



ROAD TO AUTOMATIC RECOGNITION OF HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS QUALIFICATIONS

Comparative study report

Riga 2024



Co-funded by
the European Union

The study was conducted by the Academic Information Centre (Latvia) in cooperation with Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science (Denmark), Education and Youth Board (Estonia), Information Centre on Academic Mobility and Equivalence (Italy), Malta Qualifications Recognition Information Centre (Malta), National Centre for Recognition and Equivalence of Diplomas (Romania), Centre for Recognition of Diplomas (Slovakia), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (Ireland), UK ENIC (United Kingdom) from 2023-2024.

Academic Information Centre –

Latvian ENIC/NARIC

Valnu Street 2

Riga LV-1050, Latvia

Telephone: +371 67225155

E-mail: aic@aic.lv

Website: www.aic.lv

The experts involved in conducting the study:

Edmunds Labunskis, Gunta Kinta, Baiba Ramiņa, Solvita Siliņa (Latvia)

Cecilia Løfgren, Maria Graversgaard Jørgensen (Denmark)

Aleksandra Dolgopolova (Estonia)

Serena Spitalieri, Susanna Taormina, Marina Malgina (Italy)

Jon Vercellono, Stefan Sant (Malta)

Adrian Iordache, Oana-Mihaela Salomia, Natalia Neagoe (Romania)

Lucia Hustavova, Alena Fodorova (Slovakia)

Katherine Latta, Ellisa Marques (United Kingdom)

This report was prepared with the support of Erasmus+ NARIC project No 101101645 “Road to Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Access Qualifications” (ARAQUA, 2022-2024).

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Education and Culture Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Table of Contents

Abbreviations and acronyms	4
Introduction	5
Chapter 1. Methodology of the study	7
Chapter 2. Latest developments in the national secondary level education systems in the context of HE access qualifications	8
Chapter 3. Current legal framework regulating HE access qualifications	11
Chapter 4. HE access qualifications in national education system (present situation)	15
4.1. Types of qualifications	16
4.2. Formal eligibility rights	17
4.3. Nominal duration of learning	17
4.4. Types of education institutions	18
4.5. Grading system.....	19
4.6. Assessment system.....	22
Chapter 5. Flexible pathways leading to HE access qualifications	26
Chapter 6. HE access qualifications in national qualifications framework	28
6.1. EQF level of HE access qualifications	28
6.2. Level descriptors	28
Chapter 7. Quality assurance for institutions implementing/awarding HE access qualifications	30
Chapter 8. Learning outcomes of HE access qualifications	34
8.1. Formulation of learning outcomes	34
8.2. Quality assurance of learning outcomes for HE access qualifications	35
8.3. Terminology of learning outcomes	36
8.4. Hierarchy of learning outcomes	37
Chapter 9. Recognition criteria and procedures of HE access qualifications in the country	38
9.1. Legislation regarding recognition of HE access qualifications	38
9.2. Tasks of national ENIC/NARIC offices in assessment and recognition of foreign access qualifications.....	41
9.3. Competent recognition authorities for HE access qualifications	42
9.4. Criteria and procedure for assessment and recognition of HE access qualifications	43
Chapter 10. Mapping HE access qualifications for automatic recognition in the project partner countries	45
Conclusions	47
Annexes	50
Annex 1. HE access qualifications in project partner countries	51
Annex 2. Template for analysing HE access qualifications	58

Abbreviations and acronyms

AIC – Academic Information Centre (Latvia)

CCEA – Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (Northern Ireland)

CIMEA – Information Centre on Academic Mobility and Equivalence (Italy)

CNRED – National Centre for Recognition and Equivalence of Diplomas (Romania)

CQFW – Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales

EHEA – European Higher Education Area

ENIC – European Network of National Information Centres on academic recognition and mobility

EQF – European Qualifications Framework

GCE – General Certificate of Education (UK)

GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education (UK)

GPA – Grade Point Average

HE – higher education

HEI – higher education institution

ITS – Institution of Tourism Studies (Malta)

MCAST – Malta College of Arts Sciences and Technology

MFHEA – Malta Further and Higher Education Authority

MQRIC – Malta Qualifications Recognition Information Centre

NARIC – National Academic Recognition Information Centres

NQF – national qualifications framework

Ofqual – Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (UK)

RQF – Regulated Qualifications Framework (England and Northern Ireland)

SCQF – Comprehensive credit and qualifications framework

SQA – Scottish Qualifications Authority

STEM – Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics

VET – vocational education and training

Introduction

The Council Recommendation on Promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad (26 November 2018) states automatic recognition of qualifications as the right for holders of a qualification of a certain level issued by a Member State and giving access¹ to higher education (HE) in the home country, to be considered for access to a HE programme or entry to the next level in any other Member State without having to go through any separate recognition procedure. The principle involves understanding that general access to HE in the home country provides general access to HE in any other Member State, Bachelor's degree is considered as a Bachelor, Master's degree – Master. The concept of automatic recognition stipulates that qualifications subjected to automatic recognition are evaluated without the intervention of a credential evaluator because the level, quality and workload of a qualification are automatically accepted.

A shift towards automatic recognition of HE access qualifications is very topical for many countries to ease the recognition process of qualifications for the purposes of further studies. This study focuses on encouraging and supporting automatic recognition of general secondary education qualifications and vocational education and training (VET) qualifications giving access to higher education, i.e. HE access qualifications. In terms of the study, the HE access qualifications impart both general and VET upper secondary education qualifications, which ensure rights to their holders to be candidates for HE programmes. Countries in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have showed commitment to the automatic recognition of qualifications ever since the adoption of Bucharest Communiqué² in 2012 in which the Member Countries expressed the willingness to work towards automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees, building on the tools of the Bologna framework as a long-term goal of EHEA.

From 2014 to 2016, Academic Information Centre (AIC) coordinated project “Automatic Recognition between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania” (AURBELL) which aimed to analyse the legislation and practices of recognition in the Baltic countries and explore possibilities for easier academic recognition between Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. The other aim of the project was to revise and analyse the Agreement among the Government of the Republic of Latvia, the Government of the Republic of Estonia and the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, on the creation of a common educational space in general upper secondary education and vocational (up to higher education level) education within the Baltic States (in force since 2000), and to prepare proposals for the improvement of the agreement taking into account possibilities of automatic recognition of qualifications between three Baltic countries at HE level. During the project a comparative study report³ was composed which analysed feasibility of automatic recognition among Baltic countries. On January 7, 2019, the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Estonia, the Government of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of the Republic of Lithuania on the automatic academic recognition of qualifications concerning higher education entered into force.

To foster the recognition of HE access qualifications, in 2022, AIC (Latvia) in cooperation with the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science (Denmark), Education and Youth Board (Estonia), Information Centre on Academic Mobility and Equivalence (Italy), Malta

¹ Access to HE focuses on creating equal opportunities, while admission involves the specific steps taken to evaluate and accept students into higher education institutions.

² Bucharest Communiqué (2012). https://eha.info/media.eha.info/file/2012_Bucharest/67/3/Bucharest_Communique_2012_610673.pdf

³ Academic Information Centre, Archimedes Foundation, Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (2015). Automatic recognition between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Comparative study report. https://aic.lv/portal/content/files/AURBELL_report_EN.pdf.

Qualifications Recognition Information Centre (Malta), National Centre for Recognition and Equivalence of Diplomas (Romania), Centre for Recognition of Diplomas (Slovakia), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (Ireland), UK ENIC (United Kingdom) started a Erasmus+ project “Road to Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Access Qualifications” (ARAQUA) to explore HE access qualifications in the project partner countries in order to map these qualifications and develop recommendations for NARICs, ENICs and higher education institutions (HEI) for their automatic recognition among the countries.

In order to explore the state of play in the project partner countries, country reports (in total eight reports) were prepared by ENIC/NARICs of Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Romania, Slovakia and the ENIC of the United Kingdom exploring different aspects of HE access qualifications. The information was compiled and analysed, as a result, this comparative report was prepared. The report is expected to serve as a foundation for recommendations on the procedures and criteria for the automatic recognition of HE access qualifications in order to discuss potential minimum requirements of HE access qualifications.

The report consists of ten chapters. **Chapter 1** defines the methodology of the comparative report. **Chapter 2** describes the development of national education systems in the context of HE access qualifications. **Chapter 3** lists current legal framework regulating HE access qualifications. **Chapter 4** explains the present situation for HE access qualifications in national education systems. **Chapter 5** examines flexible pathways to HE access. **Chapter 6** looks at HE access qualifications in national qualifications frameworks. **Chapter 7** explores quality assurance for institutions implementing/awarding HE access qualifications. **Chapter 8** examines learning outcomes of HE access qualifications. **Chapter 9** compares the recognition criteria and procedures of HE access qualifications in the project countries. **Chapter 10** lists all of the HE access qualifications in the partners’ countries, which were mapped for automatic recognition.

Chapter 1. Methodology of the study

In order to understand if HE access qualifications could be automatically recognised among the project partner countries, in March 2023, eight project partners were tasked with exploring their education system, legislation, recognition procedures etc, of HE access qualifications and describe the results of their desk study in their country reports. The country reports were composed by ENIC/NARICs of Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Romania, Slovakia and the ENIC of the United Kingdom. The structure and research questions of the country reports were developed and agreed upon by all the project partners. In addition, a fiche (see Annex 2) was developed for mapping HE access qualifications (also part of the country reports) for their automatic recognition.

The country reports included 10 chapters with relevant subchapters. Chapter 1 explored development of national education system in the context of HE access qualifications, which included a brief description of main developments, reforms in legislation in the context of HE access qualifications. Chapter 2 was focused on legal framework regulating HE access qualifications in secondary education system listing main legal acts stipulating access qualifications in the country. Chapter 3 explored HE access qualifications in national education system including information about types of qualifications, formal eligibility rights, grading system, present education system chart, etc. Chapter 4 included information about flexible pathways leading to HE access qualifications. Chapter 5 investigated HE access qualifications in national qualifications frameworks highlighting the level of HE access qualifications and level descriptors. Chapter 6 explored quality assurance for institutions implementing/awarding HE access qualifications, which covered quality assurance procedures and bodies. Chapter 7 explored learning outcomes of HE access qualifications emphasising formulation of learning outcomes, whether they are subject to quality assurance, their terminology and hierarchy. Chapter 8 looked into recognition criteria and procedures of HE access qualifications in the country including information about legislation regarding recognition of access qualifications, tasks of national ENIC/NARIC office in assessment and recognition of foreign access qualifications, competent recognition authorities for access qualifications and criteria and procedure for assessment and recognition. Chapter 9 listed relevant sources used for gathering information. Finally, chapter 10 included the fiche for case studies of HE access qualifications in the country.

The last chapter of the country report included a table for describing HE access qualifications (fiche) awarded in the education system. The purpose of the fiche was to map HE access qualifications available in the eight project partner countries for automatic recognition considering existing substantial differences with the reference to the provisions of Lisbon Recognition Convention and its subsidiary documents, as well experience gained from the previous NARIC projects. The fiche enabled efficient and clear comparison of the HE access qualifications in the project partner countries. The table includes information about HE access qualifications: full title of qualification (in English and national language); EQF and NQF level; access requirements; requirements for graduation (including final exams); provider; awarding body; certificate/diploma and supplementary documents; title of quality assurance body; profile (general of vocational); formal eligibility rights and template of certificate/diploma. In the last section any other relevant information regarding the qualification can be added (e.g., learning outcomes, sources of information).

The structure of the country reports was also observed when preparing this comparative report. Information compiled in each chapter was divided into subchapters (where relevant) and analysed to find similarities and differences of various aspects relating to HE access qualifications. Where no comparisons could be made, the most important information about each country was listed to emphasise the countries' case.

Chapter 2. Latest developments in the national secondary level education systems in the context of HE access qualifications

Although in all the project partner countries HE access qualifications date back much further than their NQFs, the partners agreed to analyse the processes related to the period of establishment of NQFs to provide more comparable data.

In all of the project partner countries NQFs have been established. The establishment time of NQF differs by country. In the UK the first qualifications frameworks date to 2001/2002, in Malta, NQF was established as early as 2005, in Denmark – in 2006, in Estonia – in 2008, in Latvia – in 2010, in Romania – in 2013, in Slovakia – in 2017, and in Italy – in 2018.

The UK does not have a single NQF as the devolved nations have different qualifications frameworks. There is a Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) for England and Northern Ireland, Comprehensive credit and qualifications framework (SCQF) for Scotland and Credit and Qualifications Framework of Wales (CQFW) for Wales. All of the qualifications frameworks are also referenced to the EQF (see Table 1).

Table 1. National qualifications frameworks in the project partner countries

Country	Name	Abbreviation (EN)	Established	Referenced to EQF	Levels
Denmark	Danish Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning	DQFLL	2006	2011	8
Estonia	Estonian Qualifications Framework	EstQF	2008	2011	8
Italy	Italian National Qualifications Framework	QNQ	2018	2022	8
Latvia	Latvian Qualifications Framework	LQF	2010	2011	8
Malta	Malta Qualifications Framework	MQF	2007	2007	8
Romania	Romanian National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning	ROQF	2013	2018	8
Slovakia	Slovak Qualifications Framework	SQF	2017	2017	8
UK – England and Northern Ireland	Regulated Qualifications Framework	RQF	2015	2008 ⁴	8
UK – Scotland	Comprehensive credit and qualifications framework	SCQF	2001	2010	12
UK – Wales	Credit and qualifications framework of Wales	CQFW	2002	2010	8

⁴ Although RQF was established in 2015, it was referenced to EQF already in 2008 under its previous name – Qualifications and Credit Framework.

Many countries have undergone or are in the process of reforming their education system and curriculum. As the result of many education system and curriculum reforms in all of the partner countries, learning outcomes-oriented approaches to education have been introduced for learners to acquire knowledge, skills and competences necessary for life today. The nature of reforms varies by each partner country.

In Denmark, the VET reform from 2015 “agreement on better and more attractive vocational training”, set new requirements for access to VET programmes. The new requirement included that in most circumstances, a student needs to have achieved a grade average of at least 02 (see subchapter 4.5 for grading system) in respectively Danish and mathematics in the final exams in 9th class or 10th class at the municipal primary and lower secondary school, in order to gain access to a VET programme. At the same time, general education can be combined with a vocational education programme qualifying for access to HE, called *eux*. In 2016, the Danish Parliament agreed on a reform of the Danish general upper secondary education programmes. The aim of the reform was to modernise the education programmes in order to strengthen them so the students would be prepared for higher education. One of the results of the reform was an adjustment of the 2-year higher preparatory examination programme to have more focus on specific professions with more practical elements.

