Road to Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Access Qualifications 2

Peer learning activity

General principles of automatic recognition of HE access qualifications

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Concept Note

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Automatic recognition of foreign qualifications

In the context of the project "Road to Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Access Qualifications 2" (ARAQUA 2), automatic recognition of qualifications is defined as "the rights for holders of a qualification of a certain level that has been issued by one Member State[1] to be considered for entry to a higher education (HE) programme in the next level in any other Member State, without having to go through any separate recognition procedure", in accordance with the provisions of the widely accepted Council Recommendation on automatic recognition (2018)[2]. Automatic recognition primarily serves the purpose of facilitating access to further studies. In the labour market, except for regulated professions, employers may independently decide whether a qualification is suitable for employment, taking into account national legislation, bylaws and organisational requirements.

Automatic recognition of foreign qualifications ensures that potential students' credentials do not need to be processed via procedures prescribed by the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997), but education institutions still have to examine documents to consider admission of the candidates. Thus, both national and foreign qualifications during the admission process are examined according to the same principles and procedures. And in both cases candidates may be eligible for entry to an education programme, but they may be not admitted due to objective reasons, e.g. poor school results or insufficient volume of learning in particular subject.

Another aspect of credentials, apart from learning outcomes (obtained grades/marks), education institutions have to analyse is their authenticity. Admission officers have to perform check of all documents that are submitted regardless their country of issuance. However, confirming authenticity of foreign qualifications is more challenging since information about them may be incomplete and additional knowledge about the relevant education and qualification system is necessary.

When countries or institutions agree to conclude a certain treaty on automatic recognition, involved parties have previously conducted detailed research about their qualifications and have

[1] ARAQUA 2 project (2025-2027) consortium comprises of both EU and non-EU countries: Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Denmark, Italy, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Malta, Serbia, and the United Kingdom.

[2] 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). 2018/C 444/01.

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made a thorough comparison of the qualifications subject to automatic recognition. In terms of the research, evidence is gathered for grounded discussion to decide which qualifications may be included in the legal document on automatic recognition and which qualifications should undergo additional evaluation.

Essential element for implementing automatic recognition is mutual trust – between country/institution issuing qualification and country/institution receiving qualifications – when both parties are certain about the correspondence of qualifications to certain requirements. In a broader perspective, the mutual trust in and understanding of qualifications should be present in general public that may be not experts of education field, but have some awareness of general principles of automatic recognition of qualifications.

Higher education access qualifications

The concept of "higher education access qualifications" (HE access qualifications) refers both to general upper secondary education qualifications and vocational upper secondary education and training (VET) qualifications providing legal rights to access higher education programmes. The recognition of HE access qualification has been already stipulated in the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997, Chapter 4), and the full implementation of all provisions of the Chapter 4 would mean a significant step towards automatic recognition. In case of automatic recognition, if a HE access qualification ensures rights to their holders to be candidates for HE programmes in the country where the qualification has been issued, the qualification should be considered for admission to a HE programme in another country. Although careful research shows that there may be some differences, in most countries HE access qualifications are referenced to the EQF level 4, and, as mentioned before, the most important their feature is providing eligibility to apply for HE studies.

Summary of the peer learning activity

The peer learning activity (PLA) "General principles of automatic recognition of HE access qualifications" focused on the following aspects:

- the concept and principles of automatic recognition;
- European and regional developments related to automatic recognition of qualifications;
- education system of Armenia and its HE access qualifications;
- country cases: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Serbia;
- challenges related to the implementation of automatic recognition of qualifications;
- exploring the role of quality assurance, transparency, and digitalisation in supporting automatic recognition of qualifications.

The PLA concluded with a panel discussion involving representatives of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of the Republic of Armenia (MoESCS), Yerevan State University, and American University of Armenia. The discussion highlighted that effective implementation of automatic recognition of HE access qualifications requires not only an appropriate legal framework, but also transparent quality assurance systems, reliable information

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and verification mechanisms. Automatic recognition should be clearly distinct from automatic admission, as higher education institutions (HEI) continue to apply programme-specific admission requirements and authenticity checks. Furthermore, improving international understanding of VET qualifications, strengthening transparency of qualifications frameworks, and continuous development of digital tools and information systems should be facilitated to support recognition practices while respecting institutional autonomy.

