



## **EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition**

### **Report by the EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition**

**To present to Ministers of the European Area of Higher Education  
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***A Bachelor is a Bachelor is a Bachelor.***

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**Automatic recognition of a degree leads to the automatic right of an applicant holding a qualification of a certain level to be considered for entry to a programme of further study in the next level in any other EHEA-country (access).**

## Executive Summary

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Increasing numbers of students are going abroad for credit- and/or degree-mobility in a rapidly internationalising higher education world. Mobility improves the quality of higher education systems and raises graduate's skills levels, improves their employability and contributes to filling gaps in the labour market. However, the smooth recognition of academic qualifications as a necessary condition for academic mobility and for the functioning of the Bologna Process as a whole is not yet ensured, and procedures for the academic recognition of qualifications are often lengthy and burdensome. It is often far from certain if the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC)<sup>1</sup> are correctly applied by credential evaluators in higher education institutions (HEIs) across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and the potential of the Bologna mobility tools is not yet fully exploited for recognition purposes.

Aware of the importance of improving recognition processes, the EHEA Ministers committed themselves to the long-term goal of automatic recognition (AR) of comparable academic degrees in the Bucharest Communiqué, adopted in April 2012. Automatic recognition of a degree should lead to the automatic right of an applicant holding a qualification of a certain level to be considered for entry to a programme of further study in the next level in any other EHEA-country (access<sup>2</sup>), and comprises tangible benefits for students and HEIs alike.

The Ministers proposed that a Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition (PfG) of 10 countries (Belgium [French Community], Belgium [Flemish Community], Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden and The Netherlands), supported by the European Commission, would explore ways to achieve this. The PfG carried out its work over nearly two years from end-2012 to mid-2014, exploring ways on how to achieve automatic recognition through a series of regional initiatives, by consulting a large number of stakeholders, and through the analysis of existing recognition practices across European HEIs with a survey.

The group agreed that the automatic recognition of qualifications at system level, and in particular for the purpose of accessing the next cycle, was the most promising path to follow. Through its work, the PfG concluded that automatic recognition is possible, and is convinced that a qualification which follows the EHEA three-cycle structure from one EHEA country should be recognised at the same level anywhere else in the EHEA.

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<sup>1</sup> Principles of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region; developed by the Council of Europe and UNESCO, 1997 (LRC):

- Holders of qualifications issued in one country shall have adequate access to an assessment of these qualifications in another country.
- The responsibility to demonstrate that an application does not fulfil the relevant requirements lies with the body undertaking the assessment.
- Each country shall recognise qualifications – whether for access to higher education, for periods of study or for higher education degrees – as similar to the corresponding qualifications in its own system unless it can show that there are substantial differences between its own qualifications and the qualifications for which recognition is sought.

(<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/165.htm>)

<sup>2</sup> Access (The right of qualified candidates to apply and to be considered for admission to higher education) needs to be clearly distinguished from admission, which is "the act of, or system for, allowing qualified applicants to pursue studies in higher education at a given institution and/or a given programme" (definitions from the LRC).

To support Ministers in achieving the long-term goal of automatic recognition, the PfG has formulated a number of recommendations, which help to set out the path for EHEA countries to arrive at automatic recognition. In particular the PfG **recommends** to EHEA Ministers

- **to ensure that qualifications from other EHEA countries are recognised on an equal level with domestic qualifications, for example through enacting specific legislation to achieve this objective.**

In addition, the PfG proposes to EHEA Ministers to implement a number of smaller steps as a starting point to arrive at automatic recognition. In this regard, the PfG **recommends** to EHEA Ministers<sup>3</sup>

- **to review national legislation which obliges HEIs to primarily apply formal and quantifiable criteria (length of studies/number of credits) in recognition processes; to modify such legislation in case it violates the principles of the LRC; and to seek to simplify national regulation surrounding recognition practices,**
- **to advise credential evaluators in HEIs on properly implementing the LRC and on increasing the use of qualitative criteria in recognition processes, such as the achievement of Learning Outcomes, through wide dissemination of targeted information, and the application of the Recommendation on the use of Qualifications Frameworks in the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications 2013 in order to draw more effectively on the potential of qualifications frameworks for recognition,**
- **to endorse the recently published EAR-HEI Manual as a reference framework to guide recognition processes,**
- **to ensure that the four-month maximum time limit for recognition processes foreseen by the LRC framework is adhered to in practice and to consider further reducing the maximum time limit for recognition decisions through suggesting a revised Recommendation on Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications to the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee,**
- **to explore possible improvements to recognition processes through the use of modern technologies and through making use of the expertise within the extensive network of ENIC-NARICs,**
- **to oblige competent recognition bodies to implement a system of free internal and/or external appeals to recognition decisions across the EHEA and to ensure that appeals to recognition decisions are decided within a reasonable time limit,**
- **to support the role of Quality Assurance assessing recognition processes in HEIs and to commit to strengthening Quality Assurance in general through, *inter alia*, supporting the implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR),**

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<sup>3</sup> These recommendations and the reasoning behind them are explained in detail in the 'Conclusions & recommendations'-chapter (p.20).

- **to increase the usefulness of the Diploma Supplement for recognition decisions mandating a working group to review the template, promoting a DS model which is based more closely on Learning Outcomes,**
- **to explore the potential for system level automatic recognition on a regional basis with like-minded partner countries.**

Through the implementation of these measures, the PfG is confident that recognition processes will become better, faster, and fairer. In addition, these steps can ultimately lead to enacting national legislation fully implementing automatic recognition, based on a general recognition, trust-based approach, thereby moving from individual to system-level recognition of academic qualifications across the EHEA and fully achieving the long-term goal of automatic recognition, set by Ministers in 2012.



