



Council of the
European Union

Brussels, 16 May 2023
(OR. en)

9307/23

EDUC 161
JEUN 86
SOC 314
EMPL 205

OUTCOME OF PROCEEDINGS

From: General Secretariat of the Council

To: Delegations

Subject: Council conclusions on further steps to make automatic mutual recognition
in education and training a reality

Delegations will find attached the abovementioned Council conclusions, approved by the Council
(Education, Youth, Culture and Sport) at its meeting on 16 May 2023.

Council conclusions on further steps 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) and its subsidiary texts, developed by the Council of Europe and UNESCO, provide a legal framework for the recognition of higher education qualifications and 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 which promotes mutual trust, transparency and the 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 meet by 2025. In particular, the Council recommended that Member States:
- 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 definitions 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 are set out in the annex to the 2018 Recommendation and are fully applicable to the current Council conclusions.

¹ OJ C 444, 10.12.2018, p. 1.

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 and training providers and learners alike, affecting equal access to equitable and quality education and training throughout life, and 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 enhance its competitive edge, it is imperative that full advantage be taken of the potential of the EEA, so that learners can make the most of all education and training opportunities across the EU.
2. Measures to foster transparency, and thereby enhance trust, are crucial to promoting the 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 hinges 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, among others, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), the Diploma Supplement, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), 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, including through the Copenhagen Process and 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 the automatic mutual recognition of qualifications in Europe, in particular in higher education, as the NARICs 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, support automatic mutual recognition, and provide inspiration for broader European cooperation with a view to 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:

² COM(2023) 91 final.

1. Even though automatic mutual recognition of qualifications does not mean automatic admission to further studies, there are still challenges relating to the distinction between eligibility to apply for further studies (i.e. recognition) and admission to a specific course or programme. The Commission report further states that, at the institutional level, there may be several reasons for these challenges, 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, fair and transparent automatic 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. Furthermore, the Commission report indicates that the systematic monitoring of recognition practices in education and training is underdeveloped.
3. Automatic mutual recognition remains more advanced in higher education than at upper secondary education and training level, including VET, largely due to the framework provided by the Bologna tools. However, these tools are unevenly applied, such as in the case of the use of the information provided by quality assurance agencies registered in EQAR, and the use of the Diploma Supplement, including through the Europass platform.
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 and limited use of the 2015 ECTS Users' Guide. Administrative hindrances and varied perceptions regarding quality at faculty level add further complications. While within the Erasmus+ programme, higher education institutions have committed to fully and automatically recognising 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, including VET, giving access to higher education in the Member State where the qualification was issued, for access to higher education in another Member State. There are several reasons for this, including the variety of practices and actors involved and the limited use made 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, including VET, remains underdeveloped. The diversity of education and training systems in the EU is a strength but it may present a challenge in this context. The recognition of outcomes of learning periods abroad is a complex issue due to, for example, this diversity, variations in recognition procedures and the lack of common frameworks at the appropriate level in the Member States.

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 better 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 be made by all the relevant actors to live up to the 2018 Recommendation and to put in place all the necessary steps 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 and transparency 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 building by highlighting methods and improving transparency. Continuing the important work already accomplished in the context of the Bologna Process and the EU, including the Copenhagen Process, is therefore fundamental to trust-based recognition procedures. For the sake of transparency, clear reasons for negative recognition decisions as well as the possibility to appeal such decisions in the respective systems of the Member States may prove important for individuals and for fostering trust in the recognition system.
6. EU tools and initiatives play a key part in developing more transparency and automating recognition procedures in general. These include the Erasmus+ programme and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which helps improve the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications. In this regard, it is important to keep the national qualifications frameworks up-to-date with regard to the EQF.

7. It is important to focus on digitalisation processes and the use of digital tools³ which enable easier verification of the authenticity of qualifications while allowing for efficient fraud prevention, as well as on the tools developed under the Erasmus+ programme. Together with the Diploma Supplements and the Q-Entry database, these tools can add value by decreasing costs and the administrative burden.

8. 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 to provide them with the relevant training so that they have the necessary knowledge and understanding of the 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.

³ Such as the European Digital Credentials for Learning, the European Blockchain Services Infrastructure, the Europass Mobility template and the Europass Certificate Supplement (as part of the Europass platform), as well as national qualifications registers mapped to the Europass platform, and the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR).

9. The autonomy of higher education institutions, as well as upper secondary education and training providers depending on the national context, is fundamental to the creation of a successful EEA. At the same time, consistent national approaches to automatic mutual recognition in line with the 2018 Recommendation and monitoring recognition at the national level would reduce complexity and unnecessary divergence in approaches. This could improve predictability while reducing the administrative and financial burden for authorities and learners. The involvement of all relevant actors, such as higher education institutions, NARICs, quality assurance agencies and EQF National Coordination Points, can play a key role in these efforts, including in training, information provision, monitoring and the development of national guidance. In this context, peer learning may play an important role in spreading best practice, both in higher education and upper secondary education and training, to contribute to more consistent national approaches across Member States.

10. 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. In line with the tools and the framework of the Bologna Process and of the EU, 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 achieve the 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. Establish the mindset that a qualification giving access to a certain level of higher education in the Member State where it was awarded is automatically recognised for eligibility for access to higher education at the same level in another Member State, without prejudicing the right of a higher education institution to set specific admission criteria for specific programmes, in order to allow citizens to be mobile across the EU.
3. Support higher education institutions in applying automatic mutual recognition as defined in the 2018 Council Recommendation, including by providing clear guidance and relevant training. 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 and operating in line with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), to promote transparency and thereby foster mutual trust in automatic mutual recognition.
5. In the context of upper secondary education and training, including VET, focus on learning outcomes and continue to develop existing quality assurance instruments in line with EQAVET, to enable the automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and outcomes of learning periods abroad.

6. Foster synergies within the EHEA and the EEA to ensure that they mutually reinforce each other, in order to promote transparent and efficient environments for automatic mutual recognition processes.
7. In this context, ensure that full advantage is taken of the tools of the Bologna Process and the EU, as appropriate, to facilitate automatic mutual recognition in higher education. In the field of vocational education and training, facilitate automatic mutual recognition within the scope of the 2018 Recommendation through the use of the instruments of the Copenhagen Process, as appropriate. These tools include, but are not limited to, the ECTS, the ESG, DEQAR, 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.
8. Cooperate at EU level to exchange best practices and support peer learning and the exchange of information in order to build trust and transparency among education and training systems and bolster automatic mutual recognition in higher education, including through the European Universities alliances, as well as in upper secondary education and training, including through the Centres of Vocational Excellence.
9. 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 providers, including VET providers, 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.

10. Consider, in this context, the recognition of prior learning and permeability between education and training sectors, in particular promoting transfers among and between VET and higher education, if applicable and taking into consideration the levels of education, to avoid dead ends and to make it easier to take full advantage of mobility opportunities.
11. Further support the NARICs and 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 see whether further action is needed.
12. 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 to correctly apply established tools and instruments. To that end, self-evaluation and peer review of NARICs in line with the voluntary quality assurance system of ENIC-NARIC networks may prove useful.
13. Engage in trust-based, mutually beneficial and generous cross-border cooperation to improve and support mobility opportunities, in particular long-term learning periods abroad in upper secondary education and training. Further efforts should be made to facilitate exchanges between staff, institutions, authorities, and other relevant actors. In this context, greater use should be made of the Erasmus+ programme and other relevant EU funds and programmes 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, including VET, in particular on those areas in which 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 the 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 involve 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 and training, in general 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 to 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.
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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.