Education system of Armenia with a focus on the HE access qualifications

Since independence in 1991, the education system of Armenia has undergone major changes including the shift from 11- to 12-year general education. Several important reforms have contributed to improving the transparency and comparability of the Armenian qualifications. In 2011, the Armenian National Qualifications Framework (ANQF) was established. In 2022, reforms concerning quality assurance in VET sector were introduced – a shift from programme-based accreditation to institutional accreditation.

Annually the country has in average 20,000-22,000 upper secondary education graduates. To improve accessibility and efficiency of admission process to HE study programmes, an electronic admission platform has been launched and admissions are organised twice a year. Three qualifications currently grant access to higher education:

1. Secondary Education Atestat (EQF level 4);
2. Junior Specialist (EQF level 4);
3. Specialist (EQF level 5).

Armenia's participation in development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and alignment with European standards and guidelines, including the implementation of the ANQF, provide favourable conditions for strengthening international trust in the Armenian qualifications.

Simultaneously, several challenges remain relevant for further development of automatic recognition of qualifications, e.g. strengthening international comparability of qualifications; improving understanding of VET qualifications of Armenia abroad; enhancing digital verification of the foreign qualifications; ensuring consistent implementation of recognition principles across HEIs; and balancing autonomy of HEIs with the national policy objectives.

ARAQUA 2 project and other European initiatives related to automatic recognition

Automatic recognition of qualifications has become an important policy area within the EHEA, which has been endorsed by the Bucharest Communiqué (2012) and subsequent ministerial communiqués – Yerevan Communiqué (2015), Paris Communiqué (2018), Rome Communiqué (2020) and Tirana Communiqué (2024) – have consistently reaffirmed this commitment. According to the central principle of automatic recognition within EHEA, qualifications should be recognised automatically to the corresponding level in another EHEA member country.

The Council Recommendation (2018) lays out three key conditions. First, NQFs or qualifications systems have to be referenced to the EQF. Second, upper secondary qualifications granting access to HE in the issuing country should provide the same rights in another EU Member country.

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However, HEIs or authorised bodies may set specific admission criteria for study programmes and still need to verify the authenticity of submitted documents. Third, Member States are expected to exchange information on quality assurance systems in upper secondary education, including VET, while fully respecting the diversity of national approaches to quality assurance.

Several regional agreements have been concluded on automatic recognition of qualifications. For example, the three Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – signed an agreement on the automatic academic recognition of HE qualifications and HE access qualifications (in force since January 2019). The Agreement covers qualifications that are quality assured in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) in the European Higher Education Area. Similarly, the Benelux countries formalised automatic recognition of bachelor's and master's qualifications in 2015, later extending the agreement to the doctoral (EQF level 8) and associate degree (EQF level 5) qualifications in 2018. Building on the settlements, the Baltic–Benelux Treaty was signed in 2021 (in force since May 2024), expanding the geographic scope of automatic recognition across six countries. Although unlike the Baltic Agreement, the Treaty does not cover HE access qualifications, it does not impose time restrictions regarding the date of issued qualifications subject to automatic recognition.

Council of Europe: Perspective on automatic recognition

The Council of Europe assumes an important role in advancing automatic recognition. In 2022, *Ad Hoc* Working Group on Automatic Recondition was set up to support development of common framework for automatic recognition of HE qualifications. The group's mandate was extended until the end of 2026 to advise the Steering Committee for Education (CDEDU) on the development of a common framework for automatic recognition of HE qualifications. The activities of group (2023-2025) include feasibility study for a legally binding instrument; consultations with students, HEIs and public authorities; dialogue with the Benelux Secretariat of the Multilateral Treaty and also a dialogue with the Treaty Office of the Council of Europe. The working group aims to create building blocks for automatic recognition which will include ratification and implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997), quality assurance, qualifications frameworks, transparency and participation, and academic integrity.

The proposal to develop a new legal instrument was approved by the Council of Europe Steering Committee for Education in September 2025. A green light from the Committee of Ministers was given in January 2026, thereafter, the Steering Committee for Education established an intergovernmental drafting group in March 2026. The drafting group is responsible for developing a new convention, with the first draft expected by the end of 2026 or beginning of 2027.