## 1. Introduction - Purpose, aim and organisation of the group

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*"We are determined to remove outstanding obstacles hindering effective and proper recognition and are willing to work together towards the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees, building on the tools of the Bologna framework, as a long-term goal of the EHEA."<sup>4</sup>*

- EHEA Ministerial Conference Bucharest 2012: Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area (Bucharest Communiqué)

### Recognition at the centre of the European Higher Education Area

In a rapidly changing and internationalising higher education world, increasing numbers of students are going abroad for credit- and/or degree-mobility. In achieving the Bologna and EU goal that 20% of graduates should have had a mobility experience, both credit and full degree mobility within the EHEA will further increase. Greater academic mobility also improves the quality of higher education by fostering cooperation – and competition – between institutions and systems; it raises graduates' skills levels and improves their employability by offering a better range of academic choices. In addition, it contributes to filling gaps in the labour market. However, as already stated in the 2012 Report by the EHEA Working Group on Recognition, the smooth recognition of academic qualifications is a necessary condition for academic mobility and for the Bologna Process as a whole<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, the goal of greater and easier mobility between and into countries of the EHEA must be supported by political initiatives improving recognition practices.

At the moment, procedures for academic recognition of qualifications are often lengthy and burdensome, requiring a large variety of documents to be submitted and steps to be undertaken.<sup>6</sup> In the majority of EHEA-countries, HEIs take the final decision on the recognition of foreign qualifications for the purpose of further studies – and in almost all cases on the key point of admission to a particular course of study. While this is clearly in line with the need for HEIs to retain considerable autonomy in the way they operate, there is often little in the way of accountability in this area. This means that it is often not clear

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<sup>4</sup> EHEA Ministerial Conference Bucharest 2012, *Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area* (Bucharest Communiqué):

*"Fair academic and professional recognition, including recognition of non-formal and informal learning, is at the core of the EHEA. It is a direct benefit for students' academic mobility, it improves graduates' chances of professional mobility and it represents an accurate measure of the degree of convergence and trust attained. We are determined to remove outstanding obstacles hindering effective and proper recognition and are willing to work together towards the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees, building on the tools of the Bologna framework, as a long-term goal of the EHEA. We therefore commit to reviewing our national legislation to comply with the Lisbon Recognition Convention. We welcome the European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual and recommend its use as a set of guidelines for recognition of foreign qualifications and a compendium of good practices, as well as encourage higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies to assess institutional recognition procedures in internal and external quality assurance."*

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/\(1\)/Recognition%20WG%20Report.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/(1)/Recognition%20WG%20Report.pdf); p.12: *"...if recognition does not work properly across the EHEA, several important goals of the Bologna Process such as the Bologna degree system, joint degrees, mobility of students and academics, integrating lifelong learning into higher education and others will become just a lip service."*

<sup>6</sup> Results of the PfG's HEI survey (see p.15-16).

whether the principles of the LRC<sup>7</sup> are being followed in practice, the process being left entirely in the hands of the individual institution and even in the hands of a single individual. This increases the risk that decisions are taken without applying the principles of the LRC<sup>8</sup> and without using the other tools developed for facilitating recognition.

It was against this background that the Bucharest Communiqué, adopted in April 2012, committed the countries participating in the EHEA to the long-term goal of automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees. Automatic recognition of a degree should lead to the automatic right of an applicant holding a qualification of a certain level to be considered for entry to a programme of further study in the next level in any other EHEA-country (access)<sup>9</sup> and comprises tangible benefits for students and HEIs alike:

- For students, automatic recognition means simpler access to a broader range of international study and research options, allowing them to acquire competences, knowledge and skills, and strive for academic excellence in the studies that most fit their academic profile and interests. Furthermore, automatic recognition has the potential of reducing the timeframe needed for selection-decisions, and encourages academic mobility throughout the EHEA, as the fear of not getting recognition of a degree as one of the main factors discouraging students from pursuing an entire degree abroad falls away.
- For institutions, automatic recognition means that they have to use less of their capacity on processing and taking access-decisions, but they can concentrate fully on selecting and admitting the best students to their programmes from an expanded pool of excellent (international) candidates. Therefore, automatic recognition results in an increase in the quality of students and programmes, and does not go against HEIs' autonomy, as they are still able to decide on the key point of admission.

Having these potential benefits of automatic recognition in mind, the Ministers proposed that a Pathfinder Group of countries would explore ways to achieve this.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region; developed by the Council of Europe (CoE) and UNESCO, 1997: <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/165.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Principles of the LRC (inter alia):

- Holders of qualifications issued in one country shall have adequate access to an assessment of these qualifications in another country.
- The responsibility to demonstrate that an application does not fulfil the relevant requirements lies with the body undertaking the assessment.
- Each country shall recognise qualifications – whether for access to higher education, for periods of study or for higher education degrees – as similar to the corresponding qualifications in its own system unless it can show that there are substantial differences between its own qualifications and the qualifications for which recognition is sought.

<sup>9</sup> Access (The right of qualified candidates to apply and to be considered for admission to higher education) needs to be clearly distinguished from admission, which is "the act of, or system for, allowing qualified applicants to pursue studies in higher education at a given institution and/or a given programme" (definitions from the LRC).

<sup>10</sup> In terms of the Bologna architecture, the PfG is, together with the Peer Learning and Peer Review Initiative, an Out of the box-initiative and not a separate Working Group.

In establishing this long-term goal and setting-up the PfG, Ministers understood that the creation of greater trust was the key, and that trust is frequently more easily achieved in more intimate gatherings, which allow deeper and more intense exchanges. Therefore, the PfG consists of the representatives of 10 countries (Belgium [French Community], Belgium [Flemish Community], Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden and The Netherlands) willing to explore ways of how to achieve automatic recognition.