In the general secondary education of Estonia, the new national curriculum (*Gümnaasiumi riiklik õppekava*) was introduced in 2011. The curriculum gives more importance to achieving the goals, competence and subject integration set in the curriculum, and it also expresses the learning outcomes more clearly than the previous national curriculum. There have also been changes in the system of state examinations and in the graduation requirements. Also, a major reform of the Estonian VET system took place in 2013 when new Vocational Educational Institutions Act and Standard of Vocational Education entered in force. The reformed VET system is outcome-based, as the programmes are classified according to their levels in the Estonian Qualifications Framework.

In July 2015, the Italian government adopted the Good School (*La Buona Scuola*) reform of the national education and training system. This reform foresees changes in several aspects of education and training provision management and of the curricula.

In Latvia, the most evident and recent changes in the content of the general upper secondary education (and in the general study subjects of vocational education programmes) were initiated in 2019 when the new state standard for general education was approved. The state education standard is stipulated by the Regulations of Cabinet of Ministers. The study year 2022/2023 was the final year for introducing the new education standard, which foresees the shift from study subject-based education programmes to competence-based education programmes. Due to introduction of competence-based programmes, the content of centralised final exams in general study subjects was also changed in 2023, i.e. establishing various levels of complexity for exams, setting requirements for accessing particular complexity level and formal access rights.

In Malta, recent education reform mostly has been structural and focussed on secondary education, not upper secondary education – the new Early Leaving from Education Strategy (2023) specifically impacts upper secondary students as do the revisions to the National Inclusive Education Framework as well as A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools, Route to Quality Inclusion also apply to upper secondary students. The two primary reforms are the consultation and publication of “Visioning the Future by Transforming Education, the National Education

Strategy 2024-2030”, which is holistic in approach but focuses on upper secondary education by introduction of a Post Secondary Review Working Group; the curriculum alignment plan (involving all HE stakeholders) and reforms to the scholarships and stipends plans for students focusing on STEM subjects, and “Malta’s National Strategic Action Plan for Further and Higher Education 2022-2030” which targets further education (upper secondary) with the goal of increased internationalisation, mobility and seven pillars which focus on joining up industry and education.

In Romania, the new Law on pre-university studies (No 198/2023) states that the national curriculum for pre-university education focuses on the competences promoted at European/international level for lifelong learning, which form the basis of the graduate’s training profile. The graduate’s training profile represents a regulatory component of the national curriculum, a reference for its design, implementation and evaluation and is approved by order of the Minister of Education. The profile indicates the expected levels of skill acquisition, depending on the students’ developmental stages. For each discipline and field of study, the school curriculum covers 75% of teaching and assessment hours, leaving 25% of the time allocated to the respective discipline/field of study available to the teacher.

The national curriculum for primary, secondary and upper secondary education focuses on the key competences promoted at the European level, which determine the student’s training profile:

- a) ability to read, write and understand the message;
- b) competence in multilingualism;
- c) mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering;
- d) digital competence, including internet safety and cyber security;
- e) personal, social and learning competence;
- f) civic, legal and environmental protection competence;
- g) entrepreneurial competence;
- h) cultural awareness and expression competence.

In Slovakia, a reform is underway based on the National Recovery and Resilience Plan which aims at improving the literacy, critical thinking, digital and soft skills while increasing the accessibility and inclusiveness. The reform is aimed at improving the listed areas while increasing the accessibility and inclusiveness. This includes the curricular as well as textbook reform that recently underwent a wide public discussion with the stakeholders.

In the UK, the new A-Level system was introduced which involves a move away from the broader “baccalaureate model” and narrowed the curriculum to stand-alone subjects, usually three to four per student at present. The qualification was at first graded only pass/fail, but soon acquired the A-E letter grade that students are now familiar with.

The comparison of country reports indicates that the major development tendencies in education systems are similar due to common policy priorities in the European Education Area. The described reforms in relation to HE access qualifications focus on facilitating transparency of qualifications, as well as promoting responsiveness of education programmes to the labour market needs, i.e. ensuring that learners’ knowledge, skills and competences are fit for their further pathways. Significant driving force for the development of education system is establishment of NQFs, which have been launched and referenced to the EQF in all the partner countries.

Chapter 3. Current legal framework regulating HE access qualifications

The project partners described main legal acts stipulating the design, implementation, assessment and awarding of HE access qualifications in order to capture the context of these qualifications, which is useful for credential evaluation. Furthermore, this analysis is important for composing a list of minimum requirements for qualifications to be subjected automatic recognition. This collection of legal acts may serve as a reference by credential evaluators.

In Denmark, Estonia and Latvia, separate legal acts for general secondary and vocational secondary education stipulate HE access qualifications. Meanwhile, in Italy, Malta, Slovakia and Romania a single law or act regulates HE access qualifications for both general and vocational education (see Table 2). In the UK, no national legislative acts that stipulate the qualifications necessary to access higher education have been provided; this is left at the discretion of the universities and HEIs, which are autonomous. Furthermore, no legislation exists to stipulate the commonly expected exit qualifications from secondary education; this is done through non-statutory guidance developed by the agency regulating these qualifications, i.e., Ofqual (Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation) in England, the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment in Northern Ireland, and Qualifications Wales in Wales.

In addition to national laws and regulations stipulating HE access qualifications, each country has other related legal framework which includes (varies by country) legislation regulating: education (general and/or vocational), NQFs, state standards, state exams, national curriculum, licencing, accreditation, issue of credentials, etc.

Table 2. Legal framework regulating HE access qualifications

Country	Legal frameworks regulating HE access qualifications
Denmark	<p><i>Content and overall framework of HE access qualifications</i></p> <p>Act on General Upper Secondary Education Programmes (LBK No 41 of 12 January 2024 + BEK No 497 of 18 May 2017) https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2024/41; https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2017/497</p> <p>Act on Vocational Education and Training (LBK no 40 of 11 January 2024 + BEK No 2499 of 13 December 2021) https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2024/40; https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2021/2499;</p> <p><i>Access to HE</i></p> <p>Ministerial Order on Admission and Enrolment on University Programmes (BEK no 51 of 14 January 2024) https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2024/51</p> <p>Ministerial Order on Admission and Enrolment on Academy Profession and Professional Bachelor’s Degree Programmes (BEK no 56 of 10 January 2024) https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2024/56</p> <p><i>Examinations</i></p> <p>Act on Examinations in General Upper Secondary Education (BEK No 343 of 08 April 2016) https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2016/343</p> <p>Act on Examinations in Vocational Upper Secondary Education (BEK No 41 of 16 January 2014) https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2014/41</p>
Estonia	<p>Republic of Estonia Education Act (1992) https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/968165?leiaKehtiv</p>

Country	Legal frameworks regulating HE access qualifications
	<p>The Basic Schools and Secondary Schools Act (2010) https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/13332410?leiaKehtiv</p> <p>Vocational Educational Institutions Act (2013) https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/102072013001?leiaKehtiv</p> <p>Private Schools Act (1998) https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/130052012002?leiaKehtiv</p> <p>National Curriculum for Secondary Schools (2011) https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/129082014021?leiaKehtiv</p> <p>Standard of Vocational Education (2013) https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/128082013013?leiaKehtiv</p> <p>Statute and Format of the Basic School and General Secondary School Certificates and the State Examination Certificate (2010) https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/109032023006?leiaKehtiv</p> <p>Statute, Format and the procedure for issue of leaving certificates and other documents issued by a vocational educational institution (2013) https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/110072014010?leiaKehtiv</p> <p>Minister of Education and Research regulation 15.12.2015 No 54 regulates the state and school examinations rules and procedures https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/118122015012?leiaKehtiv</p>
Italy	<p>Law 53/2003 (D.Lgs 59/2004) establishes the right/duty of all to education and training https://archivio.pubblica.istruzione.it/mpi/progettoscuola/allegati/legge53_03.pdf</p> <p>Law 107/2015 regulates several aspects of the education system, in particular the reform of the national education and training system <i>La buona scuola</i> https://www.oecd.org/education/Education-Policy-Outlook-Country-Profile-Italy.pdf</p> <p>Law 62/2000 regulates specific conditions for school-providers https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2000/03/21/000G0099/sg</p> <p>Ministerial Decree 89/2010 provides for the new organisation of general upper secondary institutes (<i>licei</i>), according to the reform of the upper secondary level of education https://www.indire.it/lucabas/lkmw_file/licei2010/Regolamento.pdf</p> <p>Ministerial Decree 769/2018 encourages the use of the standardised reference frameworks for the written tests of the state examination at the end of the upper secondary education https://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/0/DM+769+.pdf/f629b64e-c2af-47e9-b889-c131f35f1fdf</p> <p>Ministerial Decree 08/2020 regulates the model of the higher education access qualification State Exam Diploma upon the Conclusion of the Upper Secondary School Course and Diploma Supplement https://curriculumstudente.istruzione.it/cose.html</p>
Latvia	<p>Law on Education (1998) https://likumi.lv/ta/id/50759-izglitibas-likums</p> <p>Law on General Education (1999) https://likumi.lv/ta/id/20243-visparejas-izglitibas-likums</p> <p>Law on Vocational Education (1999) https://likumi.lv/ta/id/20244-profionalas-izglitibas-likums</p> <p><i>State education standards</i></p> <p>Cabinet Regulations No 416 “Regulations regarding the state general upper secondary education standard and model general upper secondary education programmes” (2019) https://likumi.lv/ta/id/309597-noteikumi-par-valsts-visparejas-videjas-izglitibas-standartu-un-visparejas-videjas-izglitibas-programmu-paraugiem</p>

Country	Legal frameworks regulating HE access qualifications
	<p>Cabinet Regulations No 322 “Regulations on state vocational upper secondary education and state vocational education standard” (2020) https://likumi.lv/ta/id/315146-noteikumi-par-valsts-profesionalas-videjas-izglitiba-standartu-un-valsts-arodizglitiba-standartu</p> <p><i>Licensing and accreditation</i></p> <p>Cabinet Regulations No 253 “Procedure on licensing general and vocational education programmes” (2023) https://likumi.lv/ta/id/342079-visparejas-un-profesionalas-izglitiba-programmu-licencesanas-kartiba</p> <p>Cabinet Regulations No 618 “Procedure for accreditation of education institutions, examination centres, other institutions and education programmes specified in the Education Law, and assessment of the professional performance of the heads of education institutions” (2020) https://likumi.lv/ta/id/317820-izglitiba-iestazu-eksaminacijas-centru-citu-izglitiba-likuma-noteiktu-instituciju-un-izglitiba-programmu-akreditacijas-un-iz...</p> <p><i>Examinations</i></p> <p>Cabinet Regulations No 1510 “Procedure on state examinations” (2013) https://likumi.lv/ta/id/263462-valsts-parbaudijumu-norises-kartiba</p> <p>Cabinet Regulations No 754 “Regulations on content and procedure of professional qualification exams” (2022) https://likumi.lv/ta/id/337530-noteikumi-par-profesionalas-kvalifikacijas-eksamenu-saturu-un-norises-kartibu</p> <p><i>Education documents</i></p> <p>Cabinet Regulations No 274 “The procedure for issuing state recognised general education documents” (2006) https://likumi.lv/ta/id/342454-kartiba-kada-izsniedzami-valsts-atziti-visparejas-izglitiba-dokumenti</p> <p>Cabinet Regulations No 52 “Regulations regarding documents certifying state recognised vocational education and professional qualifications, certificates of modules and parts of the vocational education programme” (2023) https://likumi.lv/ta/id/339330-valsts-atzitu-profesionalo-izglitibu-un-profesionalo-kvalifikaciju-apliecinosu-dokumentu-modula-apliecibu-un-profesionalas-izglitiba-programmas-dalas-apguvi-apliecinosu-dokumentu-noteikumi</p>
Malta	<p>Education Act (1988) https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/327/eng</p> <p>Mutual Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the European Region Regulations, Legal Notice 2006 (Subsidiary Legislation 451.02) – Chapter 5 is specific to requirements for mutual recognition of access to higher education qualifications issued in other party states https://legislation.mt/eli/sl/451.2/eng/pdf</p> <p>Malta Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning Regulations, Subsidiary Legislation 607.01 (2012) establishes definitions used, structure and quality assurance procedures used in the Malta Qualifications Framework. https://legislation.mt/eli/sl/607.1/eng</p> <p>Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning Regulations, Subsidiary Legislation 607.02 (2012) further defines specific procedures for the validation of formal and informal learning https://legislation.mt/eli/sl/607.2/eng</p> <p>Further and Higher Education (Licensing, Accreditation and Quality Assurance) Regulations, Chapter 607.3 defines Licensing, Accreditation and Quality Assurance regulations https://legislation.mt/eli/sl/607.3/eng</p>

Country	Legal frameworks regulating HE access qualifications
	Further and Higher Education Act, Chapter 607 (2021), set forth definitions used in further and higher education, established the MFHEA https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/607/eng
Romania	Law of National Education No 1/2011 https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/125150 Government Decision No 918/2013 on the approval of the National Qualifications Framework http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/153002 The Framework Regulation on the organization and functioning of the preuniversity school units – Order of the Ministry of Education no 4183/2022 https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/257302 Law on preuniversity education No 198/2023 entered into force on 3 rd September 2023 https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/271896 Law on higher education No 199/2023 entered into force on 3 rd September 2023 https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/277921
Slovakia	Act No 131/2002 Coll. on Higher Education https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/-/SK/ZZ/2002/131/ Act No 245/2008 Coll. on Upbringing and Education (the School Act) https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2008/245/ Decree No 224/2022 Coll. on Secondary School https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2022/224/
UK	n/a

Due to the time and resource limitations of the project, the analysis of legal acts in the project partner countries was rather superficial. The partners provided varied information about their legal framework, which hindered comparison on the systems. Perhaps for deeper exploration of the legal acts, more detailed criteria could be elaborated and applied for further studies.

