



Implementation 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

Executive Summary

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Table of Contents

Purpose of this study	6
Methodology	6
Defining automatic mutual recognition	6
Summary of findings and conclusions	7
Summary of the 'traffic light' assessment	10
Suggestions for improvement	11



Purpose of this study

This evaluation provides an analysis on the state of play regarding the implementation of 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 (hereafter: Council Recommendation). It provides a comparative analysis of the implementation of the Council Recommendation across EU27 and concludes with suggestions on how to improve the processes and practices for automatic recognition.

The Council Recommendation is premised on the benefits of transnational mobility for individuals, in terms of the development of knowledge, skills and competences, personal development, social and labour market activation and European identity. At the education system level, transnational mobility is expected to enable learners to make the best possible use of all learning opportunities across the European Union.

Methodology

Mixed research methods have been used in this evaluation. These combine the collection of secondary data from existing literature with the generation of primary data through a series of consultation activities (130 key informant interviews; online surveys with the participation of over 950 respondents in total; and two focus groups totalling 36 participants). These consultation activities engaged a wide range of stakeholders including National Ministries, credential evaluations, National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARICs), policy experts and sectoral organisations, social partners educational institutions, Erasmus+ national agencies and learners.

The findings generated from these research activities have undergone triangulation to produce a 'traffic light' assessment on the state of implementation of the Council Recommendation in each of the 27 EU Member States.

Defining automatic mutual recognition

The Council Recommendation focuses on two levels of education (higher education and upper secondary education and training) and on recognition with regards to two different elements: qualifications obtained and learning outcomes of learning periods abroad.

It defines automatic recognition of qualifications as the right for holders of a qualification of a certain level issued by a Member State and giving access to higher education in the home country to be considered eligible for access to a higher education programme or entry to the next level in any other Member State without having to go through any separate recognition procedure (e.g. general access to higher education = general access to higher education; Bachelor = Bachelor; Master = Master), and without the intervention of a credential evaluator because the level, quality and workload of a qualification are automatically accepted.

In the case of learning periods abroad in upper secondary education and training, this means that the outcomes from a learning period of up to one year abroad in a Member State are recognised in other Member States, with the learner not being required to repeat the year, or achieved learning outcomes, in the country of origin, provided that the learning outcomes are broadly in line with the national curricula in the country of origin (CR 444/3). In relation to higher education, it means that the outcomes from a learning period abroad at higher education level in one Member State are automatically and fully recognised in the others, as reflected in a learning agreement and confirmed in the Transcript of Records, in line with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).

The automatic recognition of qualifications does not affect the independence of higher education institutions or other competent authorities in making admission decisions.

The Council Recommendation applies to qualifications, certifications, credits and learning outcomes acquired in the EU, regardless of whether the holder of the qualification is an EU or third country national, in line with the requirements of the EU legal migration directive.

Summary of findings and conclusions

Progress in the use of EU tools and common standards for transparency and trust to facilitate automatic recognition

The Council Recommendation calls for Member States to commit to fulfil the necessary conditions to foster transparency and building trust.

Progress has been notable in this area across the 27 EU Member States, including in the referencing of National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Recent developments facilitating recognition have taken place also at European level. Some examples are the digitalisation of the Diploma Supplement via Europass for Higher Education and the overhaul of the Europass platform. The European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) launched the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) in 2018 to ensure direct access to the reports and decisions of EQAR-registered agencies, which increases trust in education systems. At present, most but not all Member States have at least one national quality assurance agency registered with the EQAR.

Overall, progress in this area is greater in higher education than in upper secondary education and training, where more efforts are needed to improve the use of transparency tools for the recognition of learning outcomes and to expand the application of the principles of the European credit system for vocational education and training. Moreover, internal and external quality assurance systems often do not cover recognition.

Implementation of legislative changes in the Member States since the introduction of the Council Recommendation and current state of play

In most Member States, educational and policy stakeholders consulted for this study indicated either that their country had already legislation in place that allowed automatic recognition, or approved initiatives towards automatic recognition - or were in the process of adopting such measures. However, most of these legislations focus on higher education. Among Member States, only 12 fulfil the definition of the Council Recommendation overall according to multiple assessment criteria, whereas three did not have or do not plan any change in national legislation to move towards automatic recognition.

Understanding of the concept of automatic recognition

A solid understanding of the meaning of automatic recognition is required for an appropriate implementation of the Council Recommendation. Yet, stakeholders – both in higher education and secondary education and training – lack a clear understanding of the meaning of automatic recognition as defined in the Council Recommendation, and of how it differs from other models of recognition that currently exist in the EU. The distinction between ‘automatic recognition’ and automated or simplified procedures for recognition has not always been clear to the stakeholders at the level of institutions and learners. Moreover, there has also been confusion around the difference between recognition of qualifications for general access to the next level of education, and admission to a specific programme. The evaluation survey found that more than half of the responding educational institutions either handled recognition and admission processes together or did not know if these processes were combined or separate.

