

Automatic recognition of qualifications

The concept and what it means for universities

By Helene Peterbauer, Michael Gaebel

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European University Association asbl

Avenue de l'Yser 24 Rue du Rhône 114

1040 Brussels Case postale 3174

Belgium 1211 Geneva 3, Switzerland

+32 (0) 2 230 55 44 +41 22 552 02 96

www.eua.eu · info@eua.eu

Introduction

The concept of automatic recognition (AR)¹ has received much attention in European higher education policy circles in recent years, due to its promise of greatly facilitating recognition procedures and thus mobility. Yet AR is not yet implemented across the entire European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and understandings and approaches to it vary greatly across the region.

Automatic recognition has been implicitly at the core of the Bologna Process since its very beginning, with its vision of learning periods and qualifications being recognised systematically and without unnecessary burden throughout the EHEA, as a result of the convergence and transparency measures, including quality assurance, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the shared degree system. While in the past it was simply referred to as “recognition”, AR thus results from the Bologna Process reforms and, in a way, was intended to be “automatic” from the beginning. It is also both a condition and a means to ensure smooth student mobility.

As a concept, though, automatic recognition was introduced in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) through the [2012 Bucharest Communiqué](#), on the initiative of the European Commission. It was an attempt to enhance recognition, as the aforementioned approach did not achieve satisfactory recognition processes and levels.

Yet despite many developments and efforts since 2012, today the concept of AR remains elusive and often causes confusion and questions, especially among higher education institutions which, in many European countries, are responsible for AR processes and decisions.

This briefing thus aims to unpack the concept, its various facets and history, while also pointing out common misinterpretations. It also aims to outline various fora

and actors that have driven the development of AR, such as the European Higher Education Area, the European Commission and, more recently, the Council of Europe, as well as the policy interests behind their efforts. The briefing is primarily targeted at university leadership and management, as well as staff dealing with the practical implementation of recognition. However, it may also provide insights to anyone else interested in the topic.

While it may not appear as a core priority at present, generally policy attention – for recognition in general, and AR in particular – has grown over the past years. This is likely to continue, also in relation to matters that consider broader societal matters, such as demographic changes and skills needs. Among others, this links to increasing mobility and making it fairer and more inclusive, also in the context of the European Universities alliances, enhancing internationalisation and international attractiveness, and fostering innovation in Europe’s learning and teaching provision.

The briefing focuses on the automatic recognition of higher education qualifications, which most commonly applies when a prospective student aims to have their higher education degree recognised in another country in order to continue their studies there. AR of credits obtained during study periods abroad is a rather distinct concept and process which warrants its own briefing. AR of qualifications giving access to higher education, in contrast, is relatively new and underexplored in the EHEA. Both are thus mentioned briefly, but otherwise not covered by this briefing. Thus, unless indicated otherwise, the term “automatic recognition (AR)” in this briefing always pertains to higher education qualifications.

¹ NB, automatic recognition in the context of higher education is unrelated to AR of (selected) professional qualifications, which the EU regulates through its Directive 2005/36/EC and which is not the subject of this briefing.

Where does the term “automatic recognition” come from?

The 2012 Bucharest Communiqué provides the starting point for the concept of AR:

*We [the Ministers responsible for higher education in the EHEA countries] 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** [highlights by author], building on the tools of the Bologna framework, as a long-term goal of the EHEA. (Bucharest Communiqué, 2012, p. 4)*

The keywords here are indeed “comparable academic degrees”. The idea – then and now – being that the Bologna Process, with its three-cycle degree structure and transparency tools such as the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and qualifications frameworks, makes academic degrees comparable. Thus, it should simplify recognition processes and give students certainty that their degrees will be recognised across the EHEA.

Automatic recognition vs the Lisbon Recognition Convention

The [Lisbon Recognition Convention](#) (1997), which stipulates general and practical principles of recognition of qualifications in the European region, precedes and therefore does not include AR as a concept. However, ratification of the Convention is typically a precondition for AR.