Chapter 4. HE access qualifications in national education system (present situation)

This chapter includes information about types of qualifications which grant access to HE in the project partner countries. In order to compare and analyse the qualifications, a number of criteria were used: formal eligibility rights emphasising which studies the qualifications provide access; nominal duration of learning, volume – length of study year (hours), number of years; types of education institutions (providing and awarding institutions); grading system and assessment system including final examinations for HE access qualifications. An excerpt of analysis may be seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Types of education institutions, schooling duration and grading system

Country	Types of education institutions	Duration of schooling	Grading scale
Denmark	General secondary schools (gymnasium) Vocational education and training institutions (<i>erhvervsskoler</i>) Adult education centres (<i>voksenuddannelsescenter – VUC</i>)	10-year basic and lower secondary education 3-year higher general; higher commercial; higher technical examination programme 2-year higher preparatory examination programme Vocational qualifications varies from 2 to 5½ years, but most programmes have a duration between 3-4 years	7-point (12: excellent; 10: very good; 7: good; 4: fair; 02: adequate; 00: inadequate; - 3: unacceptable 02 – passing grade Pass/fail
Estonia	Secondary school (<i>Gümnaasium</i>) Vocational education institution (<i>kutseõppeasutus</i>) State, municipal and private	9-year basic education 3-year general secondary education 3-4-year vocational secondary education	5-point (3 to pass) for general secondary 4-point for VET (5-2 scale, 3 to pass) Pass/fail 100-point scale for state exams (1 to pass)
Italy	General schools (<i>licei</i>) Technical institutes (<i>istituti tecnici</i>) Vocational institutes (<i>istituti professionali</i>)	5-year basic, 3-year lower secondary education 5-year upper secondary education	10-point (6 to pass) 100-point scale for state exams (60 to pass)
Latvia	General secondary education schools (<i>vidusskola</i>) – public or private State gymnasiums (<i>valsts ģimnāzijas</i>) Vocational secondary school (<i>profesionālā vidusskola</i>) Technical school (<i>tehnikums</i>)	9-year basic education 3-year general secondary education 4-year vocational secondary education	10-point (4 to pass) 100% scale for state exams (15% to pass in 2024, 20% to pass in 2025)
Malta	State, church and private Sixth Forms	6-year primary, 5-year lower secondary education	Grade A – 30 grades points;

Country	Types of education institutions	Duration of schooling	Grading scale
		2-year upper secondary education	Grade B – 24 grades points; Grade C – 18 grades points; Grade D – 12 grades points; Grade E – 6 grades points (44 to pass)
Romania	High school (<i>liceu</i>) College (<i>colegiu</i>) State or private	5-year primary, 4-year lower secondary education (includes class 0 – preparatory year) 4-year upper secondary education	10-point (5 to pass) 5 in each subject to pass state exams, average mark of 6
Slovakia	Gymnasium (<i>gymnázium</i>) Secondary vocational school (<i>stredná odborná škola</i>) Secondary sports school (<i>stredná športová škola</i>) School of artistic industry (<i>škola umeleckého priemyslu</i>) Art conservatory (<i>konzervatórium</i>)	4-year primary, 5-year lower secondary education 4-5-year upper secondary education	5-point (4 to pass) where 1 is excellent and 5 is unsatisfactory 100% scale for state exams (33% to pass)
UK	Senior (Secondary Education) Schools Sixth Form Colleges Further Education Colleges	11-year primary and lower secondary education 2 years for upper secondary education	England: 9-point (4 to pass) Wales, Northern Ireland: A-G (C to pass) Scotland: A-D (to pass at least D, otherwise No Award) A*-E (E to pass) for state exams (A levels)

The following sections of the report outline each of the foresaid features of the HE access qualifications, which should be considered in the terms of (automatic) credential evaluation.

4.1. Types of qualifications

In all the project partner countries general upper secondary and VET upper secondary education programmes lead to qualifications which grant access to HE studies in their countries. All of the qualifications, which grant access to HE in the explored project partner countries, are listed in Chapter 10. In Denmark, there are 10 HE access qualifications, in Estonia, Latvia and the United

Kingdom – two HE access qualifications, and in Italy, Malta⁵, Romania and Slovakia – only one HE access qualification. Out of these 21 qualifications, only one has varied EQF levels – the Evidence of Training Certificate (VET) issued in Denmark. The Evidence of Training Certificate issued after completion of a VET programme is placed at least at EQF level 3 with a duration of at least three years studies, and in this case the qualification gives formal eligibility rights for entry into relevant academy profession programme and professional Bachelor education programmes. The same VET programme may contain multiple steps or specialisations, and as a result, may lead to qualifications of different EQF levels (3-5). HE access requires that graduates meet the entry requirements for the specific academy profession programme or professional Bachelor education programmes. Rest of the 20 qualifications are referenced to EQF level 4.

In Denmark, Estonia and Latvia, separate upper secondary education programmes for either general or vocational education are provided, while in rest of the countries whether the qualification is general or vocational, is determined by the study subject combination.

4.2. Formal eligibility rights

In general, the project focuses only on the qualifications that give access to HE in their countries, yet some exceptions and limitations should be considered. In this context differentiation between formal eligibility rights and admission to further studies should be clarified.

Although holders of HE access qualifications formally have a right to become a candidate for HE programmes, the qualification itself does not guarantee their enrolment in desired study programme, because HEIs may set specific admission requirements (exams, entry tests, etc.). For example, usually learners of VET programmes, who have studied STEM subjects such as mathematics and physics, may be expected to enrol HE programmes with the focus on the same study subjects. Meanwhile, learners who have studied humanities subjects may also enrol if they are able to pass entry tests. For some HE programmes in addition to an access qualification, specific work experience or ability is required (e.g., in case of HEIs in music or fine arts).

4.3. Nominal duration of learning

Nominal duration of learning differs in each project partner country. In Denmark, Estonia and Latvia, the duration for general upper secondary education programmes is between three and four years depending on the programme's profile. Vocational programmes are usually longer as they contain vocational profiled courses in addition to general courses. In Malta, Romania and the United Kingdom, upper secondary education programmes are two years long. In Slovakia, they are four to five years long, while in Italy they are five years long.

Total duration for the education programmes leading to HE access qualifications varies by country. Not in all the countries initial education is divided into primary and lower/upper secondary education. For example, in Estonia and Latvia there is basic education (grades 1 to 9) and three-to-four-year general or vocational secondary education⁶. In Romania, primary education lasts five years, including the preparatory year called class 0 and lower secondary lasts four years with four-year-long upper secondary education; thus, being in similar length as in

⁵ The Matriculation Certificate is the primary access qualification for access to formal HE programmes. The Advanced and Intermediate Certificates form part of the Matriculation Certificate, but may be considered as stand-alone qualifications. The access requirements of private HEIs are included in the licensing agreements.

⁶ In Latvia, term “vocational education and training” is not generally used, only vocational education.

Estonia and Latvia. Meanwhile, in Slovakia, there is also nine years of primary and lower secondary education (4-year primary and 5-year lower secondary), but upper secondary education usually lasts four years. In some programmes it may even last five years while entry from grade 8 is facilitated. In Denmark and the UK, there is no distinctive division between primary and lower secondary education which takes 10 and 11 years respectively. In Italy and Romania primary education lasts five years, while in Romania the upper secondary education lasts four years, in Italy – five years. Similar to the UK, in Malta, primary and lower secondary education lasts 11 years and upper secondary education – two years. Although the division of years among primary, lower and upper secondary education differs among the partner countries, the total number of years spent for education leading to HE access qualifications is very similar. In Denmark, Estonia, Latvia and Romania primary and secondary education combined lasts 12 to 13 years (depending on the programme), in Italy, Malta and the UK – 13 years, and the longest duration on education was observed in Slovakia, where it is commonly 13 years, but in some rare cases may sum up to total of 14 years⁷.

The duration of school years is somewhat similar in all the partner countries (see Table 4). Denmark is the only country where the school year starts in August, while in other countries – either early September (Estonia, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia, UK) or in the middle of September (Italy, Malta). School year ends in late May only in Estonia and Latvia. In the UK, the school year ends in July, while in rest of the countries – middle or end of June. The duration of learning in weeks also differs from 33 (Italy) to 40 weeks (Slovakia). For example, in Latvia, the duration of learning is also longer in the final grade as there are additional lessons for preparation for final exams and examinations themselves.

Table 4. Duration of learning in the project partner countries

Country	Duration of learning (weeks)	Start and end date of school year
Denmark	35-39	August – June
Estonia	35	1 September – 31 May
Italy	33	mid-September – mid-June
Latvia	35 (grades 10-11), 38 (grade 12)	1 September – 31 May
Malta	39	mid-September – mid-June
Romania	36	early September – end of June
Slovakia	40	1 September – 30 June
UK	39	September – July

4.4. Types of education institutions

Although the typology of education institutions differs by each partner country, some similarities also may be observed. Mostly types of schools which provide general and vocational education are separate institutions in the partner countries except for Malta, Romania and the UK, but there

⁷ Most common upper secondary programme is a 4-year programme with grade 9 as an entry requirement. There are certain 5-year upper secondary programmes that can be entered, either after completing grade 8 or 9. In a rare case of entry into a 5-year programme after grade 9, the total combined length would reach 14 years. However, 13 years is generally considered as standard total length of studies leading to the HE access qualification.

can be some exceptions where both general and vocational education programmes are offered in a single institution. In Slovakia, only secondary sports schools may offer both general and VET while other types will offer either general or VET upper secondary programmes. In Latvia and Romania, colleges, which are HEIs (offering qualifications at EQF level 5), can also offer vocational secondary education programmes (EQF level 4). While in the UK, Sixth Form Colleges and Further Education Colleges, which are not considered as HEIs, provide HE access qualifications. Sixth Form Colleges typically offer just the A-level, and Further Education Colleges – vocational qualifications such as BTEC National awards and BTEC Higher National awards – in addition to A levels sometimes.

In Denmark, general upper secondary education is mostly provided by general upper secondary schools (*gymnasium*) while VET programmes typically are provided by VET institutions (*erhvervsskole*). Adult education centres (*voksenuddannelsescenter – VUC*) can also offer both types of programmes. The institutions can be both public and private; however, all institutions must be approved by the Ministry of Children and Education to offer one or more of the upper secondary education programmes.

In Estonia, general secondary education is provided by secondary schools (*Gümnaasium*) which can be state, municipal or private. Vocational secondary education programmes are provided by vocational education institutions (generic term is *kutseõppeasutus*) which can also be state, municipal or private.

In Italy, general path of the upper secondary level education is provided by general schools called *licei*. Technical education at the upper secondary level is organised at technical institutes (*istituti tecnici*). VET is organised at vocational institutes (*istituti professionali*).

In Latvia, general secondary education is provided by general secondary education schools (*vidusskolas*) (grades 1 to 12) or state gymnasiums (grades 10 to 12). Vocational secondary education is provided by technical schools (*tehnikum*s), vocational secondary schools (*profesionālā vidusskola*) and it may also be provided by colleges which can implement both vocational secondary education programmes (EQF level 4) and higher education programmes at EQF level 5.

In Malta, education providers are divided by sector, with three government (state) Sixth Forms, two church run Sixth Forms, and two private Sixth Forms.

In Romania, HE access qualifications are provided by high schools (*liceu*) and colleges (*colegiu*) both of which can be state and private run. High schools provide both general and vocational upper secondary education programmes. The vocational programmes up to NQF level 3 can be also provided by Vocational Secondary Schools (*Școala Profesională*), but they do not provide HE access qualifications.

In Slovakia, there are five types of institutions offering upper secondary education programmes (the providing institution is also the awarding institution): gymnasium (*gymnázium*), secondary vocational school (*stredná odborná škola*), secondary sports school (*stredná športová škola*), school of artistic industry (*škola umeleckého priemyslu*), and art conservatory (*konzervatórium*). Two or more schools of any type may form a single legal person with the types of schools included in its name.

In the UK, HE access qualifications are provided by Sixth Form/Colleges for further education (ages 16 to 18).

4.5. Grading system

There are no partner countries with the same grading system, which may be rather challenging aspect when comparing qualifications and their systems between countries. Grading system also

often differs between school and state exams. Therefore, in the context of credential evaluation, great attention should be paid to grades when comparing them between countries.

School exams

For school exams, in **Italy**, **Latvia** and **Romania** there is a 10-point scale where 10 is the highest score and 1 – the lowest. While the grading scale is the same in these countries, the pass marks differ. In Latvia, 4 is required to pass, 5 in Romania and 6 in Italy.

Estonia (general secondary education) and **Slovakia** use 5-point scale; however, whereas in Estonia five is the highest score and one is the lowest, in Slovakia one is the highest score and five is the lowest. Grade 3 is required to pass in Estonia, while grade 4 – in Slovakia. In Estonian vocational secondary education, a 4-point scale is used (5 to 2) where 3 is a pass mark.

Denmark uses 7-point scale where 12 is excellent; 10 is very good; 7 is good; 4 is fair; 02 is adequate; 00 is inadequate and -3 is unacceptable. Passing grade is 02. In addition to the 7-point grading scale, in VET programmes, the assessment form can also include “Pass” and “Fail”. For evaluating school tests, “Pass” and “Fail” is also used in Estonia, Latvia and Malta.

In **Malta**, assessments of students are conducted throughout Year 12 (to determine progression to Year 13) and in Year 13. The most common is the 100-point scale where 35-44 is a pass score however individual policies and grading vary by sector (state, private or church Upper Secondaries) and are conducted with a weighted percentage to determine Pass or Fail. Generally, the assessments are both formative and summative (and are internal assessments) with one private Upper Secondary conducting the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (which includes both internal and external assessments). In all sectors, the examinations have an impact on progression from year to year; but do not have an impact on the qualification for higher education access (the Matriculation Certificate).

In the **UK**, the grading differs by the devolved nation. In England, in the case of GCSEs, a 9-point scale is used where 9 is the highest score and 1 – the lowest, 4 – pass grade. In Wales, Northern Ireland, A* to G score is used where A* is the highest and G the lowest score. Students must achieve at least C to pass a study subject. In Scotland, Highers and Advanced Highers are graded pass grades as A-D, or No Award.

State exams

State exams refer to tests conducted at the end of an upper secondary education programme. The form how they are prepared, evaluated and conducted may vary by country, but either way they are carried out according to the principles and procedures stipulated by the state (government). For example, in Denmark, term “state exams” is not used, since the schools have the mandate to conduct both written and oral exams themselves, yet they are evaluated by internal and external examiners – depending on the type of exam – and content of tests is produced by the Ministry of Children and Education.

In Denmark and Romania, the same grading system is used both for school and state exams (see section about school exams). In case of Romania, the pass grade for each study subject exam is 5, but the average grade has to be at least 6 to pass the state exam.

Estonia, Italy, Latvia and Slovakia use 100-point scale (in Latvia and Slovakia the scale is expressed as percentage). In Estonia, only 1 point is required to pass the state exam, in Italy – 60 points, and in Slovakia – 33%. Currently in Latvia 15% are required to pass, but legislation stipulates that 20% will be required to pass in 2025 and onwards.

In Malta, the exams are graded as follows (per study subject): Grade A – 30 grades points; Grade B – 24 grades points; Grade C – 18 grades points; Grade D – 12 grades points; Grade E – 6 grades points. For Intermediate Level qualifications the succeeding grading is used: Grade A – 10 grades

points; Grade B – 8 grades points; Grade C – 6 grades points; Grade D – 4 grades points; and Grade E – 2 grades points. In order to pass, the learners must gain at least 44 points.

In the UK, for state exams – A levels, A to E scale is used where A is the highest score and E – the lowest. E is required to pass. Students may also be awarded N (narrow failure) or U (unclassified). Final certificates are issued by the examination board, and students may study different subjects with different examination boards.