Figure 1. Overview of how recognition and admission processes are handled



Source: ICF/3s survey, N=233

Application of automatic recognition at institutional level

While progress has been made in the implementation of the Council Recommendation at system-level, this progress may be hampered by the decentralised decision-making on recognition in most countries. The survey of institutions conducted for the evaluation found that there were inconsistent answers in nearly all countries as to where decision-making responsibilities lie or how they are applied. This points to either a lack of understanding or inconsistent systems in place for automatic recognition in practice, even in countries where the relevant regulations exist.

Automatic recognition of learning periods abroad

Most transfers of credits relating to learning periods abroad are recognised within the framework of Erasmus+ mobilities. The Erasmus+ quality framework requires a pre-approval of courses or definition of learning outcomes for the learning period abroad. The use of learning agreements prior to the departure of the learner should ensure the recognition of the learning outcomes acquired during the period abroad. The recognition rate of higher education student mobility for studies under the Erasmus+ programme 2014-2020 is high on average, although still far from universal (84.4%). Furthermore, significant differences among countries remain. For upper secondary education and training, while there is no available data on the recognition rate, the evaluation survey found that 73% of the responding educational institutions indicated giving automatic recognition of outcomes of learning periods abroad.

Some countries consider the recognition of learning outcomes from learning periods abroad outside Erasmus+ difficult due to a high diversity of recognition procedures and lack of formalisation (e.g. standardised application forms or guidelines). The research also shows that the matching of curriculum subjects is still the standard practice in many Member States in upper secondary education and training, limiting comparability and hindering automatic recognition.

Lack of recognition continues to be a substantial barrier to mobility. However, less than half of the educational institutions responding to the evaluation survey indicated that there have been improvements in their institution's recognition practices in the last 3-4 years.

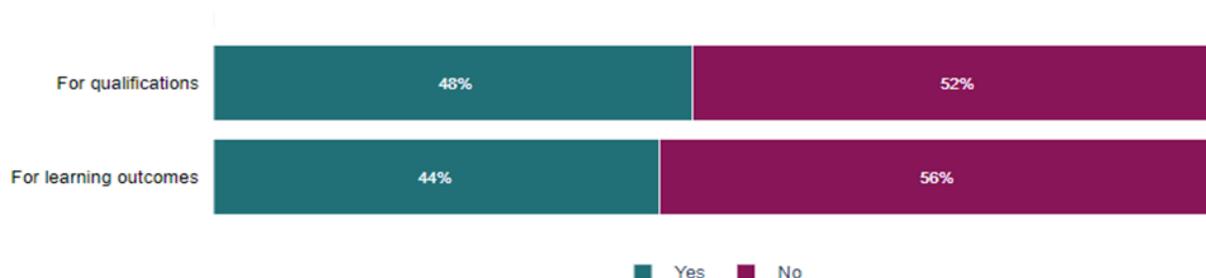
Improvement of the evidence-base and capacity building towards achieving Automatic Mutual Recognition

Systems for the collection of data of recognition decisions remain overall limited and fragmented across EU27, making it difficult for Member States to understand the trends and extent of automatic recognition.

Less than half of the institutions responding to the evaluation survey reported keeping records of recognition decisions for EU27 Member States in the case of qualifications. For

learning outcomes, 44% reported keeping records of the recognition decisions for the EU27.

Figure 2. Share of Higher Education Institutions and Secondary education institutions reporting to keep records of recognition decisions on qualifications and learning outcomes obtained in other EU Member States



Source: ICF/3s survey, N=648

Central databases on recognition decisions exist only in a handful of Member States. However, the data they contain do not specify whether the decision was automatic. Very few national databases are accessible to the public, and there is limited analytical use of the data on recognition decisions made for evaluation and dissemination purposes at the national level.

While National Academic Recognition Centres (NARICs) play an important role in facilitating automatic mutual recognition across the EU, their capacity has broadly stayed the same after the Council Recommendation - and they often lack enough resources for the additional communication needs generated by it. The function of National Academic Recognition Centres is in most cases limited to information provision, and there are shortcomings in resources available to NARICs for providing training to educational institutions on automatic recognition who, in many cases, are autonomous in their processes for issuing recognition decisions.

Nevertheless, good practices in digitalisation – which can help to reduce the administrative and financial burden for users – and in dissemination exist in some countries. EU-funded projects have also contributed to enhancing digitalisation, dissemination and awareness.