To explore this further, the Bologna Follow-up Group established a Pathfinder Group in 2012, chaired by the European Commission and comprising experts and representatives from different EHEA countries. The Group’s report was presented

at the 2015 Yerevan Ministerial Conference. It contains a definition of AR which provides the key elements making up the concept today:

*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). [...] The [Pathfinder] group agreed that the automatic recognition of qualifications **at system level**, and in particular for the **purpose of accessing the next cycle** [both highlights by author], 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. (EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition, 2015, pp. 5 and 6)*

The Pathfinder Group concluded that the Bologna Process with its three-cycle degree structure provided a sufficient basis for the automatic recognition of “comparable academic degrees”, as envisioned by the Bucharest Communiqué. In doing so, it also coined the now commonplace short-hand explanation of AR as “a bachelor is a bachelor is a bachelor”: a student with a bachelor’s degree from a Romanian higher education institution should be able to pursue a master’s degree in France. However, AR would not guaranty admission

Automatic recognition vs automatic admission

AR only guarantees cross-border recognition of the level of a qualification, but it does not interfere with an institution’s right to conduct a separate assessment of the qualification specifically for admission purposes or to set specific admission requirements.

to a specific programme – which would be for the higher education institution to decide. It would only give the student the certainty that their application cannot be rejected on the grounds of their Romanian bachelor's degree not being considered equal to a French bachelor's degree. One could argue that this is approximately what the Bologna Process envisaged in terms of recognition from the very beginning. But under the concept of AR, this is expressed more explicitly. In addition, the distinction between system-level recognition, and institution-level admission adds detail to the approach to and process of recognition. In many systems, the recognition decision is commonly taken by the higher education institution, usually in connection with the admission decision.

The understanding of AR reached by the Pathfinder Group is still valid today, yet over time, the concept has expanded in scope. The Council of the EU's [Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad](#) (2018) fully aligns with the EHEA definition in terms of qualifications, in that it understands AR as system-level recognition of a qualification for the purpose of further study. However, it emphasises that automatic recognition should be *mutual*, i.e. a common, shared practice within the EU. It also covers qualifications giving access to higher education (e.g. school leaving qualifications) and urges member states to “make substantial progress” towards AR of access qualifications, defined as outlined below:

[A]n upper secondary education and training qualification giving access to higher education in the Member State where this qualification was granted is recognised, only for the purpose of giving access to higher education, in the other Member States, without prejudicing a higher education institution's or the competent authorities' right to set specific admission criteria for specific programmes or to check the authenticity of documents[.] (Council Recommendation, 2018, p. 3)

This was a rather bold step, as unlike in the higher education sector, AR of access qualifications is not based on a decade-long process of establishing an aligned and

transparent approach. This might explain why the implementation of this type of AR lags behind that of higher education qualifications.

In addition, the Recommendation also included AR of study periods abroad, turning the rules of the Erasmus+ programme into EU policy:

*[T]he outcomes from a learning period abroad at higher education level in one Member State are automatically and fully recognised in the others, as **agreed beforehand in a learning agreement and confirmed in the Transcript of Records** [highlights by author], in line with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System[.]* (Council Recommendation, 2018, p. 3)

Automatic recognition of study periods abroad is thus understood as based on the learning agreement and the transcript of records – fully in line with the requirements of the Erasmus+ programme – and thus protecting outgoing students from the risk of their completed credits not being recognised. This is not a new concept or requirement, since in Erasmus mobility, learning agreements were already binding documents before the Council Recommendation was issued. The practice of automatic recognition of semesters and academic years abroad has in fact been at the heart of the Bologna Process since its early days – though it has never been explicitly called automatic. Accordingly, AR of study periods abroad was quickly adopted by the Bologna Process after the launch of the 2018 Council Recommendation: both the [2020 Rome Communiqué](#) and the [2024 Tirana Communiqué](#) commit to its implementation.

In summary, rather than establishing a genuinely new concept, the Council Recommendation and EHEA Communiqués confirmed and enhanced previous understandings of and commitments to implement AR. They also highlighted persisting challenges in recognition practices, while also exploring potential solutions (such as system-level recognition of degrees), as will be outlined in the next section. The only new element here is the automatic recognition of upper secondary education certificates for accessing higher education.

The state of implementation and new developments

Since the inception of the AR concept in 2012, the EHEA appears to have made slow progress in reaching this goal. This is suggested by the Bologna Process Implementation Reports (BPIRs), which monitor progress towards achieving the EHEA's goals based on data from national systems.

A full overview of the BPIR data on AR is provided in the appendix, but here it can be briefly summarised that the data from the reports is not entirely comparable, since the number of covered systems fluctuated over the years and the criteria by which the reports try to establish whether AR is in place changed slightly. Nonetheless, there has been a slight upward movement in education systems with AR in place – from 17 systems in 2015 to 19 systems in 2024.

The various BPIR reports thus conclude that the EHEA has still not achieved its goal of establishing automatic recognition as a universal practice, at least as concerns *de jure* AR (i.e. legally required AR).