Overall, the grading system is quite different in every partner country. Not only the grading scale varies, but also the passing score. Despite the vast differences for grading system among partner countries the practices have similarities and grading scales are comparable to some level. In order to compare grading and passing scores, all the grading systems of the project partner countries were expressed into percentages indicating lowest required score to pass an exam. It should be taken into consideration that in different schools and countries the percentage for each grade could be expressed differently; therefore, passing grades for each country may slightly differ and this exercise of comparison only serves as an illustrative example. For school exams the passing scores are somewhat similar ranging from 21% in Scotland to 57% in Wales and Northern Ireland. The highest passing scores for school exams can be observed in Wales and Northern Island (57%), and Italy (51%) with all passing scores averaging 36%. Denmark has the same exam passing scores for school and state exams. In Estonia, Latvia and the UK, the scores for passing state exams than school exams are lower (see Table 5). While in Estonia and Latvia as low as 1% and 15% respectively are necessarily to pass a state exam, in the UK 20% have been set as passing score, and in Slovakia – one third or 33% in written part of the state examination while other parts of the examination must be successfully passed as well. Slightly below half (44%) is necessary to pass state exams in Malta. Italy and Romania are the only partner countries which require more than half – 60% in order to pass state exam. On average requirements for passing state exams are lower than passing school exams with the average mark of 40% for school exams and 32% for state exams. Thus, even when the credentials are recognised, HEIs still would have to evaluate the grades for each student – each individual study subject in the admission procedure to see if the candidate’s achievements correspond to the admission requirements of the desired HE study programme.

Table 5. Passing scores for school and state exams

Country	Passing score for school exams (%)	Passing score for state exams (%)
Denmark	28	28
Estonia	50	1
Italy	51	60
Latvia	31	15
Malta	35	44
Romania	50	60
Slovakia	varies	33
UK	33 – England 57 – Wales, Northern Ireland 21 – Scotland	20

4.6. Assessment system

To access higher education, learners have to meet certain milestones in each partner country. Usually, these requirements include passing mandatory exams in specific subjects, passing optional/elective exams and reaching a specific grade (for passing grades see subchapter 4.5). Exams often include national language and one foreign language (see Table 6). Such exams are required in Estonia, Latvia, Romania and Slovakia. In addition, in Latvia and Slovakia learners have to select two optional exams to pass while in Estonia students have to pass one optional school exam and must do student's research or practical project. The list of those exams is regulated by respective legislation in each country. Students of secondary VET programmes in Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Romania and Slovakia, in addition to exams for general study subjects, have to take an exam for vocational study subjects. In total, depending on country and programme, in most partner countries learners would have to pass four to six exams which include both written and oral exams and may also include practical work. In Italy, students take only three mandatory exams while in Denmark learners in general upper secondary education programmes have to pass 10 exams (oral and written).

In most of the partner countries mandatory exams are stated for specific study subjects, but learners may also choose exams in some study subjects which correspond to their further study plans. Meanwhile, in Malta and the United Kingdom, no specific exams are listed which learners are required to pass as students may combine the study subjects which would fit their desired study programme or life goals.

Table 6. Requirements for passing an examination

Country	Number of exams to pass	Required exams/subjects
Denmark	General upper secondary: 10 (oral and written) VET: several types of tests and exams depending on the programme in question	General upper secondary education: written exam in Danish and in the other study subjects at A-level. The number of oral exams varies for the individual student in accordance with the number of subjects chosen at A-level In addition to the compulsory exams taken each year, the Ministry of Children and Education decides which subjects are to form part of the exam for the individual student VET: The mandatory exams depend on the specific VET programme
Estonia	5-6	Mandatory: Estonian language/Estonian as a second language; Mathematics; Foreign language 1 school exam, 1 student study/practical work Professional/vocational examination (for vocational secondary education)
Italy	3	Mandatory: 2 written exams (1 in Italian language and 1 in the specific major subject depending on the stream of the studies) and 1 final oral exam
Latvia	5-6	Mandatory: Latvian language; Foreign language; Mathematics 2 optional exams Qualification exam (for vocational secondary education)
Malta	6	2 Advanced Level examination subjects 3 Intermediate Level subjects

Country	Number of exams to pass	Required exams/subjects
		Systems of Knowledge examination (Intermediate Level)
Romania	5-6	Mandatory: Romanian language (written and oral) Other exams by choice, includes both written and oral exams
Slovakia	4-5	Mandatory: Slovak language; Foreign language; Minority language (if applicable), Vocational part of examination (if applicable) 1 or 2 optional exams (according to the programme)
UK	3	3 study subjects by choice

In Denmark, for general upper secondary, an evaluation of the individual student's achievements in the study subjects is evaluated in form of concluding term marks and exam marks. Concluding term marks are given at the end of the school year, in which instruction in the subject concerned is conducted. Concluding term marks are given by the subject-teacher and reflect the subject-teacher's appraisal of the student's level of attainment at the end of the year. A total of ten written and oral examinations must be taken in order to pass the complete examination. Towards the end of the programme, all students must also submit a specialised study project, which form part of the examination. Written examination papers are marked by two external examiners. Oral exams are marked by the teacher and one external examiner, who has the ultimate saying in the assessment.

VET qualifications in Denmark consist of a basic course and a main course. At the end of the first part of the basic course, students are examined in one of the basic subjects they have acquired. Usually, students are tested in the Danish language subject, but if students have followed multiple basic subjects, the school decides at random about the study subject in which exam is taken. At the end of the second part of the basic course, students are also examined in one of the basic subjects. Furthermore, the subject specific to the student's education programme ends with a basic training subject examination. The main course includes several types of tests and exams depending on the programme in question. Tests can be held in both basic subjects, basic training subjects as well as specialised study subjects. The main course ends with a professional vocational examination in which the students' competences are tested in staged real-life settings. The examination usually consists of both a theoretical and practical part.

In Estonia, at the end of general secondary education programme, learners must pass three state exams (Estonian language or Estonian as a second language, mathematics and foreign language), school examination in one subject of learners' choice and student study or practical work. At the end of vocational secondary education programme taking of state examinations is voluntary, except for the state examination in Estonian as a second language for those completing a curriculum in a language of instruction other than Estonian. The state examination in Estonian as a second language may be substituted by passing a professional examination or vocational examination in Estonian. The state examination can be taken the same year as completing the vocational programme or following an additional year of general education studies.

In Italy, final assessment takes place at the end of each school year and at final state examinations held at the end of the course of study (fifth grade). Mandatory exams include two written exams (one in Italian language and one in the specific major subject depending on the stream of the studies) and one final oral exam.

In Latvia, to get certificate of general secondary education (*atestāts*), a person should receive a passing score in the final state centralised exams in the Latvian language, foreign language and mathematics at least at optimal level, two study subjects of the student's choice at higher level

(Latvian language, foreign language or mathematics may also be taken at higher level) and obtained a passing mark of at least 4 in all study subjects. To obtain diploma of vocational secondary education a learner must pass the final state qualification exam in profession and final state centralised exams in general study subjects – Latvian language at least optimal level, foreign language at least optimal level, mathematics at least basic level.

In Malta, for learner to access HE, they must obtain the Matriculation Certificate which consists of six subjects chosen from four groups (of subjects). Learners must choose two Advanced Level examination subjects, and three Intermediate Level subjects. Additionally, all students must pass the Systems of Knowledge examination – which counts as an Intermediate Level examination. They must receive a “Pass” mark in groups 1, 2, and 3 and have a total of 44 points.

In Romania, to pass the Bacalaureate exam which grants access to HE, learners must gain minimum mark of five in each subject and an average mark of six for the exam. The national bacalaureate exam consists of:

1. Test A: oral and written tests in Romanian language and literature (five different test types – common tests, tests for minorities, tests for different profiles and others).
2. Test B: two foreign language tests.
3. Test C: digital skills assessment test.
4. Test D: written test in mother language and literature (for students who attended secondary school in a language of national minorities).
5. Test E: two written, mandatory, specific tests for profile or specialisation (subject combinations vary depending on profile).
6. Test F: written test, mandatory, for the assessment of basic skills (complementary to the profile/written tests E).

In Slovakia, school-leaving examination (*maturitná skúška; 'Maturita'*) has an internal and external part. The external part (for national language, minority languages and mathematics) is conducted by the National Institute for Certified Education Measurements (*Národný ústav certifikovaných meraní*) that prepares, organises, and evaluates the examinations. The external part takes place in a selected day usually in March (with alternative dates in April). The secondary schools in cooperation with the regional authorities then conduct the internal part of examination in May and June when the results of the external part are available. The number of compulsory and elective examination subjects is stipulated by law for each type of school and always includes academic subjects. In vocational programmes, the examination also includes a theoretical and practical vocational part.

In the UK, for England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, access to HE programmes is typically based on three GCE Advanced Level (A level) subjects. Students in Wales may alternatively study for the Welsh Bacalaureate Qualification. In Scotland, admission to higher education is typically based on achieving Scottish Highers in four subjects.

There is not usually a specific language requirement to study A levels, but most admitting institutions will require students to have at least a grade C (or grade 4) or above in GCSE English. Individual A-level courses may require specific subjects to have been studied at GCSE.

Most learners choose to study three subjects. There are no mandatory subjects at this level which all students in the country must study for; each student selects subjects which they feel will be appropriate in order to prepare for their preferred university-level studies (for example, students interested in the sciences will opt for science and mathematics subjects whereas those who plan to study humanities or social science subjects will likely elect to study similar subjects at A level).

A-levels are usually assessed through examinations and/or coursework, depending on the subject studied. The examination board is responsible for the syllabus and the preparation of examinations.

To summarise the analysis of the HE access qualifications, the aspects explored in the ARAQUA project show that some points may require more consideration than others in the context of credential evaluation. For example, formal eligibility rights, nominal duration of learning, number of years, types of education institutions (providing and awarding institutions) may seem to be rather homogeneous and easy to compare. Meanwhile, the grading system (at school and state level) and assessment system including final exams for HE access qualifications require more thorough analysis of national systems to evaluate qualifications. This analysis of the education systems of project partner countries highlights the necessity to agree on more detailed minimum requirements to map HE access qualifications which could be subjected to automatic recognition.

Chapter 5. Flexible pathways leading to HE access qualifications

Flexible pathways are alternative means to access higher education besides completing traditional education programmes which grant access to HE.

Not all countries provide alternative pathways to HE. In **Latvia** and **Romania**, the only way to access HE is to complete traditional education programmes of EQF level 4.

In **Slovakia**, there are no ways to gain HE access qualification through independent testing or lifelong learning, but there are different ways to upgrade the secondary vocational qualification (without access to HE) through the build-up studies (*nadstavbové štúdium*). Holder of a secondary vocational certificate, Certificate of Apprenticeship (*Výučný list*) or Final Examination Certificate (*Vysvedčenie o záverečnej skúške*) may enter a two-year study programme leading to a HE access qualification.

In **Denmark**, there are different flexible pathways leading to a HE access qualification. One of them is the secondary education for refugees and immigrants. The programme is a general secondary education programme and is aimed for refugees and immigrants whose first language is different than Danish and who wishes to apply for higher education in Denmark. The duration of the programme is one year, and the access requirement is a general upper secondary qualification from the home country which is not comparable in level to a Danish general upper secondary qualification. Another pathway is the higher preparatory exam (hf) which can be completed as a single-subject programme. The programme has a flexible structure and does not have a nominal length. The higher preparatory exam is aimed for people with the need of completing the qualification in their own pace or in combination with a job. There is also an alternative option to complete a Danish vocational programme which is the VET for adults (EUV). The EUV is for students with a minimum age of 25 years. The programme is structured after the individual's personal, education and practical experience and leads to a vocational qualification in shorter time based on an assessment of prior learning.

Similar to Denmark, also **Estonia** offers access to HE for adults which in the case for Estonia is done through general secondary education in the non-stationary studies at an adult gymnasium (*täiskasvanute gümnaasium*). The general prerequisite for commencing studies in vocational secondary education is basic education (9 grades), but studies may also be commenced by persons who lack basic education and are at least 22 years of age and who have acquired competences corresponding to basic education. Both mentioned alternative pathways lead to the traditional HE access qualifications.

In **Italy**, access to HE only granted by State Exam Diploma upon the Conclusion of the Upper Secondary School Course (*Diploma di Esame di Stato conclusivo dei corsi di istruzione secondaria superior*), but there are alternative ways to acquire the diploma by passing final state exam as external candidates. The candidates must meet the following requirements:

- turning 19 in the calendar year in which the state examination takes place and have completed compulsory education;
- holding a lower secondary school qualification (*Diploma di scuola secondaria di primo grado*), first-cycle certification, irrespective of the age;
- holding any other qualification obtained at the end of a four-year upper secondary programme, either in the education “old” programmes of the Italian system or in the regional vocational training system (art. 15 of d. lgs. 226/2005);
- leaving school before 15 March of the fifth and the last year of studies of the upper secondary school.

Candidates who have been admitted, but did not attend the last grade, are required to pass the preliminary examination on all subjects included in the curriculum of the last grade of the relevant programme. Candidates lacking grade/s and in the study programme of the last grade are required to pass the preliminary examination on these subject(s). External candidates must submit their application for admission to the state examinations to the head of the relevant Regional School Office who then will assign the students to the institutes of the municipalities they live in (or of the province or of the region).

Although the Matriculation Certificate is the primary qualification for entry into HE in **Malta**, there are other pathways for access to HE. Higher education institutions may make the use of “Maturity Clause”, which allows entry to HE beginning at age 23. For example, at University of Malta, adult learners may be admitted subject to an interview, and review of their academic background. This may not grant access to all courses and the applicants may be subject to a proficiency test. Provisions are similar at Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology and Institute of Tourism Studies.

Finally, in the **UK**, access to HE may be granted by different programmes which are focused on professional subjects. BTEC National programmes are available for study in broad occupational areas, including engineering, fashion, music, public services and sports science. The aim of BTEC Nationals is to train technician-level workers, but they are also widely accepted for admission to HE.

The BTEC Higher National Certificates and Diplomas sit at RQF levels 4 and 5 respectively (EQF level 5), and correspond to years one and two of an undergraduate degree. They are more specialised vocational qualifications that also may be used to access higher education. Students may be able to enter onto a Bachelor degree programme in the second or third year.

T levels are a relatively new qualification that are available in England only. T levels are two-year courses that follow GCSEs. They consist of 1,800 hours of study, in addition to an industry placement of a minimum of 315 hours. T levels are available in subjects such as digital business services, education and childcare, finance and health.

Considering the rapid development of technologies and changes in the labour market, alternative learning pathways are essential to ensure inclusive learning settings. The ARAQUA project provided a brief insight about alternative HE access qualifications, perhaps this information could be used for initiating discussion about conditions or criteria for including these qualifications in the general map of HE access qualifications that are considered for automatic recognition. One of the major challenges is ensuring balance between flexibility or specialisation element of these qualifications, which is crucial for their target groups, and standardisation of requirements of qualifications which usually are stipulated for regular HE access qualifications.

Chapter 6. HE access qualifications in national qualifications framework

This chapter includes the comparison of HE access qualifications in national qualifications frameworks, mentioning the EQF level for HE access qualifications and outlining comparison of level descriptors for HE access qualifications. The NQF level and their context is essential element in the credential evaluation.