The European Commission, which had supported the proposal to add the reference to automatic recognition to the Bucharest Communiqué, agreed to facilitate the work of the group. In addition, the group's work was supported through the input of a variety of stakeholders, including HEIs, the Erasmus Student Network (ESN)<sup>11</sup> and the European Students' Union (ESU).

Even though experience shows that recognition problems can be a key challenge in both transitions from Bachelor to Master level as well as from Master to Doctoral level<sup>12</sup>, for the purpose of focusing its work the PfG decided to concentrate on the transition from Bachelor to Master level. To this end, the PfG regularly met to discuss experiences with regional initiatives in the field of (automatic) recognition, gathered evidence on recognition practices involving external stakeholders and their views on automatic recognition, and drafted this report, outlining the group's work as well as its recommendations to the BFUG to arrive at the long-term goal of automatic recognition.

The group agreed that the automatic recognition of qualifications at system level, and in particular for the purpose of accessing the next cycle, was the most promising path to follow. Therefore, the PfG concluded that a first step towards achieving automatic academic recognition in the future should be to recommend to Ministers to institute general, system-level recognition amongst EHEA countries: A Bachelor/Master qualification which follows the EHEA three-cycle structure from an EHEA country should be recognised as a Bachelor/Master qualification anywhere else in the EHEA.

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## 2. Self-reflection on the group's work

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The PfG perceived its modus operandi as very positive, based on a clear task and with a tangible result. Having underlined that automatic recognition is possible and having drafted clear recommendations to EHEA Ministers, the group perceives its work in the current format as complete. The group believes that the format of its work, involving a limited number of like-minded countries willing to take concrete steps in order to make progress in a specific field, could be a model for more focused work in the Bologna context around the same action line of problem → task → action → results.

In addition, based on the experiences made, the PfG believes that regional cooperation is a useful way forward, provided that the results are transferable and non-exclusive.

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<sup>11</sup> The quotes in text boxes are a collection of statements by individual students who encountered recognition problems, which illustrates the current – problematic – situation. They were taken from an ESN-survey (see p. 14 for further details and results of the survey).

<sup>12</sup> In contrast, the recognition of doctorates for access to post-doctoral positions appeared not to present a problem in any of the participating countries.

### 3. Activities of the PfG on automatic recognition

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In total, the PfG met 6 times from the end of 2012 to mid-2014. At its **first meeting** on 15 October 2012, the PfG defined the aim and purpose of its work as well as the working modalities of the group. It agreed that barriers to automatic recognition should be dismantled through a series of regional initiatives, identifying elements which could be transferred to other countries for strengthening cross border cooperation and which could be transferred to the EHEA as a whole. These **regional initiatives** were exploring ways of achieving automatic recognition

- in the **Benelux** countries
- between **Nordic and Baltic** countries
- between **Germany** and neighbouring German-speaking countries and/or regions
- in the **South-East Europe Region**

At its first meeting, the group also agreed to focus on the recognition of qualifications at system level, namely on the level of a Bachelor-degree (first cycle of the EHEA-QF and level 6 of the EQF-LLL) and a Master-degree (second cycle of the EHEA-QF and level 7 of the EQF-LLL), and concluded to focus its further work on the automatic recognition of generic levels of qualifications by moving away from individual to system-level recognition, placing students on an equal footing irrespective of the country of origin of their degree.

While there was consensus in the group that the autonomy of individual HEIs must be respected when it comes to the admission-decision, the PfG concluded nonetheless that a change in policy attitudes, a change in practice, and a change in culture across HEIs was a prerequisite to arrive at automatic recognition.

*"Why is there still a requirement of nostrification of my qualification in my country if it is an EU country and I have an EU degree?"*

- ESN-survey quote

The group underlined the importance of Quality Assurance (QA) providing the guarantee of a minimum quality level as a necessary condition for automatic recognition, but stressed that QA itself was not sufficient and that other prerequisites had to be fulfilled as well.

Even though recognition is also strongly connected with labour market issues, the group decided to concentrate its work on recognition for the purpose of further studies (academic recognition), in line with the mandate under the Bucharest Communiqué.

At its **second meeting** on 18 February 2013, the PfG further elaborated the problem definition guiding its work and agreed to consult a set of stakeholders to gather more relevant data. In addition, increasing the effectiveness of the Bologna tools for recognition as well as the potential use of information and communications technology (ICT) tools for recognition practices were discussed. Furthermore, stakeholders from HEIs were invited to present their perspectives on recognition to the group in order to properly take account of the institutional perspective in the group's work, and they gave examples of cooperation between HEIs leading to consistency in level recognition at the involved HEIs.

At the **third meeting** of the PfG on 31 May 2013, Denmark presented a **survey of the PfG's ENIC-NARIC** on each country's recognition standards for each other's general degree types, which showed that countries generally recognised professionally-oriented and academic Bachelor degrees (but at times requiring a bridging programme to move from a professionally-oriented Bachelor programme to an academic Master programme), regardless

of whether the country operates a binary or unitary system. The greatest difficulties presented the recognition of Master's degrees, given the variety in load of study (1 to 2 year Masters or advanced Masters requiring a prior Master qualification and a load of study varying from 60 to 90/120 ECTS); however, the group nevertheless concentrated its work on the automatic recognition of Bachelor degrees as 1) the number of potentially degree-mobile students are larger on Master's level than on PhD-level and 2) the findings and recommendations of the group are transferable and equally apply to the recognition of

*"The grades of my foreign degree were not correctly changed into the national standard."*

- ESN-survey quote

Master's degrees. The results of this survey were complemented by the results of the PfG's own HEI survey (for detailed results see below under 'fifth meeting'), which showed that the length of studies played an equally important role in the transition from Bachelor to Master level. As previously assumed by the group, no systemic problems were evident for the recognition of PhD-level qualifications.