Concept and principles of automatic recognition of HE access qualifications

The first discussion on automatic recognition was launched during the Malta Conference by the Council of Europe in 1994. Since then, the concept has gradually evolved within the EHEA through series of significant policy developments and political commitments. Key milestones include the Bucharest Communiqué (2012), which emphasised the importance of fair recognition practices, the Yerevan Communiqué (2015), which called for automatic recognition of comparable

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academic qualifications. Further progress was reflected in the Rome Communiqué (2020) and the Tirana Communiqué (2024), which continued to strengthen the commitment to automatic recognition as an important instrument for facilitating mobility and improving transparency across education systems. Simultaneously, the Council Recommendation (2018) promoted automatic recognition of HE and upper secondary education qualifications.

The Council of Europe maintains discussions on elaborating a convention on automatic recognition, which would consolidate and further evolve the principles, practices, and policy achievements in this regard.

Currently, four models of automatic recognition exist in Europe. First model comprises legally binding agreements through which countries commit to automatically recognising each other's qualifications, e.g. Italy–Holy See (1929), Italy–Austria (1952), the Baltic–Benelux Treaty (2024). The second model includes non-legal arrangements which are based on voluntary collaboration and shared practices among the countries and recognition authorities, e.g. AdReN and MAReN networks and their comparison tables supporting recognition decisions. The third model involves unilateral recognition lists in which countries independently determine and publish information on foreign qualifications subject to automatic recognition, e.g. Portugal applies the approach through Decree Law 341/2007 for bachelor's, master's and doctoral qualifications. The fourth model represents *de facto* automatic recognition, where countries unilaterally recognise certain foreign qualifications on the basis of general criteria and common practices, in the absence of formal agreements. Furthermore, the full implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) would certainly lead to some kind of the automatic recognition.

Several digital tools and databases supporting automatic recognition of qualifications include Q-Entry database, ARDI (Automatic Recognition Database Italia) which is a free tool aligning with European standards for automatic recognition. Digitalisation may provide a strong support to automatic recognition, through interoperability of systems, blockchain technology and artificial intelligence. However, digitalisation should not be confused with automatic recognition itself. Although recognition processes can benefit significantly from digital tools and automated procedures, e.g. secure exchange and verification of qualifications, automatic recognition cannot be reduced to digitalisation alone.

HE access qualifications: Country cases of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BA), Georgia (GE), Kazakhstan (KZ), Serbia (RS)

The PLA examined four country cases to compare approaches to HE access qualifications and recognition practice. Although differences exist regarding the duration of secondary education, grading systems and national qualifications frameworks, HE access qualifications in participating countries generally correspond to EQF level 4 and provide legal eligibility for access to higher education.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, duration of schooling leading to HE access qualifications is 13-14 years, including primary education (9 years) and general and art secondary education (4 years), or secondary vocational education (4 years) or religious secondary education (4 of 5 years).

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Access to HE is granted by 12 qualifications, as there are 12 competent educational authorities (one HE access qualification per authority) in the country; generally, the title of HE access qualification is the Diploma on Completion of Secondary School (*Diploma o završenoj gimnaziji/srednjoj stručnoj školi/umjetničkoj školi/religioznoj školi*, comparable to the EQF level 4).

In **Georgia**, there is a legal transition period as regards duration of schooling leading to HE access qualifications, i.e. shift from 12 years to 11 years with one voluntary year (reform is expected to be concluded by 2028/2029 academic year). The new model of schooling (11-12 years) comprises primary education (6 years), basic education (3 years), general secondary education (2 years) plus one voluntary year or vocational secondary education (3 years).

Access to HE is granted by two qualifications: 1) Certificate of Full General Education (EQF level 4) and 2) Secondary Vocational Education Diploma (EQF level 4).

In **Kazakhstan**, duration of schooling leading to HE access qualifications is 11-12 years, including primary education (4 years), basic secondary education (5 years), general secondary education (2 years) or vocational secondary education (2-3 years after basic secondary education or 1-2 years after general secondary education).

Access to HE is granted by three qualifications: 1) Certificate of Secondary Education (EQF level 4); 2) Diploma of technical and vocational / Diploma of Post-Secondary Education (EQF level 4); 3) International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (recognised as EQF level 4).

In **Serbia**, duration of schooling leading to HE access qualifications is 11-12 years, including primary education (8 years) and secondary education (3-4 years).

Access to HE is granted by one qualification – the Diploma of Completed Secondary Education – awarded after four-year programme for the gymnasium or general education profile, or three- to four-year vocational secondary education programmes.