6.1. EQF level of HE access qualifications

In all the partner countries HE access qualifications are placed at EQF level 4 or equal. In Denmark, HE access qualifications are primarily placed at EQF level 4, but a few are also placed at level 3 and 5 in the NQF/EQF⁸. In the UK, Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) has been established in England, Wales and Northern Ireland where HE access qualifications (GCE Advanced (A levels) and Advanced Subsidiary (AS-levels)) are placed at level 3 of RQF which is equal to EQF level 4. Meanwhile, Scotland uses Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) where HE access qualifications (Higher and Advanced Higher) are placed at SCQF level 6 (equal to RQF level 3 and EQF level 4) and 7 (equal to RQF level 4/5 and EQF level 5 respectively)⁹.

6.2. Level descriptors

To describe the learning outcomes, Denmark, Latvia, Malta and Slovakia use knowledge, skills and competences. Estonia, Italy and Romania use the same dimensions as EQF: knowledge, skills, responsibility and autonomy. In England and Northern Ireland, RQF is used which expresses learning outcomes in knowledge and skills. In Scotland, SCQF expresses learning outcomes in:

- Knowledge and understanding;
- Applied knowledge, skills and understanding;
- Generic cognitive skills;
- Communication, ICT and numeracy skills;
- Autonomy, accountability and working with others.

In Wales, Credit and Qualifications framework for Wales (CQFW) is used which expresses learning outcomes in Knowledge and understanding; Application and action; Autonomy and accountability.

In almost all NQFs including RQF and CQFW, qualifications are arranged in eight levels (same as EQF). The only exception is the SCQF for Scotland which lists qualifications in 12 levels. Even though SCQF has 12 levels, it is still comparable with other NQFs.

⁸ For example, the Irish Leaving Certificate is placed over two levels of both the NQF and the EQF based on a process involving evaluation of learning outcomes associated with three options of education programmes and examinations. First two options – the Leaving Certificate Established and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme – give general access to HE studies. Third option, the Leaving Certificate Applied that is primarily vocationally oriented, with additional study subjects from the Leaving Certificate Established provides enhanced progression opportunities. The achievements of learners who take “higher level” courses in their Leaving Certificate programme and achieve well are likely to acquire learning outcomes more associated with NQF level 5 (EQF level 4). However, all learners would be engaged in attaining learning outcomes to some extent consistent with EQF levels 3 and 4 rather than being exclusive to either one of these EQF levels.

⁹ Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF): <https://qualifications.pearson.com/en/support/support-topics/understanding-our-qualifications/framework-rqf.html>

In all of the NQFs except for those used in the UK, learning outcomes are expressed in quite similar dimensions, but they are quite different for the RQF, CQFW and SCQF.

When comparing level descriptors of EQF level 4 and RQF level 3 some similarities can be observed. For example, both levels require a range of cognitive and practical skills to solve problems in a field of work or study. Both levels involve taking responsibility in a work or study context. Though, there are some differences which also should be taken into consideration. For example, EQF Level 4 requires factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts, while the RQF level 3 requires knowledge of facts, principles, processes, and general concepts. EQF level 4 involves self-management and supervising others within certain contexts, while the RQF level 3 involves taking responsibility for task completion and adapting behaviour to solve problems.

As mentioned before, Scottish HE access qualifications are placed at SCQF level 6 and 7 which corresponds to EQF level 4 and 5 respectively. When comparing level descriptors of SCQF level 6 and EQF level 4 the main similarities were that both levels require a range of cognitive and practical skills to solve problems in a field of work or study. Both levels involve taking responsibility in a work or study context. The main differences were that EQF level 4 requires factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts, while the SCQF level 6 requires knowledge of facts, theories, ideas, materials, terminology, practices, and techniques which are essential to the work area or sector. EQF level 4 involves self-management and supervising others within certain contexts, while the SCQF level 6 involves carrying out clearly defined activities in which a number of tasks, including non-routine or new tasks, are combined and normally works in familiar contexts.

CQFW has the same levels for qualifications as RQF. EQF level 4 corresponds to CQFW level 3. When comparing level descriptors for the respective level some similarities and differences can be observed. For example, both frameworks aim to describe the learning outcomes at each level in terms of knowledge, skills, and autonomy/responsibility. The EQF level 4 seems to be more advanced than the CQFW level 3, as it involves a higher degree of self-management, the ability to supervise others, and the application of knowledge and skills in broader contexts.

The comparison was made considering the generic level descriptors. The specific knowledge, skills and competences can vary depending on the specific qualification.

The analysis of the country reports points out that almost in all cases the HE access qualifications are referenced to the EQF level 4, which also corresponds to the provisions of Paris Communiqué (adopted on 25.05.2018) in the Appendix III stating that short-cycle and first cycle qualifications build upon general secondary education. The level of NQF is an essential aspect to be taken into account in the credential evaluation, and in the terms of ARAQUA project, it is an important criterion for developing map of HE access qualifications to be subjected to automatic recognition. The NQFs may be used as valuable tool when doing credential evaluation; however, additional information about the qualification is necessary.

Chapter 7. Quality assurance for institutions implementing/awarding HE access qualifications

Before education programmes can be implemented, they require a licence or an approval by the relevant ministry. In all the partner countries programmes which give access to HE must be licenced or approved by the ministry, otherwise the HE access qualification in respective country cannot be issued. Before education programmes can be implemented in the institution, the institution itself must acquire a licence or must be approved to offer and handle upper secondary qualifications.

In addition, all the education programmes which lead to qualifications giving access to HE, must be accredited or approved. The duration of accreditation or approval by the relevant ministry varies by country. In Denmark, evaluations are done annually. Only in case of continuing low performance in the evaluation, the Ministry of Children and Education engages in a dialogue and requests a statement accounting for the background of the continuing low performance. The ministry can decide to impose sanctions if the quality is not improved. In Italy, Malta, Romania and Slovakia programmes which lead to qualifications giving access to HE are accredited for five years, in Latvia and Estonia (vocational secondary education) – for six years. General secondary education programmes in Estonia undergo periodic administrative oversight.

In Slovakia, the education providers must first obtain a ministry license and be registered into the Network of School and Schooling Institutions (*Sieť škôl a školských zariadení*), including their licensed study programmes. After that, the quality assurance authority (State School Inspection) conducts a complex inspection regularly every five years, or a specific inspection, based upon a specific suggestion in regards to quality assurance. In case of serious deficiencies, there are several types of sanctions, including the motion for the ministry to remove the school from the school network.

In the UK, there is no validity period for Ofqual, awarding institutions submit annual report for compliance. The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) accreditation has set a time frame, after which accreditation is extended or withdrawn.

In all the project partner countries both internal and external quality assurance may be observed. Internal quality assurance in partner countries is carried out in form of self-assessment reports which are prepared by education institutions and sent to national quality assurance agency or ministry. In most cases, the reports have to be prepared annually. In Estonia, internal quality assurance must be carried out at least once every three years. The content of the reports differs by country depending on legislation and national requirements. They may include school's organisation, implementation of education and teaching, etc.

All of the project partner countries have external quality assurance, but their implementation and form is different in each partner country. The external quality assurance is carried out by the ministry or another external body (see Table 7). Only in Denmark external quality assurance of all HE access qualification programmes is carried out by the ministry – the Danish Ministry of Children and Education. The parliament has set three national guiding goals for all general upper secondary education and four for vocational education programmes. The goals are formulated so there is room for the management and teachers at the individual institutions to adjust the quality assurance criteria in order to develop the schools and teaching in accordance with the local conditions. The Danish Ministry of Children and Education monitors the school's quality work, through different types of supervision, to support that the institutions deliver high-quality education and fulfil their obligation to contribute to meeting the goals.

In Estonia, administrative oversight over the teaching and learning carried out by the school is regularly exercised by the Ministry of Education and Research. The VET secondary schools

undergo a different process of external quality assurance, which is the accreditation of education programme groups. In VET the competent accreditation body is the Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA) (former Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education, EKKA). HAKA oversees the initial assessment and re-assessment of education programme groups (granting the right to provide instruction in a new group of programmes without a term or for three years) and quality assessment of education programme groups (at least once in every six years for the group of education programmes that has been granted the right to provide instruction without a term).

Table 7. Quality assurance for institutions awarding HE access qualifications

Country	Responsible institution/s	Internal evaluation (yes/no)	External evaluation (yes/no)	Max. duration of accreditation (years)
Denmark	Danish Ministry of Children and Education	Yes	Yes	1
Estonia	Ministry of Research and Education Estonian Quality Agency for Education (vocational education)	Yes	Yes	6
Italy	National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education System National Institute of Documentation, Innovation and Research in Education Ministry of Education and Merit	Yes	Yes	5
Latvia	State Education Quality Service (<i>Izglītības kvalitātes valsts dienests</i>)	Yes	Yes	6
Malta	Malta Further and Higher Education Authority	Yes	Yes	5
Romania	Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education	Yes	Yes	5
Slovakia	State School Inspection (<i>Štátna školská inšpekcia</i>)	Yes	Yes	5
United Kingdom	Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation; Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills Scottish Qualifications Authority (Scotland) CCEA Regulation (Northern Ireland) Qualifications Wales (Wales)	Yes	Yes	No validity period

In Italy, the Ministry of Education and Merit is only partly involved in the quality assurance process. In rest of the cases there are external agencies which carries out the quality assurance. In Italy, the National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education System (*Istituto nazionale per la valutazione del sistema educativo di istruzione e di formazione*) co-ordinates the system and prepares tests for the external evaluation of pupils' learning outcomes in all types of school at all educational levels, The National Institute of Documentation, Innovation and Research in Education (*Istituto nazionale di documentazione, innovazione e ricerca educativa - Indire*) supports the improvement and continuing professional development of school staff, and the

special inspection body, which is made up of the managers with technical functions of the Ministry of Education and Merit (*Ministero dell'istruzione e del merito*).

In Latvia, the responsible authority for quality assurance of institutions implementing and awarding HE access qualifications is the State Education Quality Service (*Izglītības kvalitātes valsts dienests*) which carries out licensing of vocational educational programmes and provides quality assurance both in general and vocational education. When assessing the quality areas of education, the level of quality assessment is determined by the following criteria: 1) Conformity to the goal; 2) High-quality learning; 3) Inclusive environment; 4) Good governance.

In Malta, the external quality assurance is conducted by Malta Further and Higher Education Authority. There are regular meetings with the Quality Assurance Committee to review Quality Assurance Decisions. There are two kinds of programmes which can be provided: home-grown programmes that are accredited through Malta Further and Higher Education Authority or foreign accredited qualifications (schools may offer programmes from other accredited providers). Provided it is within the parameters of their licensing agreement, and that the external programme is accredited in the country of origin (and permission is received to become a provider) the institution may then offer the course. “Home Grown” programmes of studies are reviewed by external reviewers/evaluators prior to being offered (to determine the MQF level, the learning outcomes, and entrance requirements).

In Romania, the external quality assurance, for granting the provisional operating authorisation, accreditation, periodic evaluation of the organisations providing education that organises and carries out education activities in the Romanian education system, is carried out by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education. The accreditation process involves two successive stages: provisional operation authorisation and accreditation. The process of periodic external assessment of the quality of education in education institutions accredited pre-university courses are carried out at least once every five years. Provisional operating authorisation is the stage in which the education institution/unit on the basis of the external evaluation carried out under the conditions of the law, acquires the quality of education provider, by order of the Minister of Education, upon proposal of Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-university Education.

In Slovakia, the external evaluation is conducted by the State School Inspection (*Štátna školská inšpekcia*). In addition, a specialised organisation called National Institute of Certified Educational Measurements (*Národný ústav certifikovaných meraní*) was established to monitor and assess the quality of education for the purpose of which they conduct several types of nationwide examinations, most importantly, the external part of the Maturita Examination (HE access qualification).

In the United Kingdom, the first level of quality assurance is provided by the government body Ofqual (Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation). Ofqual employs a recognition process to determine which awarding organisations / exam boards are permitted to offer A levels (HE access qualification) and sets the rules for assessing the subject content. Ofqual then additionally accredits the A level courses awarded by recognised awarding bodies. There is extensive documentation detailing the conditions which awarding bodies must comply with in order for the organisation to receive recognition and for individual qualifications to be accredited through Ofqual. Though, Ofqual does not directly quality assure schools, only the examination boards and the qualifications they offer. Schools are inspected by Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills), which focuses on assessing the learning provider through set inspection criteria and delivering inspection reports detailing strengths and weaknesses of the educational setting, in respect of teaching and curriculum (quality of education), student behaviour and safeguarding, and leadership and management of the setting.

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is both the awarding body for qualifications, including the Highers and Advanced Highers, as well as the regulatory body in Scotland; it operates two divisions, SQA Awarding and SQA Accreditation, which act separately from one another. Nevertheless, following a review of the situation, changes will be implemented in 2025 and the organisation will be replaced by two new bodies, one which will separately be responsible for design and award of qualifications while the other will be responsible for accreditation and regulation.

According to the country reports, rather varied quality assurance practices are implemented in the project partner countries, yet in general in all cases the procedures involve both external and internal quality assurance mechanisms. In the context of credential evaluation, the most essential aspect perhaps is the possibility to acquire trustful and objective information that particular qualification is quality assured. Although further discussion is required on how to ensure the availability of such information, the necessity of trust in quality of qualifications for them to be automatically recognised may not be disputable.

Chapter 8. Learning outcomes of HE access qualifications

The project partners described learning outcomes of HE access qualifications considering their formulation, quality assurance, terminology and hierarchy. However, in terms of the project, analysis of actual learning outcomes (their content) was not conducted due to the limitations of the study as countries have rather varied approaches to the formulation of the learning outcomes.

8.1. Formulation of learning outcomes

In the project partner countries learning outcomes for HE access qualifications are formulated by the ministries or supporting agencies in close cooperation with employers, education institutions, professional associations, etc.

In Denmark, the National Agency for Education and Quality under the Danish Ministry of Children and Education is responsible for the development of subjects and content in general upper secondary education. The National Agency for Education and Quality collaborates with teachers, management and institutions in the upper secondary school area as well as representatives of the labour market in the development of the national core curriculum. For VET the parliament sets out the overall framework which is administered by the Ministry of Children and Education. Even though the Ministry of Children and Education has the general responsibility for VET, the social partners (including e.g. trade committees) do also have considerable influence on and great responsibility for VET in regards to duration, structure, learning outcomes, approval of practical training companies etc. The social partners are thus responsible to ensure that provision of VET is in line with the needs of the labour market.