At the same meeting, Belgium (Flemish Community) presented a **survey of the PfG countries' implementation of the main Bologna tools**, examining which tools and structures (e.g. Qualifications Frameworks, Diploma Supplement, European Credit Transfer System credits, Learning Outcomes, Quality Assurance, the Lisbon Recognition Convention, a public higher education register, programme structure, etc.) were used for recognition processes, which confirmed that the legal frameworks and tools to support automatic recognition existed in the PfG-countries. The group concluded therefore that a shift to automatic recognition would not place an unreasonable burden on countries and institutions and continued to concretise its aim on achieving automatic recognition. As the survey did, however, not show how the relevant Bologna tools for recognition were applied in practice, it was agreed to further investigate how they were used by HEIs through the means of a survey, designed by the PfG and surveying HEIs' policies and procedures for academic recognition regarding access to Master's level with a Bachelor degree.

At its **fourth meeting** on 27 September 2013, the PfG intensively discussed the new Belgian (Flemish Community) higher education law of 10 July 2013, which introduced automatic recognition and provided for two distinct possibilities to this end: level recognition (e.g. Associate Degree, Bachelor, Master, and Doctor) and full specific recognition (e.g. Master of Science in Mathematics), leaving the choice to the applicant.

In Belgium (Flemish Community), the criteria for level recognition are:

- An existing QA system in the country of origin of the degree which is in line with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, as well as the proof that it guarantees the achievement of the Learning Outcomes;
- A higher education programme structure in line with the EHEA structure and compatible with and integrated in a National Qualifications Framework (NQF);
- A NQF as part of the overarching QF of the EHEA.

For full specific recognition, the above conditions must be fulfilled plus a comparison of the Learning Outcomes of the specific programmes undertaken.

Furthermore, where a programme leading to an Associate degree, a Bachelor degree or a Master degree is accredited by an accreditation organisation listed in the European Quality

Assurance Register for Higher Education, a foreign degree resulting out of such a programme is automatically considered, in general or specific, equal to an Associate degree, a Bachelor or a Master degree in Belgium (Flemish Community). HEIs, when assessing applications by students with foreign degrees, are under a legal obligation to process these applications according to the new higher education law. Through these clear criteria in place, it is easy for potentially mobile students to know exactly - before they apply for a study programme abroad - if the degree they aspire to will be recognised at home later.

In addition to the Belgian (Flemish Community) law on automatic recognition, the group discussed evidence showing that the Diploma Supplement, as one of the most important transparency tools, was rarely used by students and employers for recognition purposes and therefore needed more clarity and recipient orientation to become more useful in recognition processes.

At the same meeting, the results of the ESN and ESU stakeholder consultations were presented to the group – both organisations had conducted surveys, which showed that students perceived recognition procedures as problematic:

The **ESU-survey** was carried out in the framework of the main research survey of the Student Advancement of Graduates' Employability project and aimed to collect National Unions of Students' (NUS) views on recognition.

It established that:

- there was significant support by NUS for implementing automatic recognition,
- NUS were being asked for help by students regarding recognition problems,
- students mainly needed support due to long administrative procedures for recognition.

The **survey by ESN**, conducted between August and December 2013, received a total of nearly 14.000 responses, including by 3.428 degree-mobile students, and concluded that fear of not getting recognition was a barrier to degree-mobility, that 9% of (degree-)mobile students had problems with recognition<sup>13</sup>, and that the main problem for recognition were long administrative procedures, followed by the degree not meeting all conditions for recognition, high administrative costs, and the non-existence of a degree in the country in which recognition for it was sought.

In addition, ESN used a part of the survey to collect individual students' statements as regards recognition problems, which serve as good examples to illustrate the current – problematic – situation:

- *"I went to Denmark to do my further education instead as they recognised my Bachelor."*
- *"The grades in the country of further studies did not match the ones from the country I came from, and a one year master programme is not valued enough there."*
- *"Why is there still a requirement of nostrification of my qualification in my country if it is an EU country and I have an EU degree."*
- *"The grades of my foreign degree were not correctly changed into the national standard."*

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<sup>13</sup> While this percentage number does not seem very high at a first glance, given the potentially severe consequences for students of not having their degrees recognised, the survey indicates a clear need for action.



- *"Differences in ECTS-points-amount. My university degree was only recognised as a University of Applied Sciences degree, and not as a full university course."*
- *"In order to get my degree recognised, I needed to receive a very specific and difficult to obtain court stamp."*
- *"The university would not allow me to continue my studies there as the degree I applied for was considered a 5-year degree there."*

In addition to clearly demonstrating the strong need for an improvement of the current situation, ESN underlined that students' expectations towards policy-makers as regards improving recognition processes were very high: Students do not understand and are not ready to accept that the recognition of their degrees presents such a difficulty at a time when the EHEA is at an advanced stage, and students have a clear expectation that higher education policy should provide solutions.

*"Differences in ECTS points amount. My university degree was only recognised as a University of Applied Sciences degree, and not as a full university course."  
- ESN-survey quote*

The PfG's **fifth meeting** was held on 6 February 2014 and resulted in a discussion on the direction of possible recommendations to the BFUG, with the group agreeing that a system-level recognition, trust-based approach connected with a strong role of Quality Assurance was the best way forward.