Challenges to progress in the practical application of automatic recognition

The implementation of the Council Recommendation across the EU is hampered by the following challenges:

- diversity in decision-making processes across Member States with regard to recognition, partly explained by the autonomy given to educational institutions in issuing recognition decisions in nearly all Member States;
- lack of clarity about automatic recognition at institutional level, including lack of differentiation between access to higher education and admission to a specific programme;
- cultural resistance within educational institutions;
- limited use of learning agreements ensuring recognition of learning periods abroad among educational institutions from different Member States outside of the Erasmus+ programme; and
- lack of monitoring and evaluation of recognition decisions.



Summary of the ‘traffic light’ assessment

The ‘traffic light’ assessment of progress was based on the seven criteria outlined in Table 1 on the next page.

It shows that a good level of implementation has been achieved with regards to the implementation of European and Bologna transparency tools across the EU.

There is more variation in compliance with the criterion on capacity building and support for institutions and agencies, through national guidance and training for education institutions, dissemination of information by National Academic Recognition Information Centres, and digitalisation of system-level recognition. Monitoring and evaluation of recognition decisions also registered overall limited progress.

With regards to system level automatic recognition of higher education qualifications, overall, the trend is that automatic recognition is still primarily governed by other models such as bilateral and multilateral agreements or de facto recognition, which do not meet the requirements of the Council Recommendation. Automatic recognition of upper secondary education and training qualifications is more developed, although there is still substantial room for improvement in many countries.

The automatic recognition of the outcomes of learning periods abroad, more specifically outside of European programmes such as Erasmus+, has shown limited progress, particularly in upper secondary education and training. Procedures in this regard often vary between institutions and are not consistent.

Table 1. Comparative assessment of EU Member States' progress towards meeting the 2018 Council Recommendation

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

Colour code: green = full completion/implementation, light green = near completion/implementation, yellow = moderate completion/implementation, orange = limited completion/implementation, red = no completion/implementation

Criterion 5 (PL) and Criterion 7 (FR): traffic light assessment differs for general Upper secondary education and VET.



Suggestions for improvement

Based on the study findings, the following proposals for further improvement have been identified:

Proposal 1: Further efforts are needed to ensure clear understanding among stakeholders at institutional level of the meaning of automatic recognition as defined in the Council Recommendation, how it relates to other policy developments in the area of recognition, and the specific added value of automatic recognition vis-à-vis other models of recognition. Particular progress is required at the upper secondary education and training level, where some of the benefits of automatic recognition can be more difficult for institutions to identify.

Proposal 2: Moving the competence for automatic recognition to a system-level body (e.g. along the lines of established practices for the Directive on mutual recognition of professional qualifications) merits consideration to improve implementation of the Council Recommendation, and clarify decision-making responsibilities. A less fragmented system would also create efficiencies and avoid duplication of efforts. This system would not detract from the autonomy of educational institutions in making admission decisions.

Proposal 3: The links between recognition and internal and external quality assurance need to be enhanced so that recognition procedures become a more important and visible part in quality assurance processes, including the correct use of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), in line with the 2015 ECTS Users' Guide.

Proposal 4: Use of digital tools for recognition, including the further development of the Europass Platform, needs to be further explored. Continue the process towards greater digitalisation in recognition also at national level to increase efficiencies, for example: enabling digital submission and management of documentation and underlying data; or providing information and advice through the use of chatbots based on advanced language models. Supporting the development of well-functioning and quick authenticity verification systems for qualifications and learning outcomes is important, as unduly long qualification verification processes would be incoherent with and even defeat the purpose of automatic recognition.

Proposal 5: Further actions and tools to improve the recognition of longer periods abroad in Secondary Education Institutions, in particular VET institutions, should be priorities. These could include greater involvement of the sector in discussions around recognition, further support for mobility actions to develop mutual trust, better embedding of this type of periods within their curricula, more intensive guidance (including on the use of learning outcomes), and further staff development.

Proposal 6: There is a need to make young people, in particular those who are not mobile, aware of opportunities for automatic mutual recognition to alleviate their fear of non-recognition and further stimulate mobility. Educational institutions should take more decisive collective action to promote this information and move towards automatic recognition, as this will ultimately reduce their administrative burden associated with recognition processes.

Proposal 7: There needs to be increased investment in the capacity of National Academic Recognition Centres to develop automatic recognition services and better contribute to the implementation of the Council Recommendation, as current levels of staffing are insufficient to fulfil the responsibilities allocated to them by the Council Recommendation.

Proposal 8: Work towards the centralisation of data collection systems at the national level while defining clear and common monitoring indicators for collecting data on recognition cases is an important step towards facilitating the implementation of automatic recognition as per the Council Recommendation.

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