In Estonia, each secondary school drafts its own curriculum according to the national curriculum. The expected generic learning outcomes for the general secondary and vocational secondary education are set out in the relevant Government approved regulations (National Curriculum for Secondary Schools, VET Standard and national curricula for certain professions) and further more specifically described in national and school curricula. Specific learning outcomes are described in the syllabi. VET Standard establishes learning outcomes at threshold level for each type of formal vocational education, which is the basis for designing the content and learning outcomes of the corresponding curriculum. Similar to Denmark, the national curriculum in VET is prepared in cooperation with other education institutions, employees, employers, business and professional associations, undertakings and institutions related to the specialty (i.e. social partners), taking into consideration the VET Standard, relevant occupational standards elaborated by the National Qualifications Authority (*Kutsekoda*) and in case of secondary VET also the National Curriculum for Secondary Schools.

In Italy, curricula in general upper secondary education, is defined in specific National Guidelines for *licei* issued in 2010. The National Guidelines set out the specific learning objectives for each type of *liceo*. For each subject, specific learning objectives describe knowledge and skills that students are expected to acquire as the basis for building their own competences. The National Guidelines also include the student's educational, cultural and professional profile representing what a student should know and should be able to do at the end of each branch of *liceo*.

In Latvia, for general upper secondary education, learning outcomes are listed in the Cabinet Regulations on the state general upper secondary education standard (2020). The standard stipulates learning outcomes for each study subject, but there are no general learning outcomes for the entire education programme. Learning outcomes for vocational upper secondary education programmes are formulated according to the state vocational upper secondary education standard, and programmes also include learning outcomes for general upper secondary education as vocational upper secondary education programmes comprise general study subjects in such scale

that learners are able to pass final centralised exams. In addition, depending on the field of the education programme, these programmes have learning outcomes related to the respective occupation, which are stipulated by the respective occupational standard. The occupational standards are developed by expert groups, reviewed by the Sectoral Experts Councils and approved by the National Tripartite Sub-council for Cooperation in Vocational Education and Employment.

In Malta, the competent institution for formulation, review and updating the framework for learning outcomes is the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority. Learning outcomes are key components of the Malta Qualifications Framework. Each MQF level is described in terms of both learning outcomes and qualifications.

In Romania, same as in Denmark, the Ministry of Education formulates learning outcomes in the curricula for secondary education. They are developed within specialised commissions for each subject and approved by a Minister of Education Order. The ownership of the learning outcomes belongs to the Ministry of Education.

In Slovakia, learning outcomes for HE access qualifications are formulated in the section Education Standard of the document “National Education Programme” for each level and type of school. The standard includes the Content and the Output part. The Content part of education standard defines the minimum content of the education. The Output part defines on what level the student should master the minimal curriculum and what to be capable of.

In the UK, learning outcomes tend to be outlined by the regulators and then the curriculum is set by the examination boards. These tend to be consistent across the devolved nations.

8.2. Quality assurance of learning outcomes for HE access qualifications

Learning outcomes are part of quality assurance process in all of the partner countries at greater or lesser capacity. In Romania, the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education takes into account the learning outcomes in the process of evaluation for authorisation or accreditation. Meanwhile, in Estonia, Latvia and Slovakia, the learning outcomes are not subject to quality assurance in general and vocational education per se, but achieving of learning outcomes is taken into account as a criterion in quality assessment of several areas (e.g., the learning environment, the organisation of studies, teaching methodology etc.).

In Malta, the learning outcomes are listed in S.L. 607.01 Malta Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning Regulations, Second Schedule, and also in the national Referencing Report.

Similar to Estonia, Latvia and Slovakia, in Denmark learning outcomes are not subject to quality assurance in general and vocational education per se. However, the Ministry of Children and Education has formulated learning outcomes for each single subject in general upper secondary education. Supervision of the learning outcomes is also conducted by the Ministry of Children and Education. In case of upper secondary VET, the trade committees define learning outcomes for each VET programme and supervision is conducted by the Ministry of Children and Education.

In the UK, there are different regulators for each of the devolved nations, but in the context of HE access qualifications, learning outcomes tend to be outlined by the regulators and then the curriculum is set by the examination boards. These tend to be consistent across the devolved nations.

8.3. Terminology of learning outcomes

How learning outcomes are defined in the NQF and how they are defined for different qualifications may differ by each country.

In Malta, there are no specific differences between national or sectoral, generic, or specific learning outcomes. This includes academic and vocational qualifications. Similar to Malta, in Romania, learning outcomes used for HE access qualifications are the same as ones used for level descriptors in NQF: knowledge (factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study); skills (a range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study); responsibility and autonomy (exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change; supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities).

While in Estonian Qualifications Framework level descriptors of the learning outcomes are described as knowledge, skills and competences (see subchapter 6.2), in general education they are formulated as knowledge, skills and attitudes obtained as a result of learning, which are described at the minimum level in order to pass the curriculum, module or subject course. Meanwhile, learning outcomes in vocational education are described through vocational and professional knowledge, skills, extent of independence and responsibility, learning competence, communication skills, self-determination competence, performance competence, information technology competence and initiative and entrepreneurial competence, which are defined in § 8 of the Standard of Vocational Education. Competence can be categorised as either general or field-specific competence.

In Latvia, the situation is quite similar as regards to differences between use of learning outcome dimensions for NQF and for HE access qualifications. While in Latvian Qualifications Framework the dimensions are the same as in the Estonian Qualifications Framework (knowledge, skills, competences), the dimensions for programme level learning outcomes for general and vocational secondary education differ. In vocational secondary education they are expressed as: a) skills and attitudes; b) professional knowledge (divided into concept level, comprehension level and application level); c) competences. Meanwhile, in general education there are no general learning outcomes for entire education programme, instead they are divided for each study subject and are expressed into general level of learning, optimal level of learning and the highest level of learning.

In Denmark, the learning outcomes in the NQF are the same for all types of upper secondary education qualifications. However, the dimensions of learning outcomes for general and vocational upper secondary education differ as in the case of Latvia. In upper secondary VET, learning outcomes are described in individual education agreements (*uddannelsesordning*) defined by the relevant trade committee. The terminology of the learning outcomes differs from programme to programme. In general upper secondary education, there are similar to Latvia no general learning outcomes for the entire education programmes, instead they are described in national course regulations for each study subject.

In Italy, there is more complex division of learning outcomes for HE access qualifications, where knowledge and competences are organised into four cultural areas: languages, mathematics, science/technology and history/social studies. Knowledge and competences are also the basis for building learning pathways aimed at acquiring key competences that can help students in adulthood and for lifelong learning.

Similar to Estonia, Latvia and Italy, there are differences between dimensions of learning outcomes in NQF and the ones used in the state education standard. While Slovakian NQF has such dimensions as knowledge, skills and competences (also used in Denmark, Latvia, Malta),

the state education standard uses factual knowledge (basis element of discipline that enables to solve the scientific problems within); conceptual knowledge (relationships between facts); procedural knowledge (how to perform something, scientific methods) and metacognitive facts (cognition in general).

For the UK, the RQF has separate level descriptors based on knowledge and understanding, and skills. These descriptors apply to all qualifications regulated by Ofqual, including general and VET qualifications.¹⁰ In Scotland, the SQA has five characteristics for each level of the framework. These include characteristic descriptors on Knowledge and Understanding, Practice: Applied Knowledge, Skills and Understanding, Generic Cognitive Skills, Communication, ICT and Numeracy Skills, Autonomy, Accountability and Working with Others.¹¹

8.4. Hierarchy of learning outcomes

Hierarchy of learning outcomes includes existing structure of setting, i.e., generic and specific learning outcomes (e.g. national, sectoral, level descriptors).

In the partner countries the hierarchy of learning outcomes is quite similar. There are NQF level descriptors at most general national level, then there are state education standard(-s) (and occupational standard if relevant (Latvia)) at national level which prescribe learning outcomes of education programmes at education institution level.

Learning outcomes are aligned with the level descriptors of respective NQF. State education standard establishes threshold level for general and vocational education, which is the basis for designing the content and learning outcomes of the corresponding curriculum.

As mentioned before, the dimensions of learning outcomes at education institution level may differ from NQF level descriptors, but the level of learning will be the same. Also, emphasis of learning outcomes varies by country. For example, in Malta, learning outcomes are the “standard” against which all qualifications and awards¹² in the national system are accredited.

The conducted desk studies in the project partner countries in terms of learning outcomes show that additional exploration in this regard should be done. Regarding the procedures of formulating learning outcomes of HE access qualifications some similarities may be observed; learning outcomes may be evidently considered as valuable element for the transparency of qualifications, yet various approaches to formulation and structure of learning outcomes are practised. Taking into account the results of this study, further discussions should be carried out to set some guiding principles as regards the role of learning outcomes in credential evaluation (especially automatic recognition).

¹⁰ Ofqual Handbook: General Conditions of Recognition. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook/section-e-design-and-development-of-qualifications>

¹¹ SCQF level descriptors. https://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/SCQF-LevelDescriptors.pdf

¹² In Malta, a qualification is a “substantial” programme based on a certain amount of ECTS while an award is a programme lacking the credits of a qualification.

Chapter 9. Recognition criteria and procedures of HE access qualifications in the country

This chapter compiles comparison of legislation regarding recognition of HE access qualifications; tasks of national ENIC/NARIC or ENIC in assessment and recognition of foreign HE access qualifications; competent recognition authorities for HE access qualifications and criteria and procedure for assessment and recognition.

9.1. Legislation regarding recognition of HE access qualifications

In all the partner countries, the recognition of foreign qualifications concerning HE (HE qualifications and HE access qualifications) is done in accordance with Lisbon Recognition Convention. In addition, there are national laws and regulations stipulating recognition criteria and procedures of evaluation of foreign qualification, including HE access qualifications (see Table 8). Furthermore, countries have mutual recognition agreements, which may involve specific procedures or principles. For example, in 2018, in order to facilitate academic recognition of qualifications concerning HE and promote exchange of information on education systems of the Baltic Countries, the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Estonia, the Government of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of the Republic of Lithuania on the automatic academic recognition of qualifications concerning higher education (in force since 7 January 2019) was concluded.

In Estonia, there are two Government regulations concerning assessment and recognition of qualifications, including access qualifications. In addition to Government of the Republic of Estonia Regulation No 89 of 6 April 2006 “Criteria and Procedures for Assessment and Academic Recognition of Foreign Qualifications and for Use of Title of Qualification Granted in Foreign Education System” (*Välisriigi haridust tõendavate dokumentide hindamise ja akadeemilise tunnustamise ning välisriigi haridussüsteemis antud kvalifikatsiooni nimetuse kasutamise tingimused ja kord*) there is Government of the Republic of Estonia Regulation No 120 which stipulates the comparability of qualifications issued on the territory of the former USSR before 20 August 1991.

In the UK, there is no legislation for recognition of HE access qualifications.

Table 8. Legal framework for the recognition of foreign HE access qualification by the partner countries (overview)

Country	Legislation on recognition of HE access qualifications	Competent authority to evaluate foreign HE access qualifications	Criteria for assessment	Legal status of statement
Denmark	Assessment of Foreign Qualifications Act (Consolidation Act No 579 of 1 June 2014)	Danish Agency of Higher Education and Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access requirements • Level • Workload/nominal duration • Aims of the programme • Subject combination and structure of the programme 	Legally binding, but not mandatory for HE admission

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ratio of theory and practice within the programme • Formal eligibility rights • Status of the issuing institution in the home country • The qualification must be publicly recognised in the home country falling within the ordinary degree structure 	
Estonia	Government of the Republic of Estonia Regulation No 89 of 6 April 2006 “Criteria and Procedures for Assessment and Academic Recognition of Foreign Qualifications and for Use of Title of Qualification Granted in Foreign Education System”	Education and Youth Board – Estonian ENIC/NARIC HEIs and employers if they have sufficient knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level • Quality • Workload/nominal duration • Learning outcomes • Formal eligibility rights • Grades • Status of the issuing institution in the home country 	Recommendation (not mandatory by law)
Italy	Art. 2 of Law 148/2002	CIMEA, HEIs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level • Status of the issuing institution in the home country • Formal eligibility rights • Learning outcomes • Access requirements • Workload/nominal duration 	Recommendation (not mandatory by law)
Latvia	Article 111 of the Education Law (1998)	AIC – Latvian ENIC / NARIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level • Formal eligibility rights • Workload/ nominal duration • Status of the issuing institution in the home country 	Recommendation (mandatory by law)
Malta	Legal Notice 2006 (Subsidiary Legislation 451.02) – Chapter 5	MQRIC, University of Malta, MCAST, ITS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Status of the issuing institution in the home country • Level • Workload/nominal duration 	Recommendation (not mandatory by law)

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eligibility rights for regulated professions 	
Romania	<p>Law on Pre-university Education No 198/2023</p> <p>Law on Higher Education No 199/2023</p> <p>Order of the Ministry of Education No 3630/2018</p>	CNRED – Romanian ENIC / NARIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level • Field/specialisation (on request) • Formal eligibility rights 	Legally binding, but not mandatory for HE admission
Slovakia	Act No 422/2015 Coll. on recognition of evidence of formal qualifications and on recognition of professional qualifications	Regional School Administration Offices ¹³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level • Status of the issuing institution in the home country • Formal eligibility rights • Workload/nominal duration 	Decision, legally binding and required for enrolment
United Kingdom	n/a	UK ENIC, HEIs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National recognition status of the qualification and awarding institution • Level • Access requirements • Workload/nominal duration • Course structure, style and content • Assessment methods • Learning outcomes • Formal eligibility rights 	Recommendation (not mandatory by law)

Each ENIC/NARIC or ENIC office issues a statement after the evaluation of qualifications which notes to which national qualification is the respective qualification comparable to. The content of these statements may vary by country. The qualifications can be fully recognised, partially recognised or recognition may be denied.

The legal status of the statements also varies by country. In Denmark and Romania, the statements are legally binding, but they are not mandatory for HE admissions. The Danish and Romanian ENIC/NARIC offices determine the general level of qualification, but the individual education institution hold the right to admit students to specific education programmes. In Latvia, recognition statements are mandatory for HE admissions, but the statements themselves only have a recommending status, as HEIs themselves decide whether they want to admit the students. While in Italy, Malta and Estonia, the statements are in a form of a recommendation and are not legally binding, in Estonia, a particular HEI can make them mandatory with internal regulations.

¹³ The Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic (Slovak ENIC/NARIC) acts as the consulting and appeal body.

In the United Kingdom for the admission the HE programmes the recognition of qualification by UK ENIC is not required by law.

In Slovakia, the statement is a decision issued according to the administrative law that is legally binding and appealable. It also presents a requirement for enrolment¹⁴ into a HE study programme. The decision allows access to HE, but does not guarantee admission to the study programme of choice, which is a separate, autonomous administrative decision by the HEI according to the admission conditions for the specific study programme.

9.2. Tasks of national ENIC/NARIC offices in assessment and recognition of foreign access qualifications

The tasks of the national ENIC/NARIC offices, which commonly act as the evaluation and/or recognition authorities, in assessment and recognition of foreign access qualifications are very similar in all the project partner countries. ENIC/NARIC offices usually assess foreign qualifications of all levels from all countries in the world. The assessments of foreign qualifications follow similar assessment criteria whether it is basic education¹⁵, general upper secondary or HE qualifications. The main principle is that a foreign qualification should be recognised unless substantial differences can be demonstrated.