ESN presented the final and updated results of their survey, and the results of the **PfG's own survey of HEIs**, which was developed with the intention of gathering more information and examples on HEIs' policies and procedures for academic recognition regarding access to Master's level, were presented by Croatia. A total of 87 HEIs<sup>14</sup> from the PfG-countries responded to the survey, which showed that:

- The surveyed HEIs overly concentrate on formal and quantifiable criteria in the recognition procedure (by comparing nominal duration, amount of credits), attributing less importance to qualitative and knowledge-based ones; especially the length of studies/the number of credits are the predominant criteria used by HEIs when it comes to assessing a degree.<sup>15</sup> The PfG recognises that such institutional practices are not necessarily a result of a formalistic interpretation of the concept of substantial differences on an institutional level, but can also be the result of national legislation requiring HEIs to focus on these quantitative criteria in recognition processes;
- In only one quarter of responding HEIs is the Diploma Supplement sufficient on its own to permit the assessment of foreign qualifications;

<sup>14</sup> 42 from Germany, 17 from Croatia, 5 from Denmark, 4 from Sweden, 4 from Belgium (Flemish Community), 4 from Estonia, 3 from The Netherlands and 8 from Slovenia. However, after the survey was closed and the analysis already undertaken, a few more replies were received from Luxembourg and Slovenia, as well as a compilation of replies from Belgium (French Community). In order to make use of these replies as well, they were included in the qualitative analysis.

<sup>15</sup> This means in practice that a Bachelor degree itself in a given subject is not considered sufficient to be considered for admission to Master level studies in the same subject, but that only a Bachelor degree of at least the same duration/comprising at least the same number of credits as a Bachelor in the country of the admitting institution is, thereby discriminating for formal reasons against students who might nevertheless have achieved the required Learning Outcomes.

- Only a little more than half of the HEIs surveyed always or often use National and/or European Qualifications Frameworks to assess foreign qualifications;
- Nearly one third of the surveyed HEIs have not yet put in place Quality Assurance for recognition processes;
- The timeframe needed for taking recognition decisions varies broadly, and can last up to 6 months;
- In most HEIs, appeals against negative recognition decisions are possible, which are either internal, external or a combination of both (i.e. an external appeal following a negatively decided internal one). However, in nearly one fifth (17%) of surveyed HEIs they are not free of charge;
- The acceptance rate of domestic applications (applications with a Bachelor-degree from a specific country to a Master-programme in the same country) is generally higher than the acceptance rate of EHEA-applications (applications with a 'foreign' degree awarded in another EHEA-country). The PfG believes that the long-term goal should be an equal, non-discriminatory acceptance rate for both domestic and EHEA-applications, and making recognition processes fairer is a necessary precondition to achieve this.

*"In order to get my degree recognised, I needed to receive a very specific and difficult to obtain court stamp."*

- ESN-survey quote

In addition to discussing the survey results and its implications, the group considered possible participation in the Erasmus+ Key Action 3: Prospective initiatives call, providing funding for policy experimentations trialling improved recognition.

The **sixth meeting of the PfG** on 15 May 2014 was mainly used to discuss the report to the BFUG and the recommendations it should contain in further detail. In addition, the PfG countries provided updates of the ongoing work in the regional initiatives, while the European Commission reported back from the BFUG meeting in Athens and the group discussed the proposed European Approach to Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, which was designed as a response to the increasing number and importance of joint programmes across the EHEA and the problems connected to their Quality Assurance, including for recognition. It was agreed at this meeting that the work of the PfG can be completed with the finalisation of the report and that no further meetings had to be foreseen.



#### 4. Results of the regional initiatives

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In the following section the activities and the results of the regional initiatives initiated between the pathfinder-countries and exploring ways to achieving automatic recognition are detailed.

The regional initiatives have clearly shown that automatic recognition can be taken further in specific regional contexts where a large degree of trust is already present, often due to an already well-established practice of cross-border cooperation and at times complemented by a similarity of language and higher education systems. However, the regional initiatives have also shown that automatic recognition between larger numbers of countries, and even system-level automatic recognition, is possible once the first hurdles have been overcome by a mixture of political willingness and targeted cooperation.

At the time of the finalisation of this report, these regional initiatives are still on-going. Therefore, while many of the lessons learnt and good practices of regional cooperation could already be used for the recommendations contained in the report, the initiatives might still lead to further results in the future and should therefore be continuously monitored.

**Benelux:** Benelux is an inter-governmental cooperation between Belgium, The Netherlands and Luxembourg. On the 7th of November 2012, Benelux started - on initiative of Flanders and with the support of the Benelux Secretariat-General - to discuss the automatic academic recognition at generic level of HE degrees within the Benelux partners, as a possible way to achieve a smooth and fair academic recognition of foreign qualifications to enable mobility.

The three communities of Belgium, The Netherlands, Luxembourg and the Benelux Secretariat-General decided at the 2nd meeting on 25th of January 2013 to organise an experts' workshop in March to collect information on the recognition of each other HE degrees, to list possible problems regarding the academic recognition of HE degrees and to offer solutions.

At the Benelux ministerial meeting in November 2013, Belgium, The Netherlands and Luxembourg have agreed to realise cross-border automatic academic recognition of HE degrees at system level. One big step has already been taken by Flanders and The Netherlands: As of the 1st of April 2014, the amended NVAO Treaty came into force declaring all Bachelor and Master degrees in Flanders and The Netherlands equal to each other.<sup>16</sup>

Automatic recognition is also an item on the working programme 2014 of Benelux. At the moment, the Benelux partners are discussing and analysing which legal format is the best way to realise such an objective. To this end, a senior officials' meeting on 1 October 2014, agreed to work towards a Benelux Decision - which is one of the legal instruments used within the Benelux cooperation - on automatic recognition. At the moment, a technical group is working on the exact text of the Decision.