The role of information transparency and qualification databases in automatic recognition

The PLA also explored the role of information transparency, quality assurance systems, and qualification databases in supporting automatic recognition of qualifications.

First, an example of regional database was presented. As a result of DIGI-AR project, the online platform AR-GO (https://ar-go.online) was launched in 2025 to support implementation of the Baltic–Benelux Treaty on automatic recognition. The platform includes the countries participating in the Treaty and allows users to select and compare qualifications across countries covered by the Treaty. The users can generate standardised recognition statements, thereby facilitating more transparent and consistent cross-border recognition practices. The platform serves as a practical tool supporting implementation of automatic recognition at regional level.

The continuation project DIGI-REQA (2025–2027) further contributes to strengthening a common understanding and implementation of automatic recognition among the Contracting Parties to the Treaty and supports possible future extension of the framework.

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Second, the Armenian experience regarding digital and quality assurance tools was explored. Quality assurance and transparent accreditation systems were identified as essential preconditions for effective implementation of automatic recognition of HE qualifications. Mutual trust between countries and institutions is strengthened through shared European standards and guidelines, publicly accessible accreditation registers, and international databases (e.g. DEQAR).

The country becomes increasingly integrated into the European quality assurance framework through participation in ENQA-related processes, EQAR registration mechanisms, and publicly accessible accreditation information. These developments demonstrate alignment with the European recognition principles and contribute to strengthening confidence in qualifications issued by the HEIs of Armenia.

The presentation also highlighted the importance of programme-level evaluation, joint accreditation procedures, and assessment of learning outcomes in ensuring transparency and comparability of qualifications. Transparent and internationally connected quality assurance systems make recognition processes more reliable, consistent, and efficient across countries.

Automatic recognition is not only a technical or administrative process, but also a reform based on mutual trust, transparency, cooperation and shared understanding of qualifications and quality assurance systems. Publicly accessible accreditation decisions, reliable databases and transparent information systems create the foundation that makes fair and reliable recognition of qualifications possible across countries.

Stakeholders' perspective and key challenges: Panel discussion on admissions and automatic recognition in Armenia

During the discussion, representatives of the Armenian from public and private HEIs and national authority (MoESCS) expressed their views regarding procedures of admission both regarding national qualifications and foreign qualifications, mentioned existing challenges and explored potential measures for implementing automatic recognition of foreign HE access qualifications.

The discussion focused on practical aspects of recognition, existing challenges, and possible measures necessary for implementation of automatic recognition of foreign HE access qualifications. Participants noted that, generally, admission process of the national qualifications does not create any difficulties and recognition of VET qualifications is rather smooth. VET students take the same centralised final exams as students of general secondary education. Simultaneously, foreign HEIs often seek additional clarifications regarding the content of VET qualifications, particularly whether they include general education components and whether they provide legal access to higher education. In such cases, the ministry issues an official confirmation stating that the graduate has the rights to access higher education.

Representative of Yerevan State University explained that applications from foreign learners are assessed individually. The university evaluates whether the candidate possesses sufficient academic achievements for the chosen study programme, interviews may also be organised. Since studies are mainly conducted in the Armenian language, the university also offers a one-year preparatory language course.

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Representative of the American University of Armenia highlighted the institution's internationally oriented admission practices, operating in accordance with national and international standards. While national recognition requirements are fully respected, the university also applies additional admission criteria, including assessment of English language proficiency and consideration of non-academic achievements. Institutional admission requirements and procedures are publicly available, and applications from international students are reviewed individually regarding national regulations and institutional policies.

The discussion also addressed ongoing reforms on strengthening transparency and international comparability of the Armenian VET qualifications. Implementing automatic recognition requires not only regulatory framework, but also mutual trust has to be facilitated by involving all stakeholders in the consultations on the necessary changes and practices.

A key issue raised during the discussion concerned practical implementation of automatic recognition of qualifications. Although the legal framework may establish recognition principles, HEIs retain institutional autonomy regarding admissions decisions. As a result, implementation depends not only on regulation, but also on cooperation, transparency, institutional commitment, and availability of practical tools and guidance supporting consistent application of recognition principles.

To summarise, the panel discussion provided valuable insight on how HE access qualifications are evaluated during the admission process and highlighted major aspects that are particularly considered in assessment of foreign qualifications. The discussion demonstrated that implementation of automatic recognition of foreign HE access qualifications would require coordinated measures at legislative, institutional, administrative and operational levels.

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