To apply for academic recognition in project partner countries, an applicant must submit to national ENIC/NARIC or ENIC:

- an application for the assessment of a foreign education qualification,
- personal identity document,
- original diploma/certificate or a certified copy (e.g. by notary, awarding education institution, or other competent authority) and authorised translations of the education documents and supplements into national language, English or other (varies by country) if required. Applicant may submit documents as originals, certificated copies, or electronically as scanned copies.

The list of required documents may slightly vary depending on the country or depending on who may apply for the recognition (e.g., HEIs, individuals (holders of the qualification), etc.).

Then ENIC/NARIC or ENIC offices provide a written evaluation statement to candidate or HEI (depending on who submitted the documents). The time period for the issue of statements may vary by country, but usually they are issued within 30-60 days. Malta has implemented the Fast Track system for applications parallel to the normal system, which guarantees (in most cases) finalisation with the course of two working days. In some countries recognition of foreign qualifications is for free, in other – a fixed fee is applied.

In Slovakia, the ENIC/NARIC office does not act as the recognition body in case of secondary education qualifications, however, as part of the responsible ministry, it stipulates the recognition policies, provides advice to the recognition authority and acts as the appeal body for the decisions issued by the recognition body. Although the Slovak ENIC/NARIC is involved in the recognition process, it does not accept applications or issue statements in regards to secondary education qualifications.

¹⁴ Applicant is admitted conditionally and cannot enrol unless the recognition decision is presented, on the day of enrolment at the latest.

¹⁵ In Estonia, credentials of basic education are not assessed by the Estonian ENIC/NARIC.

9.3. Competent recognition authorities for HE access qualifications

In all the partner countries, except for Slovakia, national ENIC/NARIC or ENIC offices carry out the evaluation of foreign qualifications giving access to HE, but they are not necessarily the only body which can assess those qualifications. For example, HEIs as well may assess qualifications.

The Danish Agency of Higher Education and Science since 2000 has functioned as the Danish ENIC/NARIC and is the central office where citizens, companies, institutions and authorities can apply for assessments of foreign educational qualifications, obtain advice on recognition of foreign qualifications and competencies as well as gain information on foreign examinations, educational systems and grade conversion.

Estonian ENIC/NARIC, a division of Education and Youth Board is the competent authority to assess foreign HE qualifications and qualifications giving access to HE in Estonia. HEIs are competent recognition authorities for HE access qualifications. In conformity with the legislation, in general HEIs and employers are also allowed to perform the assessments themselves if they have sufficient knowledge about particular education system and credentials. Estonian ENIC/NARIC's evaluation statements are informative, giving a piece of advice for competent recognition authorities. The final recognition decision about the foreign qualification rests with the HEI, the employer or any other body giving access to an activity or rights to the holder of a qualification.

In Italy, HEIs have the authority to issue recognition and admission decisions within the scope of their autonomy and in conformity with the respective legislation, except for specific sectoral bilateral agreements. The Ministry of Universities and Research (*Ministero dell'universita e della ricerca*) provides general instructions and guidelines for the procedures for entry, residency and enrolment of international students and the perspective recognition of qualifications for HE courses in Italy.

The person who is seeking recognition in Latvia may submit documents either to the HEI or to the Academic Information Centre (AIC) – Latvian ENIC/NARIC. AIC based on the application of the person or HEI performs the evaluation of foreign qualification and issues a statement to which qualification of Latvia and Latvian Qualifications Framework level it is comparable. The HEI makes decision on recognition based on the statement of AIC. There are plans to allow some HEIs (if they meet certain requirements) to recognise qualifications from specific countries internally, but during the preparation of this report such legislation is not in force yet.

The ENIC/NARIC of Malta (MQRIC) is the competent authority for recognition (superseding the autonomous institutions), but recognition of foreign qualifications can be carried out by any education institution under the principle of automatic recognition. These institutions can recognise qualifications unilaterally, but their decision is not binding on third parties.

In Romania, the recognition of foreign qualifications is carried out by the Ministry of Education through the National Centre for Recognition and Equivalence of Diplomas (CNRED) – National ENIC/NARIC office which provides recognition of qualifications for the EU citizens and the Department of Foreign Students which recognises the qualifications for citizens of third countries. The automatic recognition of diplomas obtained in a member state of the EU, the EEA and the Swiss Confederation ensures access to continuing studies in Romania. For admission to higher education in Romania, CNRED collaborates with higher education institutions in order to fulfil the specific admission criteria.

The Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic – Slovak ENIC/NARIC decides the policies of recognition of foreign qualifications in Slovakia and acts as a consulting and appeal body. The authorities responsible for the recognition of all secondary (non-HE qualifications) are the Regional School Administration Offices in eight major cities across the country.

HEIs are autonomous recognition bodies in the United Kingdom. UK ENIC provides informed advice and opinion on overseas qualifications but there is no requirement to obtain recognition of qualifications through UK ENIC in law.

9.4. Criteria and procedure for assessment and recognition of HE access qualifications

Although each partner country follows the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the specific criteria and procedures for assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications slightly differ (see Criteria for assessment in Table 8).

In all the partner countries when evaluating a foreign qualification, the **level** of the qualification in host country is taken into account. Also, in almost all cases the **formal eligibility rights** are considered to determine if the qualification in question grants access to HE in the host country. In Malta, formal eligibility rights are only considered for regulated professions.

In Denmark, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Slovakia and the UK, the nominal **duration** of the education programme will also be evaluated to determine if the length of the programme is comparable to that of a similar national programme. For example, if the nominal duration of for education programme giving access to HE is considerably shorter than in the host country, it may not be recognised.

In Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Slovakia and the UK, also the **status** of the qualification and awarding institution in the home country is checked to make sure that the institution is licenced and quality assured and the study programme is accredited to issue said qualification.

ENIC/NARIC offices in Denmark, Italy and the UK check the **access requirements, subject combination and structure of the programme** to ensure that the qualification in question is sufficient for the specific study programme.

Learning outcomes are actively evaluated in Italy and the UK. In other countries the evaluation of learning outcomes for qualifications is done rarely as this process is very time consuming and not always is effective considering that learning outcomes are often not well formulated, hard to compare or not indicated at all. The evaluation of learning outcomes is mostly used for more difficult cases of when not all required credentials are submitted or available.

Grades are evaluated in Estonia and in some cases in Latvia. For example, if a candidate is applying for study programme in STEM subjects that a note will be made that this student has low grades in maths and/or physics. The decision whether to admit students with low grades in respective subjects is still up to higher education institution. In Estonia, in case there are more than 10% of courses/examinations failed or grades are below 50% of maximum, this is considered as substantial difference, and qualification is recommended not to be recognised.

In Denmark, in addition to previously mentioned assessment criteria, also **aims of the programme** are evaluated and the ratio of theory and practice within the programme. In the UK, in addition, assessments methods will be evaluated. In Romania, the main assessment criterion is not only the level of the qualification, but also the specific **field or specialisation**, which may be evaluated upon request.

In effort to support international mobility in HE, Slovakia has in recent years removed several obstacles to recognition of HE access qualifications. The recognition for further studies is currently aimed at recognising the level of education, without comparing the contents of the study programme. For example, it has been legally stipulated that the access qualification from another EHEA state must always be compared to the access qualification and cannot, even if the programme was shorter, be evaluated as equivalent to lower-secondary qualification (without HE

access rights). While the duration, scope, and contents are still compared, the use of substantial difference by the responsible body has been legally limited and currently, overall duration of the study programme from another EHEA state that is less than two years shorter cannot be considered a substantial difference or a reason to decline an application or to impose differential examinations. The admission conditions are further evaluated by the higher education institution but the level of obtained education (upper secondary qualification with HE access right) as the basic prerequisite is recognised as long as it is the access qualification in the home state and there is no substantial difference identified.

The recognition procedures in all the project partner countries are very similar – primarily evaluating the level and formal eligibility rights of HE access qualifications, also taking into consideration other aspects of the qualification which may slightly vary by country and specific qualification or credentials provided. In the comparison of recognition procedure and criteria of HE access qualifications no significant differences were observed. Thus, automatic recognition could be implemented as long as respective HE access qualifications meet the criteria of the host country.

Chapter 10. Mapping HE access qualifications for automatic recognition in the project partner countries

During the development of country reports case studies were conducted listing all the HE access qualifications in each partner country (see Chapter 1). Annex 1 of the comparative report lists all the qualifications from project partner countries which grants access to HE in their countries. In order to provide a more transparent comparison of these HE access qualifications, a set of criteria was designed in a form of table. The table lists countries, the name of access qualifications in English, their EQF level, access requirements, requirements for graduations (including exams) and profile, highlighting whether the qualification is general or vocational.

In Denmark, in total, 10 qualifications grant access to HE. HE access qualifications in general upper secondary education are:

- The Higher General Examination Programme (stx) (*Almen studentereksamen (stx)*); The Higher Commercial Examination Programme (hcx) (*Merkantil studentereksamen (hcx)*); The Higher Technical Examination Programme (htx) (*Teknisk studentereksamen (htx)*);
- The Higher General Examination Programme – 2-years (stx) (*Almen studentereksamen (2-årig stx)*);
- The Higher Preparatory Examination (hf) advanced set of subjects included (*hf-eksamen (2-årig hf) med overbygning*);
- The Higher Preparatory Examination (hf-single subject) advanced set of subjects included (*Højere forberedelseeksamen (enkeltfag) med overbygning*);
- Danish Higher Preparatory Examination (*Hf-eksamen (2-årig hf)*);
- The Higher Preparatory Examination (hf-single subject) (*Højere forberedelseeksamen (enkeltfag)*);
- General Upper Secondary Education for Refugees and Immigrants (*Gymnasiale indslusningsforløb for flygtninge og indvandrere (GIF)*);

Vocational upper secondary qualifications giving access to HE are:

- Vocational Education Examination Qualifying for Access to Higher Education (EUX) (*Erhvervsfaglig studentereksamen i forbindelse med erhvervsuddannelse (EUX)*);
- Evidence of Training Certificate (VET) (*Skolebevis*) (if the awarded qualification corresponds to at least EQF level 4);
- General Upper Secondary Education Leaving Certificate EUX Part 1 certificate (for mercantile programmes) (Before 2018: *Bevis for generel studiekompetence (eux 1. del)*, after 2018: *Bevis for eux 1. del*);

In Estonia, HE access is granted by two qualifications: Certificate of General Secondary Education (*Gümnaasiumi lõputunnistus*) and Certificate of Vocational Secondary Education (*Kutsekeskhariduse lõputunnistus*).

In Italy, only State Exam Diploma upon the Conclusion of the Upper Secondary School Course (*Diploma di Esame di Stato conclusivo dei corsi di istruzione secondaria superiore*) grants access to HE.

In Latvia, same as in Estonia, HE access is granted by two qualifications (one general and one vocational): Certificate of general secondary education (*Atestāts par vispārējo vidējo izglītību*) and Diploma of vocational secondary education (*Diploms par profesionālo vidējo izglītību*).

In Malta, the primary access qualification for HE is the Matriculation Certificate.

In Romania, one qualification grants access to HE – Baccalaureate degree (*Diploma de bacalaureat*).

In Slovakia, HE access is only granted by Maturita Examination Certificate (School-leaving Examination Certificate) (*Vysvedčenie o maturitnej skúške*).

In the UK, two qualifications grant access to HE. In England and Wales, HE access is granted by General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE A Level), while in Scotland it is granted by Scottish SQA Highers. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, access to Bachelor degree programmes is typically based on three A level subjects. BTEC Nationals are also widely accepted by HEIs. In Scotland, admission is typically based on Scottish Highers in four subjects. A wide range of other qualifications are also accepted, depending on the institution and programme of study.

Considering similarities and differences among HE access qualifications which includes their types, formal eligibility rights, nominal duration, grading and assessment system, their place in NQF, quality assurance procedures and recognition procedures, as well as considering what credential evaluators value the most when comparing qualifications, a conclusion can be made that almost all of these HE access qualifications could be automatically recognised among the project partner countries as differences among them are not substantial. The major difference lies with Danish qualification “Evidence of Training Certificate (VET) (*Skolebevis*)” which is issued after completion of a VET programme at least at EQF level 3 with a duration of at least three years and may contain multiple steps or specialisations, and as a result, be completed at EQF levels 3-5. While the qualification gives formal eligibility rights for entry into relevant academy profession and professional Bachelor education programmes in Denmark, the qualification must meet very specific entry requirements of the HE study programme. Therefore, considering the variations of the programme, the qualification could be automatically recognised if it corresponds to at least EQF level 4. In addition, three other Danish HE access qualifications – 1) the Higher Preparatory Examination (hf) advanced set of subjects included; 2) the Higher Preparatory Examination (hf-single subject) advanced set of subjects included; 3) General upper secondary education leaving certificate EUX Part 1 certificate (for mercantile programmes) – should require additional evaluation as they do not give general access to HE programmes in Denmark. However, they provide access to professional Bachelor’s degree programmes, as well as academy profession programmes.

Thus, the analysis of the HE access qualifications reveals that most of the qualifications have similar features, e.g. EQF level, nominal duration or admission requirements. However, some qualifications may involve specific characteristics, which may create question whether they could be subjected to automatic recognition. Therefore, the discussion and agreement on a certain list of minimum requirements for automatic recognition is crucial to facilitate trust between various countries in their qualifications.

Conclusions

National education systems are quite different in each project partner country and the pace of their development has been varied. Yet following the international education policy priorities and labour market requirements, the reforms keep improving the transparency, comparability and recognition of qualifications in order to facilitate cross-border mobility. In all the partner countries the reforms have led to learning outcome-oriented approaches in education.

The nominal duration of learning in each partner country is rather similar. While the division of grades for primary, lower and upper secondary education differs, the total duration of learning for HE access qualifications usually is 12-13 years (depending on country and education programme). The length of a school year also is quite similar in all cases ranging from 33 to 40 weeks per school year (37 weeks on average). One of the challenges in comparison of HE access qualifications could be the varied grading system observed in the partner countries. Some countries have the same system for both school and state exams, while some have different systems. Despite the difference among partner countries in grading systems, they can be compared to some extent and marks for passing school exams when expressed in percentages are also very similar mostly ranging from 21% to 57% (40% on average). Meanwhile, passing marks for state exams on average tend to be slightly lower than for school exams (32% on average). In Estonia, Latvia and the UK to pass a state exam as low score as 1%, 15% and 20 (out of 100) respectively is necessary, then in rest of the countries 28% or higher is required.