**Nordic-Baltic cooperation:** The 5 Nordic NARIC Offices have in more than a decade had a very closely knit cooperation based on the Reykjavik Declaration signed by the ministers in 2004 and funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers. The declaration stipulates that the Nordic countries must strive for full mutual recognition of higher educational qualifications. The NARIC Offices have established the Nordic recognition network ([www.norric.org](http://www.norric.org)), where the countries meet on a regular basis for discussion of projects of cooperation aiming to remove barriers to recognition among the Nordic countries, as well as exchanging knowledge

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<sup>16</sup> [http://www.nvao.net/page/downloads/Protocol\\_tot\\_wijziging\\_Verdrag\\_NL-VL\\_16\\_jan\\_2013.pdf](http://www.nvao.net/page/downloads/Protocol_tot_wijziging_Verdrag_NL-VL_16_jan_2013.pdf)

of foreign non-Nordic qualifications and discussing and exchanging good practice in the principles and procedures of recognition of foreign qualifications.

Since 2004, the 3 Baltic NARICs have joint regular meetings for sharing recognition practices and discussing joint activities. On their meeting in February 2014 it was planned to review the existing agreement between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on the academic recognition of educational qualifications on the purpose to explore whether it is possible to propose a new text focused on the principles of automatic recognition. In addition, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia have recently been awarded funding under the European Commission's NARIC 2014-2016 call to analyse national recognition legislation and practices in the Baltic countries and to search for possibilities for better and quicker recognition of academic degrees, as well as to propose a revision of the existing agreement taking into account the work of the PfG.

As an offspring to the work of the pathfinder group on automatic recognition, initiatives have been taken to extend the Nordic cooperation with closer ties to the Baltic NARIC offices. A survey of recognition standards of degree types among the Nordic-Baltic Countries was initiated in spring 2013. The survey showed that a regime of full recognition of degree types existed among the Nordic-Baltic countries. What still remains to be documented and enhanced is the institutional recognition of Nordic and Baltic degrees, when students apply for recognition and admission to higher education institutions.

The Heads of Offices of the 5 Nordic and 3 Baltic NARICs have thus agreed to initiate a project targeted at developing placement recommendations (i.e. providing guidance as where to place qualifications in respect to each other) for the HEIs in the region. The project is aimed at supporting and applying knowledge for the admission decisions of the HEIs by producing short descriptions of the existing degree types of all the 8 countries and subsequently placement recommendations for the HEIs' decisions on the admission of students from other countries in the region. If the results of the survey about degree type recognition among the Nordic-Baltic countries mentioned above are verified in the project, candidates with corresponding qualifications from all the countries could thus be eligible for access to the same level in the other countries as they are in their home country.

Regarding the admission to specific study programmes, the HEIs will as always have the full autonomy to decide whether candidates fulfil the specific admission requirements for the study programmes and whether the profile of e.g. a given Bachelor degree matches the profile needed to be admitted to a specific Master level programme. The project will commence in autumn 2014.

**Germany:** Germany has explored links with neighbouring German-speaking countries (Austria, Switzerland, Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft Belgiens) in order to identify practical steps to promote more automatic recognition.

**South East Europe<sup>17</sup>:** South East European cooperation on the recognition of qualifications has progressed through various initiatives aiming to improve recognition policies and practice among the countries in the region. The most notable initiatives have been aligned to the development of national qualifications frameworks that have been recognised as a tool to improve the recognition of qualifications.

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<sup>17</sup> For the purpose of this text the term South East Europe encompasses the following countries: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo (this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence), Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia.

The first one is the Education Reform Initiative of Southern and Eastern Europe (ERI SEE) Task Force Cluster of Knowledge (TFCoK) for Development of National Qualifications Frameworks chaired by Croatia from 2010 until 2013. Removing obstacles to regional mobility through reaching an agreement on the mutual recognition of old qualifications (due to the same legacy of old diplomas) was one of the Cluster objectives.

Most recently, with the adoption of the South East Europe Strategy 2020, the TFCoK was dissolved and ERI SEE was designated for the monitoring of the implementation of the Education and Competencies dimension of the Strategy. Recognition of qualifications has been identified as one of the policy areas for regional cooperation, whereas regional cooperation shall implement the underlying principles set out in the EU HE policies with respect to developing solutions for higher education quality issues and mutual trust for the recognition of qualifications. The Council of Europe SEE Network of National Correspondents for National Qualifications Frameworks has been an additional platform for fostering cooperation in the policy area of the recognition of qualifications.

As inspired by the PfG, another initiative for regional cooperation in the field of recognition was proposed in 2013 by Slovenia and was accepted by other SEE countries which asked for formalisation of cooperation and securing sustainable funding of activities as well as to achieve more efficiency and better synergy between various initiatives. Therefore, with the objective of assuring continuity of previous actions and synergy with other regional initiatives a single Regional SEE Working Group on Recognition of Qualifications is being set up. The purpose of the SEE WG Recognition is to contribute to improved recognition of qualifications in the SEE region with the use of Bologna transparency instruments and based on increased trust in reliable quality assurance arrangements. The SEE WG Recognition will look at both academic recognition and at recognition for the purpose of employment in another country.

With a view to being in line with the overall task of the PfG, the SEE WG Recognition will explore the potential of improving academic recognition of Bachelor and Master degrees towards possible automatic recognition. While not cutting across the autonomy of institutions to make decisions about admitting individual students, the possibilities will be explored to grant an individual the automatic right to be considered (though not necessarily admitted) for entry to a programme of further study at the next level in another country. In addition, cross border quality assurance will be discussed and the possible effects it might have on recognition (possible automatic recognition at the system level).

At the time of finalisation of this report, Croatia is about to introduce automatic recognition of degrees for the purpose of further studies. The draft law, on which stakeholder consultations have taken place, already contains provisions which reflect the policy recommendations from the PfG.