Within the EU, a similar conclusion was reached. In the period 2022-2023, an [evaluation of the 2018 Council Recommendation's implementation](#) was undertaken. The evaluation report sees considerable gaps in the implementation of the Council Recommendation and concludes that enhanced efforts should be undertaken to clarify the concept of AR. It also highlights that AR might benefit from more concerted efforts in implementing transparency tools such as ECTS and qualifications frameworks, and recommends the centralisation of AR procedures at system level as much as possible, i.e. to establish structures and resources, such as a central database of recognition decisions, to ensure that AR decisions take place at system level and in a uniform manner. In this context, the report indicates that National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (NARIC) may take on the task of centralised AR procedures to ensure consistent decision making.

These reports have regularly sparked discussions in European higher education policy circles about the sluggish progress in AR, which may have been a driving force behind the creation of bilateral and multilateral AR treaties between some countries, such as the [Benelux-Baltic Multilateral Treaty on the Automatic Recognition of](#)

[Higher Education Qualifications](#). This Treaty, in force since May 2024, builds on two prior agreements – between the Benelux countries (2015) and between the Baltic countries (2018). It commits signatory countries to grant each other AR. The treaty is now open to the accession of additional countries. Poland has recently initiated the process, while Ireland has also expressed interest. Due to its openness, this Treaty indeed has the potential of further spread the automatic recognition of higher education qualifications. However, if the circle of signatories remains small, AR may in effect remain the privilege of a selected few countries within the EHEA, of a “club within the club”, whereas AR is in fact already a commitment of the entire EHEA.

Another initiative to speed up progress towards AR has been launched by the Council of Europe. It created an Ad Hoc Working Group on Automatic Recognition (2023-2026), tasked to advise the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Education (CDEU) on the development of a Convention, a binding legal instrument. This ‘Convention on the Conditions of Transparency and Quality Assurance for Automatic Recognition of Higher Education qualifications in Europe’ (draft title) would outline the preconditions required for the effective implementation of AR across Council of Europe member states. It would oblige countries ratifying it to ensure that certain prerequisites for AR are in place at national level. Such prerequisites include long-term EHEA commitments such as the implementation of a three-cycle higher education system, national and European-level qualifications frameworks, quality assurance in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA, and the ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and its subsidiary texts, to name only a few examples. Most of these are longstanding, established commitments for all countries of the EHEA.

As a member of the Working Group and an observer in the CDEU, EUA has advocated for an approach that would support and build on, rather than compete with the Bologna Process approach. This is particularly important considering the continued confusion around the concept of AR, as concerted efforts – rather than efforts that are fragmented by several initiatives with overlapping but slightly different approaches – would have the greatest effect towards dispelling misunderstandings and driving progress.

Implications for higher education institutions

What institutions can do

The data from the BPIRs outlined above illustrates the crux of the matter: when drawing on data from the national level, *de jure* (i.e. legally cemented) implementation of AR, it appears obvious that there has been very little progress in achieving AR. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the sector simply does not have enough data to truly establish the extent of the issue, and that *de facto* AR (i.e. AR in practice, regardless of any legal requirement) implemented by individual higher education institutions may be more commonplace than the national-level overviews in the BPIRs indicate.

In addition, since many higher education institutions continue to conduct recognition as part of their admission procedures, there is typically no national, let alone European-level data available on how many negative admission decisions are caused by a lack of AR instead of other reasons, which leaves the sector in the dark on the true extent of the issue. Hence, those systems that have not formally adopted AR cannot be taken as an indication that AR, and recognition in general, does not take place.

Generally, the impression is that recognition overall has improved. However, it is difficult to demonstrate this through data. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are still differences in recognition practices between, but also within higher education institutions.

For these reasons, the current policy emphasis on AR could be an opportunity for the university sector to consider their recognition processes and practices, and try to enhance them.

There are several steps universities and their representatives, such as national rectors' conferences, can take to shed more light on the topic and tackle remaining challenges. The most urgent ones are outlined below:

1. Support the establishment of a better evidence base on recognition

A shared understanding of AR and how it is administered and implemented is important. Dialogue and cooperation between national rectors' conferences and higher education institutions with ministries and ENIC-NARIC offices may help to clarify how and to what extent AR is actually implemented, and how it could be better implemented. Such exchanges would also help to dispel misconceptions, and thereby foster broad-scale understanding and support for AR, also among staff within institutions.

