to design and implement the necessary reforms in the higher education area, including by improving the governance and quality assurance mechanisms for higher education institutions.

(20) The Commission intends to support bench-learning between quality assurance agencies.

(21) This Recommendation fully respects the principles of subsidiarity, institutional autonomy and academic freedom, and will be implemented in accordance with national circumstances and in cooperation with Member States and all relevant stakeholders.

HAS ADOPTED THIS RECOMMENDATION:

Improving all quality assurance systems

(1) It is recommended that Member States:

(a) develop the enhancement dimension of quality assurance, to foster continuous improvement and keep a high level of transnational trust and accountability within higher education institutions;

(b) ensure that quality assurance systems are fit-for-purpose to **respond to key societal and economic developments** affecting higher education. Higher education systems may address these aspects in different ways, for example by encouraging higher education institutions to include them in their internal quality assurance procedures, incorporating specific objectives in their regular external quality assurance or through focused or thematic quality reviews at system level. Such an approach should be carried out in full alignment with the ESG, and could cover topics such as:

(i) promotion and protection of **fundamental academic values**, as defined by the Bologna process[43];

(ii) **relevance of teaching and learning outcomes** for employability and personal development, building, for example, on information from

[41] DEQAR is the Database of External Quality Assurance Results for quality assurance agencies listed on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). All EQAR-registered agencies can publish their reports in the Database. Participation in DEQAR is voluntary (https://www.eqar.eu/qa-results/search/).

[42] Regulation (EU) 2021/694 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2021 establishing the Digital Europe Programme and repealing Decision (EU) 2015/2240 (Text with EEA relevance) (OJ L 166, 11.5.2021, p. 1).

[43] www.ehea.info.

graduate tracking or closer cooperation with social partners, including curriculum design and offering internship opportunities[44];

(iii) whether programmes (leading to full degree or micro-credentials) are enhancing competences (that is to say knowledge, skills and attitudes) of students and lifelong learners on key societal and economic priorities, such as the **green and digital transitions;**

(iv) relevant **synergies** between education, including vocational education and training, research, innovation, and service to society;

(v) **inclusive** higher education, as defined by the Bologna process, fostering, among others, accessibility and gender equality, as well as student-centred learning and well-being;

(vi) attractive and sustainable **academic careers** and working conditions;[45]

(vii) strategies to strengthen international cooperation;

(c) **reduce**, for higher education institutions, the **workload, bureaucracy, and cost implications** linked to external quality assurance processes, based on a cost-benefit analysis of quality assurance procedures.

(d) ensure that **decisions on accreditation and registration of higher education institutions and programmes** are made in a transparent and objective way, in accordance with the ESG, with the involvement of adequate expert input and the participation by the higher education community, including students and staff, in fostering a quality culture.

(e) monitor the extent to which quality assurance procedures are leading to an improvement in the quality of educational provision and encourage the publication, in a widely spoken language, of quality assurance reviews (be it at institutional or programme level), in DEQAR, to improve the transnational transparency of the quality of higher education provision.

(f) ensure that institutional internal quality assurance systems cover the whole range of educational provision of a higher education institution. For educational provisions leading to **micro-credentials,** use the **European Approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability and the Union principles for the design and issuance of micro-credentials**[46] as a reference.

(g) support and encourage quality assurance agencies to organise mutual learning activities, allowing national higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies **to benchmark their practices** with those from elsewhere in the European Education Area. This can be done through bench-learning[47], where higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies can learn from other leading higher education institutions, or through the analysis of European graduate tracking.

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44 Council Recommendation of 20 November 2017 on tracking graduates (OJ C 423, 9.12.2017, p. 1).

45 As defined in the Council Recommendation for attractive and sustainable careers in higher education proposal adopted by the Commission together with the proposal for this Recommendation.

46 As outlined in Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability (OJ C 243, 27.6.2022, p. 10).

47 Bench-learning is defined as a process for creating a systemic and integrated link between benchmarking and mutual learning activities in all the fields related to quality assurance in the field of higher education.

Developing a cross-institutional quality assurance approach for alliances of higher education institutions

(2) It is recommended that Member States develop a European framework to enable any type of alliance of higher education institution that is engaged in sustainable, long-term cooperation, which goes beyond ad-hoc or project-based cooperation, such as European Universities alliances, to undergo a joint external evaluation of their joint internal quality assurance arrangements**,** covering all joint actions or at least their own joint educational provision, such as joint programmes or joint micro-credentials. This work should include the following actions:

(a) working together with quality assurance stakeholders to develop and test this cross-institutional quality assurance framework based on the building blocks included in Annex I to this Recommendation and drawing on the results of the Erasmus+-funded EUniQ[48] and IMINQA[49] projects;

(b) allowing and encouraging **quality assurance agencies** registered in EQAR to carry out such an external quality assurance evaluation, based on this cross-institutional quality assurance framework;

(c) recognising the outcomes of the quality assurance evaluation based on such **cross-institutional** quality assurance framework in the national quality assurance systems, ensuring that all joint educational provision covered by the alliance is **considered quality assured and accredited**, without the need to fulfil any additional quality assurance requirements.