Serbia and Macedonia have agreed on a bilateral treaty on automatic recognition, which awaits ratification by both parliaments, and which will simplify the procedures in place.

Slovenia has implemented a system of automatic recognition for the purpose of employment in non-regulated professions. While recognition for employment in a non-regulated sector is not compulsory, the non-legally binding assessment document (opinion) issued by the Slovenian ENIC-NARIC centre can nevertheless be helpful for job-seekers on the Slovenian labour market. This option is available both for holders of qualifications from the EHEA and for those with qualifications from elsewhere.

**Portugal:** Portugal has introduced a system of automatic recognition in 2007, which relies on the principle of mutual trust for the recognition of foreign academic degrees. In the Portuguese approach, there is a generic-level automatic recognition, whereas foreign

academic degrees of a level and nature and with objectives identical to the degrees of licenciado (Bachelor), mestre (Master) and doutor (PhD) awarded by Portuguese higher education institutions are recognised. Once recognised, the holder of the degree is entitled to all the inherent rights of the aforementioned degrees.

To this end, a Commission (Commission for the Recognition of Foreign Degrees), which is composed of representatives of HEIs (Council of Portuguese University Rectors, Coordinating Council of Higher Polytechnic Institutes and Portuguese Association of Private Higher Education) and presided over by the Director-General for Higher Education, analyses foreign higher education systems in a dynamic process and recognises, through decisions of a general nature, a number of degrees awarded by HEIs from various countries. All decisions are published in the Official Journal and on the website of the Directorate-General for Higher Education (DGES).

Subsequently, an applicant who holds a specific foreign degree which has already been recognised on a generic level by the Commission may submit an application to a public HEI or to DGES to register the degree. The registration is noted on the back of the original diploma and therefore no additional certificate is issued. This process can last up to 30 days and a maximum of 26,80€ is charged to the individual applicant.

#### **Automatic Recognition in Portugal - a good practice example**

Since 2007, a new mechanism of automatic recognition of foreign degrees was put in place as an innovative and flexible measure based on the principle of mutual trust, to avoid still existing obstacles to the free circulation of holders of foreign diplomas wishing to develop academic and/or professional activities in Portugal.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> [http://www.dges.mec.pt/en/pages/naric\\_pages/academic\\_recognition/Decree-Law341\\_2007.html](http://www.dges.mec.pt/en/pages/naric_pages/academic_recognition/Decree-Law341_2007.html)

## 5. Conclusions & recommendations

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The PfG has undertaken a comprehensive assessment of the possibility of introducing automatic recognition in the EHEA. It has done so by setting-up a series of regional initiatives, through an analysis of the legal frameworks for recognition, a survey on the use of the Bologna tools needed for automatic recognition, as well as by looking at current recognition practices across European HEIs.

Through this process, the PfG established that automatic recognition of generic levels of qualifications is needed in order to achieve the EHEA's goals: Without a general agreement on implementing automatic recognition across the EHEA, study and degree mobility will not reach the levels needed for truly enhancing the competences, knowledge, and skills of a large variety of students from across the EHEA. Automatic recognition is a necessary pre-condition for large-scale academic mobility, and must complement other internationalisation and mobility policies to guarantee their success.

Not only has the PfG clearly demonstrated the need for automatic recognition, but the group's work has also shown that it is possible. The Bologna tools needed to implement a system-level, trust-based approach of automatic recognition, in combination with a strong role of Quality Assurance, are all developed.

The PfG believes that EHEA countries should take all steps necessary to ensure that qualifications from across the EHEA are recognised on an equal level with domestic degrees. Aware of the fact that this requires political commitment across the EHEA and might require legislative change in some countries, the PfG **recommends** to EHEA Ministers

- **to ensure that qualifications from other EHEA countries are recognised on an equal level with domestic qualifications, for example through enacting specific legislation to achieve this objective.**

Despite the PfG's confidence that automatic recognition as a long-term goal of the EHEA can be achieved if the political commitment is upheld, the PfG is nevertheless aware that a change to automatic recognition can take more time. Therefore, in addition to recommending the recognition of foreign qualifications on an equal level with domestic qualifications, the PfG recommends to Ministers a number of smaller steps. The implementation of this 'policy of smaller steps' can serve as a starting point to arrive at automatic recognition, without being a substitute for it:

Regarding the criteria used for recognition purposes by credential evaluators, the PfG's evidence has shown that HEIs aspire to be open towards applicants with EHEA-degrees, but do not necessarily focus on the most suitable criteria in the recognition process to properly assess the aptitude of applicants. Formal and quantifiable criteria, such as the number of ECTS/the length of studies play the most important role, while more qualitative criteria, such as the use of Qualification Frameworks or the achievement of Learning Outcomes, are used to a lesser extent when assessing qualifications<sup>19</sup>. As these latter criteria are, however, those which are most suitable to determine if an applicant possesses the right knowledge, skills, and competences to pursue his/her studies in a given field, the PfG concluded that their use in recognition processes should be increased. This can be achieved, inter alia, by specifically

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<sup>19</sup> The EHEA Working Group on Recognition concluded already in its 2012 report (p.26) that "*an insufficient number of credits may be an indicator of a substantial difference,*" but that it not necessarily is, and that therefore "*workload should be controlled against level and learning outcomes;*"

reviewing and modifying national legislation which obliges HEIs to apply these formal criteria in their recognition processes against the principles of the LRC.

