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Unpacking the concept of automatic recognition of access qualifications to higher education
How to lift obstacles to mutual trust?

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Policy context
Where do we stand in Europe?

➤ Automatic recognition has always been an implicit goal of European cooperation in higher education, at least from the start of Erasmus

➤ Sorbonne Declaration (1998) and Bologna Declaration (1999) coupled it to convergence in qualifications structure (cycles)

➤ The choice for a common structure had, however, another rationale as well: empowering European education on the global forum through standardisation

➤ From the outset, high expectations to Bologna to realise automatic recognition (or at least allowing citizens to move from country to country without administrative burden)

Policy context
Where do we stand in Europe?

➢ Slow progress in first decade of Bologna Process led to decision of Ministers in Bucharest (2012) to set up a "pathfinder group" to explore the possibility of automatic recognition

➢ Positive evolution: Lisbon Recognition Convention (supported by ENIC-NARIC network) brought more professionalism in the recognition practice, but geared at *procedural* recognition

➢ Milestones in **de jure** automatic recognition at bilateral level or regional (Benelux 2015 and 2018, Baltic States 2018), next to (regional) initiatives of de facto recognition.

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Policy context
Where do we stand in Europe?

Evolutions since 2018

➢ *EU 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* (2018/C 444/01) that builds on the achievements in Europe in legally binding automatic recognition and on principles of the LRC for access to higher education

➢ Multilateral Treaty on Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications (2021, in force 01.05.2024)

➢ Preparation of COE legal instrument focusing on framework conditions to guide MSs to make AR work

Towards consensus in defining automatic recognition

The EU Council Conclusions definition became consensual as it lifts for a large part the confusion on what AR is (or should be):

"the **right** for holders of a qualification of a certain **level** that has been issued by one Member State to be **considered for entry** to a higher education programme in the next level in any other Member State, **without** having to go through any **separate recognition procedure**"
It clearly takes options:

➤ RIGHT: option for *legally binding (de jure)* arrangement vs mere de facto
➤ CONSIDERED for entry: *access in principe* vs admission
➤ LEVEL: *generic* recognition (level of degree) vs specific (study field)

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Towards consensus in defining automatic recognition

▶ EDUCATION programme: *academic* vs professional recognition

But it leaves some issues open:

▪ Related to the definition itself:

➢ Limitation - can't there be *specific* automatic recognition (at the level of the discipline) – bilateral examples exist

➢ What with *reciprocity*? Is self-declaration not meaningless without *mutual* recognition?

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Towards consensus in defining automatic recognition

- Related to the limitations of the EU Treaty:

- ➢ Legally binding requires efforts in legislation of the Member State or- at European scale - **Multilateral** Treaty as the EU Treaty does not provide competences for academic recognition
- ➢ Status of education qualification: more than access to next level, also **civil effect** (right to hold the title of…, entitlement to certain benefits, including in the world of work).
- ➢ Distinction between academic and professional recognition very relevant for EU, less in **pan-European and global** context, where civil effect remains key.

Conditions and challenges to mutual trust

➢ Successful de jure examples demonstrate that AR is always based on mutual trust, hence the importance of convergent visions on:

- Quality standards (ESG, EQAR)
- Recognition practices (LRC)
- Structure of HE and qualifications framework
- Public responsibility on higher education
- AR decision based on consultation or at request of stakeholders
- Institutional autonomy and academic freedom
- Robust prevention of corruption and fraud
- …

=> Great challenge to meet these pre-conditions at once for Europe as a whole

Acces qualifications to higher education: the next step?

➢ **LRC**, although procedural, found a smart solution to make progress in the recognition of access qualifications possible by:
- avoiding to take secondary as such in the scope
- focussing on the access qualification only
- establishing the principle that a holder of an access qualification to HE in one country should in principe have access to HE in another
- making a clear distinction between access and admission

➢ **EU Council Recommendation** (2018) and ensuing Council Conclusions echo this solution but provide recommendations beyond procedural recognition and on AR for study periods in secondary education.

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Specific obstacles and possible solutions

➢ At regional level the Baltic States lead the way – the established AR de jure for this type of qualifications in 2018

➢ It is striking that the Multilateral Treaty (initiated by the Baltic States and the Benelux countries) and the Bologna Process as a whole leaves out this type of qualifications, considered as "too difficult for the time being".

=> *Q: what makes it so difficult*?

Specific challenges and possible solutions

1. *Heterogeneity* of access qualifications => could a European baccalaureate help? But no Europe-wide support as immediately connected to the obstacles below.
2. Diversity of *structure/duration* of secondary education in Europe. Complexity is added if within national systems there are different tracks with different lengths that give access to only part of higher education.

=> Could a common age for the end of *compulsory education* (18) or rigourous implementation of the Unesco monitored standard of 12 years of basic and secondary education in Europe be of help?

Specific challenges and possible solutions

3. Constant *confusion* between in principle *access and admission*.

This problem is exacerbated with access qualifications as:

- they are geared at entry at the first place
- there are different competences involved – HEIs are autonomous in admission and can even be milder than what the LRC prescribes
- they reflect the vision of the country and HE system in general on transition into higher education (entrance exams or not, differentiated entrance related to type of institution or ranking of HEI in national system).

=> Need to work at **clearer definitions** and **common vision on access criteria** for in principle access to HE.

Tentative conclusions

➢ As with AR in general "solutions" for the AR of access qualifications to higher education consist mainly of lifting the obstacles to the facilitating pre-conditions
➢ The ostacles for the latter are far serious since the pre-conditions are less realised.
➢ Preparatory work to take up without delay in realising the facilitating pre-conditions!

Thank you for your attention.

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