Making programme or combined approaches to external quality assurance more agile

(3) It is recommended that Member States:

(a) facilitate **transnational cooperation** and the agility of higher education systems by:

(i) supporting higher education institutions to put in place or enhance a **robust internal quality assurance process**, and develop strong institutional quality culture, thereby enabling the shift towards an institutional approach to external quality assurance;

(ii) once higher education institutions have a robust internal quality assurance, moving towards institutional approach for quality assurance, for example by limiting compulsory programme accreditation by quality assurance agencies to **initial accreditation for new programmes and** introducing self-re-accreditation procedures as part of the internal quality assurance process;

(iii) strengthening an **evidence-based approach** to quality assurance**,** using a range of data, including from graduate tracking; and

(iv) supporting peer learning and capacity building of higher education institutions to **strengthen their quality culture** in the process of transition towards an institutional approach to external quality assurance;

[48] The EUniQ project developed an approach for comprehensive quality assurance of European Universities (https://www.nvao.net/en/euniq).

[49] IMINQA is the umbrella project to support the Bologna Thematic Peer Group on Quality Assurance (https://ehea.info/page-TPG-C-on-QA-Meetings-2021-2024#h61slbqps7o9t9ay8p1ys562l19y8x9j).

(b) allow and encourage the use of the **European Approach** by:

(i) removing any quality assurance criteria added at national level or any other unjustified potential administrative or regulatory barrier;

(ii) creating an **enabling environment** that provides guidance and support to people working in quality assurance;

(iii) ensuring no financial disadvantage to its use in comparison to procedures carried out at national level.

Building the foundations towards a European degree

(4) It is recommended that Member States:

(a) allow **quality assurance agencies** registered in EQAR to:

(i) **award the European label**[50] to joint degree programmes matching the European criteria as set out in Annex II, where programme or combined approach to external quality assurance are required;

(ii) **grant higher education institutions subject to external quality assurance at institutional level the ability** to award the European label to their joint degree programmes based on internal quality assurance and compliance with the European criteria;

(iii) **grant alliances of higher education institutions subject to external quality assurance at cross-institutional level the ability** to award the European label to their joint degree programmes based on a cross-institutional evaluation carried out in accordance with the principles laid down in Annex I and compliance with the European criteria;

(b) work with EQAR to identify ways to complement the regular ESG review of the work of national quality assurance agencies in ensuring that joint programmes match the European criteria and create a repository of programmes that have met the European criteria and are eligible to award a European degree.

Implementing automatic recognition

(5) It is recommended that Member States:

(a) encourage and support the evaluation of the implementation of automatic recognition[51] through the internal and external quality assurance processes of higher education institutions;

(b) develop, in close cooperation with higher education institutions and other stakeholders involved, and issue **clear guidance** to higher education institutions on how to distinguish between automatic recognition of a qualification for access and higher education institutions' right to make decisions on admission to a specific programme. Review these guidelines

[50] As mentioned in Article 12 of the Council Recommendation of 5 April 2022 on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation (Text with EEA relevance) 2022/C 160/01 (OJ C 160, 13.4.2022, p. 1).

[51] As defined in the Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad (OJ C 444, 10.12.2018, p. 1–8).

regularly, building on the outcomes of Erasmus+ accelerator team reviews[52] for the implementation of automatic recognition;

(c) support higher education institutions in taking a learning outcomes approach with regard to **admission procedures**, focusing on competences related to the level of the qualification, rather than specific curriculum content;

(d) work with higher education institutions and national recognition bodies to monitor recognition decisions, enhancing **data collection** and evidence-based approaches at institutional, national and European levels;

(e) support higher education institutions in issuing all degrees and micro-credentials in a format **compatible with the European Digital Credentials for Learning[53]** (EDC) standards, including the European Learning Model[54], as a key enabler of automatic recognition, through EDC's in-built checks of authenticity and proof of quality assurance and accreditation;

(f) encourage and support the **capacity building and networking of staff in ENIC-NARIC[55]** centres and **higher education institutions** through training and digital tools, including in artificial intelligence, and ensure close cooperation with recognition and quality assurance authorities;

(g) support close **cooperation** between staff working in recognition and quality assurance, in cooperation with the ENIC-NARIC network and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

(6) It is recommended that Member States follow up these Recommendations as soon as possible to allow a smooth path towards a European degree. They are invited, in the context of the European Education Area framework working structures[56], to inform the Commission regularly of the measures taken of the corresponding measures at the appropriate level to support the objectives of this Recommendation as essential steps towards achieving and further developing the European Education Area.

Done at Brussels,

For the Council
The President

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52 As recommended in 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, 23 February 2023, COM(2023) 91 final.

53 European Digital Credentials for Learning- Introduction to Digital Credentials | Europass.

54 European Learning Model for Stakeholders | Europass.

55 The ENIC network (European Network of Information Centres) and NARIC network (National Academic Recognition Information Centres) cooperate closely and are known as the ENIC-NARIC network. ENICs are recognition authorities of the state parties of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, where the secretariat is provided by the Council of Europe and UNESCO, while NARICs are recognition authorities of the Erasmus+ Programme countries. The two networks have a joint Work Programme, Charter and Board.

56 As detailed in the 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).