European and national-level efforts to implement AR may also serve as an impetus for institutions to assess their own admission and recognition practices and to verify whether the level of qualifications from another EU or EHEA country is automatically recognised during recognition procedures. This is an area where national rectors' conferences and institutional leadership may want to investigate and take action for improvement, if needed.

Another tangible step for higher education institutions to take would be a clearer distinction between recognition and admission in their processes, which would also help to establish a clear evidence base on the reasons for which study applications are turned down. Without this kind of information it is difficult to establish just how far the EHEA really is from its goal of achieving AR.

2. Implement the 2018 Council Recommendation

The 2018 Council Recommendation calls upon EU member states to support their higher education institutions in enhancing the transparency of their education provision and recognition procedures through:

- a. *up-to-date Course Catalogue[s], with descriptions of degree programmes, single educational units and grade distribution tables;*
- b. *Diploma Supplements for all graduates, issued automatically and free of charge in a widely used language and, where possible, in digital format; and*
- c. *transparent criteria for recognition that are applied throughout each higher education institution. (Council Recommendation, 2018, p. 3)*

Institutions may thus want to pay particular attention to the state of these elements and implement national guidance on these matters, where available. National rectors' conferences, in turn, may consider whether such guidance, if not already available, could be developed in cooperation with their members and/or a responsible ministry.

3. Explore the potential benefits posed by technological advances while remaining vigilant of their threats

Automatic recognition may not necessarily require the institution to establish substantial additional infrastructure, resources or procedures since – despite a common misconception – AR does not mean automated, i.e. IT-supported recognition. In fact, AR can be an entirely pen-and-paper-based procedure. However, like in many other sectors of higher education management, technology is opening up the possibility of outsourcing some tasks within recognition procedures to artificial intelligence (AI), such as automated checks of an institution's accreditation status or, indeed, the level of a qualification.

Yet AI is also used to create fraudulent qualifications, which is why an increasing number of countries and institutions is considering counter-measures to combat education fraud. This tendency is already reflected in the Council of Europe's forthcoming Convention, which lists national-level measures against fraud as a precondition for countries to be eligible for AR. This is a clear call for countries and institutions to step up efforts to proactively tackle education fraud, in order to not jeopardise trust across higher education systems, which is a crucial precondition for AR.

All of the steps outlined above are best implemented in open dialogue and collaboration between all stakeholders. AR cannot appear out of a vacuum but is very much a concept built on trust among higher education systems. It will only succeed with an all-hands-on-deck approach.



Automatic recognition vs automated recognition vs immediate recognition

Automatic recognition “only” means that the level, quality and workload of obtained credits or a qualification are automatically recognised, i.e. accepted at face value. This process, like all recognition processes, may be automated in the sense of being digitally supported, but the automation aspect is not part of the concept of automatic recognition.

In this context, it is also important to highlight that automatic recognition does not exclude the completion of authenticity checks; a qualification may well undergo an authenticity check to rule out fraud before it is automatically recognised.

Appendix

Overview of AR scorecard results across the Bologna Process Implementation Reports (BPIR)

The BPIRs use a colour-coded system to indicate the level of implementation of AR at national level, with green signalling a high level of implementation, orange or yellow indicating some gaps, and red meaning no implementation at all. This colour-coding is reflected in the table below.

BPIR edition and page numbers	2015 BPIR (pp. 82-83)	2018 BPIR (pp. 145-149)	2020 BPIR (pp. 86-88)	2024 BPIR (pp. 75-77)
Green = highest category, equivalent to full implementation of Bologna Process commitment The text in the columns to the right indicates by which indicators this category is defined in the respective BPIR, and which countries were placed in it.	EHEA qualifications are treated in the same way as national qualifications for all 3 cycles ² in 17 systems : AD, AM, BE-FR, BG, DE, EE, FI, HR, IE, IS, LI, LT, ME, MK, NL, NO, SE	AR is in place, i.e. EHEA qualifications are recognised at system level on an equal level with comparable academic qualifications in the home country and give the right to be considered for entry to a programme of further study at the next level, plus additional conditions are met ³ in 5 systems : DE, DK, FI, NO, SE	AR is in place, i.e. EHEA qualifications are recognised at system level on an equal level with comparable academic qualifications in the home country and give the right to be considered for entry to a programme of further study at the next level in 10 systems : DE, DK, FI, FR, IT, MT, NO, PL, SE, TR	AR is in place, i.e. EHEA qualifications are recognised at system level on an equal level with comparable academic qualifications in the home country and give the right to be considered for entry to a programme of further study at the next level in 19 systems : AD, AT, CH, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, GR, HR, IT, KZ, MT, NO, PL, SE, SM, TR, VA

² The 2015 BPIR used equal treatment of EHEA qualifications as a proxy for AR, whereas subsequent editions attempted to identify the application of AR through different indicators.