While substantial differences are differences between the foreign qualification and the national qualification that are so significant that they would most likely prevent the applicant from succeeding in the desired activity such as further study, research activities or employment, the PfG's survey on admission practices showed that HEIs' interpretation of possible substantial differences in terms of the LRC varies and is often broader than necessary. Therefore, ensuring a clearer and more unified application of the criteria of the convention is a useful intermediary step to making recognition practices better and fairer, and the PfG wants to re-affirm that the recognition of a qualification should only be refused – on the basis of a substantial difference - when this is absolutely necessary and proportionate. Therefore, the PfG **recommends** to EHEA Ministers

- **to review national legislation which obliges HEIs to primarily apply formal and quantifiable criteria (length of studies/number of credits) in recognition processes; to modify such legislation in case it violates the principles of the LRC; and to seek to simplify national regulation surrounding recognition practices,**
- **to advise credential evaluators in HEIs on properly implementing the LRC and on increasing the use of qualitative criteria in recognition processes, such as the achievement of Learning Outcomes, through wide dissemination of targeted information, and the application of the Recommendation on the use of Qualifications Frameworks in the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications 2013 in order to draw more effectively on the potential of qualifications frameworks for recognition, and**
- **to endorse the recently published EAR-HEI Manual as a reference framework to guide recognition processes<sup>20</sup>.**

Furthermore, the PfG concluded through its own survey of HEIs' recognition procedures that the timeframe needed to process recognition decisions varies strongly from institution to institution and can exceed the four-month maximum time limit foreseen by the LRC framework<sup>21</sup>. These findings were confirmed by students' consultations, with both ESN and ESU reporting that overly long administrative procedures were one of the main obstacles for (degree-)mobile students. Therefore, in view to ensure that recognition decisions are taken within a reasonable time limit and aware of the potential of modern ICT to further reduce the time needed to decide on the recognition of qualifications<sup>22</sup>, the PfG **recommends** to EHEA Ministers

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<sup>20</sup> EAR-HEI Manual – Practical guidelines for credential evaluators and admissions officers to provide fair and flexible recognition of foreign qualifications and periods of study abroad, under: <http://eurorecognition.eu/Manual/EAR%20HEI.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Paragraph 16 of the Revised Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications, adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee on 23rd June 2010: *"Applications should be processed as promptly as possible, and the time of processing should not exceed four months."*

<sup>22</sup> The rapidly changing ICT-environment has the potential of significantly reducing the time needed for recognition decisions, e.g. through using online-based platforms for the submission of applications and corresponding documents.

- **to ensure that the four-month maximum time limit for recognition processes foreseen by the LRC framework is adhered to in practice and to consider further reducing the maximum time limit for recognition decisions through suggesting a revised Recommendation on Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications to the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee.**

In addition, the PfG is convinced that modern technologies have the potential of facilitating recognition and that their use in recognition processes, already standard practice in some ENIC-NARICs, should be further increased, and therefore invites EHEA countries to explore the potential use of ICT-tools for achieving automatic recognition. Therefore, the PfG recommends to EHEA Ministers

- **to explore possible improvements to recognition processes through the use of modern technologies and through making use of the expertise within the extensive network of ENIC-NARICs,**

The PfG's HEI survey has shown that appeals against negative recognition decisions are not free of charge in nearly one fifth (17%) of surveyed HEIs and that the costs of appeals can vary strongly. To improve the accessibility of legal remedies, and thereby ensuring the rights of students as well as strengthening the correct application of the legal framework for recognition, the PfG **recommends** to EHEA Ministers

- **to oblige competent recognition bodies to implement a system of free internal and/or external appeals to recognition decisions across the EHEA and to ensure that appeals to recognition decisions are decided within a reasonable time limit.**

The PfG has concluded that internal and/or external Quality Assurance verifying recognition processes is essential for improving recognition standards. Despite the increase of the importance of QA in higher education in recent years<sup>23</sup>, the PfG's survey showed that access and admission processes are not yet assessed as part of Quality Assurance in nearly one third (29%) of surveyed HEIs. Therefore, the PfG **recommends** to EHEA Ministers

- **to support the role of Quality Assurance assessing recognition processes in HEIs<sup>24</sup> and to commit to strengthening Quality Assurance in general through, *inter alia*, supporting the implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).**

In addition, through its HEI survey, the PfG found that in only 24% of cases the Diploma Supplement (DS) is sufficient on its own to permit the assessment of a foreign qualification. HEIs reported, in particular, that the information needed for taking a recognition decision was often not included in the DS and some suggested that the DS should contain more and/or more targeted information (e.g. transcript of records, final grades, number of credits). Furthermore, HEIs responded that the content of the DS often varied from country to country,

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<sup>23</sup> See for example the European Commission's January 2014 Report on Progress in Quality Assurance in Higher Education COM(2014)29 final, under: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2014:0029:FIN:EN:PDF>

<sup>24</sup> In line with the Bucharest communiqué, recommending for quality assurance agencies "to assess institutional recognition procedures in internal and external quality assurance."

which makes it less useful as a recognition tool. Therefore, the PfG **recommends** to EHEA Ministers

- **to increase the usefulness of the Diploma Supplement for recognition decisions mandating a working group to review the template, promoting a DS model which is based more closely on Learning Outcomes.**

Given the success of the regional initiatives, which have clearly shown that automatic recognition can be more easily established in specific regional contexts where the necessary degree of trust is often already present, the PfG believes that automatic recognition on a regional basis between like-minded countries can be a useful intermediary step, notwithstanding AR on a broader geographical basis being the final aim. Therefore, the PfG **recommends** to EHEA Ministers

- **to explore the potential for system level automatic recognition on a regional basis with like-minded partner countries.**

Through the implementation of these recommendations, the PfG is confident that recognition processes will become better, faster, and fairer. In addition, these steps can ultimately lead to a system fully implementing automatic recognition, based on a general recognition, trust-based approach, thereby moving from individual to system-level recognition of academic qualifications across the EHEA and achieving the long-term goal of automatic recognition, set by Ministers in 2012.