Most of the partner countries, with the exception of Latvia and Romania, offer some form of flexible pathways to higher education. Those differ by country, but usually are offered in form of adult education or vocational education-oriented programmes. In the context of automatic recognition, evaluation of these alternative qualifications should be carefully considered in order to ensure equal access to all learners with further learning opportunities. Considering the rights in home country for qualifications giving access to HE via flexible pathways, an automatic recognition and equal access should be also provided for those qualifications obtained using an alternative pathway; however, in difficult cases evaluation and recognition of the qualifications should be left to credential evaluators.

Almost all of the HE access qualifications are placed on NQF levels equivalent to EQF level 4. The dimensions for level descriptors are similar among partner countries with the exception of NQFs used in the UK. For the purposes of automatic recognition, an access qualification must be included in the national qualifications framework. HE access qualification must be at national qualifications framework level that is referred to EQF level 4 to be subjected to automatic recognition.

The implementation of quality assurance differs in each partner country, but all of them have both internal and external quality assurance. In all cases HE access qualifications can only be issued by education institutions which are providing programmes that are licenced, accredited and/or approved by respective ministry. Furthermore, education institutions themselves have to be licenced or approved. For automatic recognition of HE access qualifications to be equal and transparent in all of the project partner countries, the education institution that awards HE access qualifications must be quality assured and recognised by the state.

Learning outcomes are used for describing all the HE access qualifications in the project partner countries. According to the country reports, the learning outcomes vary by education programmes, their formulation and use in quality assurance procedures are vastly different. The qualitative analysis of learning outcomes of HE access qualifications was not focus of this project; therefore, conclusions about the nature, content and structure of learning outcomes may not be drawn. In order to provide some guidance in recognition procedures, additional study and discussions should be arranged.

Although there are formal differences, general conditions for obtaining a HE access qualification are comparable. Some countries have several types of HE access qualifications for different (types of) study programmes or types of schools, in other countries, the name of the qualification remains the same, but differences still exist on the level of education programme (for example, in the number and type of final examination subjects). Therefore, the difference seems to be more in the legal or formal sense of how education is organised rather than a serious division between countries in the durations, contents or scope of education programmes.

While the recognition of HE access qualifications in all the partner countries is done in accordance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention, some aspect of credential evaluation may vary by country. The level and formal eligibility rights of the qualification are evaluated in almost all cases. Also, nominal duration and status of the awarding institution are considered in most of the countries. The institutions which carry out the recognition vary by country, as in some countries this can only be done by ENIC/NARIC offices and in others – also by HEIs or other bodies. Ultimately, the decision of admitting the candidate is taken by HEI.

Automatic recognition means automatic recognition of the qualification as a HE access qualification, but it does not mean automatic admission to HEI, as the HEI may require specific admission requirements. Also, for qualifications to be automatically recognised, national authorities must provide accessible and transparent information about HE access qualifications (content, pathways, grading system, examination, etc.). While the nominal duration of secondary education programmes usually is 12-13 years (depending on the programme), a one-year difference in the length of secondary education should not be considered a substantial difference and these qualifications should be automatically recognised.

Finally, it is imperative for ENIC/NARIC and ENIC offices to promote among the stakeholders the benefits of automatic recognition of HE access qualifications. Furthermore, national authorities should provide support to the ENIC/NARIC offices regarding automatic recognition of HE access qualifications.

In order to determine which HE access qualifications could be automatically recognised, aspects credential evaluators value the most when evaluating different qualifications should be considered. The study report¹⁶ of Erasmus+ project “Online course catalogues and databases for transparency and recognition” (OCTRA, 2020-2022) coordinated by AIC analysed what information in qualifications is valued by ENIC/NARIC credential evaluators. The results were compiled from non-structured interviews with ENIC/NARIC experts from the project countries and the study report¹⁷ of Erasmus+ project – “Automatic Recognition between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania” (AURBELL, 2014-2016) coordinated by AIC. According to OCTRA project study report, credential evaluators when evaluating a qualification value the most: 1) level of the study programme and study course; 2) formal rights; 3) workload; 4) information on external quality assurance; 5) the status of awarding institution; 6) the composition of the study programme; 7) access and admission requirements; 8) graduation requirements; 9) nominal length of the full-time programme; 10) speciality of field of study. Although the list was composed for HE programmes, almost all aspects can be applied to and are equally important for HE access qualifications. The comparison of country reports revealed that in most of the partner countries the level of programme, formal eligibility rights and workload/nominal duration are primarily considered when evaluating a qualification (see Chapter 9). Other aspects such as grading which proved to be considerably different among project partner countries, are rarely

¹⁶ Academic Information Centre, Centre for Information and Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education, National Centre for Information and Documentation, et al. (2022), Online Course Catalogues and Databases for Transparency and Recognition. https://aic.lv/content/files/OCTRA_report_web.pdf.

¹⁷ Academic Information Centre, Archimedes Foundation, Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (2015). Automatic recognition between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Comparative study report. https://aic.lv/portal/content/files/AURBELL_report_EN.pdf.

taken into consideration when evaluating HE access qualifications and should not be an obstacle to the automatic recognition of access qualifications.

The results of analysis and comparison of HE access qualifications awarded in Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Romania, Slovakia and the United Kingdom leads to a conclusion that all of these HE access qualifications can be subjected to automatic recognition.

Annexes

Annex 1. HE access qualifications in the project partner countries

Annex 2. Template for analysing HE access qualifications

Annex 1. HE access qualifications in project partner countries

Extract from the fiches completed by the project partner countries.

Country	HE access qualification	EQF level	Access requirements	Requirements for graduation (including final exams)	Profile (general or vocational)
DK	<p>The Higher General Examination Programme (stx) (<i>Almen studentereksamen (stx)</i>)</p> <p>The Higher Commercial Examination Programme (hcx) (<i>Merkantil studentereksamen (hcx)</i>)</p> <p>The Higher Technical Examination Programme (htx) (<i>Teknisk studentereksamen (htx)</i>)</p>	4	<p>Completed basic education (Danish Examination after 9th form)</p> <p>A GPA on at least 5,0 in the obligatory final examinations</p> <p>Been taught in a foreign language from 5th to 9th grade or equivalent</p> <p>If the above requirements are not fulfilled, the student can apply for admission on the basis of an individual assessment, which can include an admission test</p>	GPA with a minimum of 2,0	General
DK	The Higher General Examination Programme (stx) – 2-years (<i>Almen studentereksamen (2-årig stx)</i>)	4	<p>Completed basic education (Danish Examination after 9th form)</p> <p>A GPA on at least 5,0 in the obligatory final examinations</p> <p>Been taught in a foreign language from 5th to 9th grade or equivalent</p> <p>If the above requirements are not fulfilled, the student can apply for admission on the basis of an individual assessment, which can include an admission test</p>	GPA with a minimum of 2,0	General

Country	HE access qualification	EQF level	Access requirements	Requirements for graduation (including final exams)	Profile (general or vocational)
DK	The Higher Preparatory Examination (hf) advanced set of subjects included (<i>hf-eksamen (2-årig hf) med overbygning</i>)	4	Completed basic education (Danish Examination after 9th form) A GPA on at least 4,0 in the obligatory final examinations Been taught in a foreign language from 5th to 9th grade or equivalent. If the above requirements are not fulfilled, the student can apply for admission on the basis of an individual assessment, which can include an admission test	GPA with a minimum of 2,0	General
DK	The Higher Preparatory Examination (hf-single subject) advanced set of subjects included (<i>Højere forberedelseeksamen (enkeltfag) med overbygning</i>)	4	It is possible to be admitted to hf single-subjects 1 year after completion of 9th or 10th grade. Typically, a student would also need to attend an admission interview. The programme has a flexible structure and does not have nominal length. It is aimed at people with the need of obtaining a qualification in their own pace or in combination with a job	GPA with a minimum of 2,0	General
DK	Danish Higher Preparatory Examination (<i>hf-eksamen (2-årig hf)</i>)	4	Completed basic education (Danish Examination after 9th form) A GPA on at least 4,0 in the obligatory final examinations Been taught in a foreign language from 5th to 9th grade or equivalent	GPA with a minimum of 2,0	General
DK	The Higher Preparatory Examination (hf-single subject) (<i>Højere forberedelseeksamen (enkeltfag)</i>)	4	It is possible to be admitted to hf single-subjects 1 year after completion of 9th or 10th grade. Typically, a student would also need to attend an admission interview. The programme has a flexible structure and does not have nominal length. It is aimed at people with the need of obtaining a	GPA with a minimum of 2,0	General

Country	HE access qualification	EQF level	Access requirements	Requirements for graduation (including final exams)	Profile (general or vocational)
			qualification in their own pace or in combination with a job		
DK	General Upper Secondary Education for Refugees and Immigrants (<i>Gymnasiale indslusningsforløb for flygtninge og indvandrere (GIF)</i>)	4	The GIF is a one-year qualification based on a foreign general upper secondary school examination. The access requirements are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residence permit in Denmark • Minimum 12 years of schooling including a foreign upper secondary qualification which is not comparable in level to a Danish upper secondary qualification • Sufficient management of Danish, English and Mathematics 	GPA with a minimum of 2,0	General
DK	Vocational Education Examination Qualifying for Access to Higher Education (EUX) (<i>Erhvervsfaglig studentereksamen i forbindelse med erhvervsuddannelse (EUX)</i>)	4	Completed basic education (Danish Examination after 9th form) with a minimum pass grade in Danish and Mathematics	GPA with a minimum of 2,0	General and vocational
DK	Evidence of Training Certificate (VET) (<i>Skolebevis</i>)	3-5	Completed basic education (Danish Examination after 9th or 10th form) with a minimum pass grade in Danish and Mathematics	A pass grade at the final exam. The pupil/apprentice must have completed the school-based education including a GPA with a minimum of 2,0. Supplementary conditions may be requested in the specific educational programme	Vocational

Country	HE access qualification	EQF level	Access requirements	Requirements for graduation (including final exams)	Profile (general or vocational)
DK	General Upper Secondary Education Leaving Certificate EUX Part 1 certificate (for mercantile programmes) (Before 2018: <i>Bevis for general studiekompetence (eux 1. del)</i> , after 2018: <i>Bevis for eux 1. del</i>)	4	Completed basic education (Danish Examination after 9th form) with a minimum pass grade in Danish and Mathematics	GPA with a minimum of 2,0	General and vocational
EE	Certificate of General Secondary Education (<i>Gümnaasiumi lõputunnistus</i>)	4	Basic education	3 state exams (Estonian language or Estonian as a second language, mathematics and foreign language), school examination and student study or practical work	General
EE	Certificate of Vocational Secondary Education (<i>Kutsekeskhariduse lõputunnistus</i>)	4	Basic education	Full completion of the vocational secondary education curriculum and taking a professional examination or a vocational examination. Taking of state examinations is voluntary, except for the state examination in Estonian as a second language for those completing a curriculum in a language of instruction other than Estonian. The state examination may be substituted by passing a professional examination or vocational examination in Estonian	Vocational

Country	HE access qualification	EQF level	Access requirements	Requirements for graduation (including final exams)	Profile (general or vocational)
IT	State Exam Diploma upon the Conclusion of the Upper Secondary School Course (<i>Diploma di Esame di Stato conclusivo dei corsi di istruzione secondaria superiore</i>)	4	Secondary qualification – Compulsory education certificate (<i>Certificato delle competenze di base acquisite in esito all'assolvimento dell'obbligo di istruzione</i>)	Completed five years of upper secondary school course and a final state exam consisting of two written and one oral test	General and vocational
LV	Certificate of general secondary education (<i>Atestāts par vispārējo vidējo izglītību</i>)	4	General basic education (9 years of schooling) <i>or</i> Vocational basic education (1-3 years of schooling after general basic education)	Passed state centralised examinations in Latvian language – at least optimal level a foreign language (English, German or French) – at least optimal level (B2) Mathematics – at least optimal level at least two higher level study subjects, including Latvian language, foreign language and mathematics	General
LV	Diploma of vocational secondary education (<i>Diploms par profesionālo vidējo izglītību</i>)	4	General basic education (9 years of schooling) Vocational basic education (1-3 years of schooling after general basic education)	Obtained a passing grade in: all general upper secondary study subjects at least basic level, language domain study subjects – at least optimal level, pass at 4 vocational study subjects corresponding to LQF level 4 – at least average performance level Taken and obtained a passing score in the following state examinations: Latvian language – at least optimal level a foreign language (English, German or French) – at least optimal level	Vocational

Country	HE access qualification	EQF level	Access requirements	Requirements for graduation (including final exams)	Profile (general or vocational)
				mathematics – at least general level, but not lower than specified in the corresponding education programme LQF level 4 professional qualification examination – at least average performance level	
MT	Matriculation Certificate	4	Requirements may vary. Passes in five to six SEC (Ordinary Level) subjects (depending on school) – at Grade 5 or better, with required subjects generally including English Language, Maltese Language and Maths	Pass in Groups 1, 2, and 3 and a score of 44 points	Dependent on subject choice
MT	AM – Advanced Matriculation	4	Requirements may vary. Passes in five to six SEC (Ordinary Level) subjects (depending on school) – at Grade 5 or better, with required subjects generally including English Language, Maltese Language and Maths	Passing Score for examination	General or vocational – dependent on subject choice
RO	Baccalaureate degree (<i>Diploma de bacalaureat</i>)	4	Basic education (8 years)	National examination: minimum mark 5 in each subject and average mark 6 for the exam	General, technical and vocational
SK	Maturita Examination Certificate (School-leaving Examination Certificate) (<i>Vysvedčenie o maturitnej skúške</i>)	4	Basic education (9 years)	Depends on education programme and study subject. Minimum 25% in the external part and 3 (<i>dobrý</i>) in the internal oral part Minimum 33% in the external part and 4 (<i>dostatočný</i>) in the internal oral part	General or vocational

Country	HE access qualification	EQF level	Access requirements	Requirements for graduation (including final exams)	Profile (general or vocational)
UK – England & Wales	General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE A Level)	4	General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) level examinations in related subjects	For each study subject taken, students complete a final exam in addition to course work (varies by the study subject taken)	General
UK – Scotland	Scottish Higher	4	Students ordinarily require a minimum number of passes at “National 5” examination level	Study subjects are assessed through course work and final exams	General

Annex 2. Template for analysing HE access qualifications

The country reports included a template (fiche) to list the most important aspects for the comparison of HE access qualifications awarded in the project partner countries.

Country	
Full title of qualification (EN) or type of qualification	
Full title of qualification (national language) or type of qualification	
EQF level	
NQF level	
Access requirements	
Requirements for graduation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information about final exams • Pass grades for school • Pass grades for final exams 	
Provider (name and type of institution)	
Awarding body (name and type of institution)	
Certificate/diploma and supplementary documents	
Title of quality assurance body	
Profile (general or vocational)	
Formal eligibility rights	
Template of certificate/diploma	
Any other relevant information regarding the qualification e.g., learning outcomes, please provide link or source (e.g., responsible body) e.g., sources of information e.g., temporary documents (their formal eligibility rights)	