³ The additional benchmarking conditions to be met (2018 BPIR, p. 148) are the following:

- National legislation has been reviewed and, if necessary, modified to ensure that the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) are respected.
- Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) or recognition bodies receive clear guidance on properly implementing the principles of the LRC.
- Recognition decisions are taken within a four month limit.
- Appeals procedures are in place, and decided within a clear and reasonable time limit.
- Recognition practice in HEIs is monitored by external Quality Assurance (QA) in line with the ESG 2015.

BPIR edition and page numbers	2015 BPIR (pp. 82-83)	2018 BPIR (pp. 145-149)	2020 BPIR (pp. 86-88)	2024 BPIR (pp. 75-77)
Orange/Yellow = medium category, equivalent to gaps in the implementation of AR	Qualifications from some EHEA countries are treated as national for all 3 cycles in 12 systems : AT, BE-FL, CZ, FR, ES, PT, RO, RU, TR, UK, UK-Scotland, VA	AR is applied to qualifications from some EHEA countries, plus additional conditions are met in 8 systems : BE-FL, BE-FR, EE, IS, LI, LT, LU, NL	AR is applied to qualifications from some EHEA countries, but additional conditions ⁴ are met in recognition practice in 7 systems : BE-FL, HU, LI, LT, NL, UA, VA	AR is applied to qualifications from some EHEA countries in 16 systems : AR, BE-FL, BE-FR, CZ, EE, IS, LI, LT, LU, LV, NL, PT, SK, HU, RO, UA
		AR is applied to qualifications from some EHEA countries, plus some but not all of additional conditions are met in recognition practices for other countries in 2 systems : CZ, SK	AR is applied to qualifications from some EHEA countries, plus some but not all of additional conditions are met in recognition practices for other countries in 9 systems : BE-FR, CZ, SK, EE, IS, LU, LV, PT, RO	
Red = lowest category, equivalent to no implementation of AR	EHEA qualifications are treated differently to national qualifications in 9 systems : AZ, CY, GE, GR, KZ, LV, MT, RS, SI	No AR in place, but at least two of the additional conditions are met in 29 systems : AD, AL, AM, AT, AZ, BG, CH, CY, ES, FR, GE, GR, HR, HU, IE, IT, KZ, LV, MD, ME, MT, PL, PT, RO, RU, SI, TR, UA, VA No AR in place and less than two of the additional conditions are met in 6 systems : BiH, BY, MK, UK, UK-Scotland, RS, SI	No AR in place, but at least two of the additional conditions are met in 20 systems : ⁵ AD, AL, AM, AT, AZ, BG, BiH, CH, CY, GE, GR, HR, IE, KZ, MD, ME, SI, RU, UK, UK-Scotland No AR in place and less than two of the additional conditions are met in 4 systems : ⁶ BY, ES, MK, RS	No AR in place in 13 systems : AL, AZ, BG, BiH, CY, GE, IE, MD, ME, MK, SI, UK, UK-Scotland

⁴ NB, the additional conditions are the same as outlined in the 2018 BPIR (see footnote above), but the 2020 BPIR only considered them as an indicator for systems in which AR is not applied to all EHEA countries, quasi as a “gateway” towards AR, as these measures had been recommended by the 2015 Pathfinder Group report.

⁵ NB, the 2020 BPIR refers to 21 systems, but Eurydice confirmed through direct correspondence that it should indeed read 20.

⁶ NB, the 2020 BPIR refers to 3 systems, but Eurydice confirmed through direct correspondence that it should indeed read 4.

BPIR edition and page numbers	2015 BPIR (pp. 82-83)	2018 BPIR (pp. 145-149)	2020 BPIR (pp. 86-88)	2024 BPIR (pp. 75-77)
The two categories on the right exist only in the 2015 BPIR and have no equivalent in subsequent editions.	EHEA qualifications are treated in the same way as national qualifications for at least one cycle in 8 systems : AL, CH, DK, BiH, HU, IT, MD, PL	No equivalent category		
	Qualifications from some EHEA countries are treated as national for at least one cycle in 2 systems : LU, SK	No equivalent category		

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