



Promoting recognition and access to higher education

Policy Conclusions from a peer learning activity,

Copenhagen, 21-22 June 2018

ET2020 Working Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education

Setting and participation

This peer learning activity on “Promoting recognition and access to higher education” was organised in cooperation with the Austrian Presidency and hosted by the Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science. It brought together experts from public authorities and higher education institutions from 10 countries¹ as well as the Council of Europe, the European University Association (EUA) and the European Student Union (ESU).

The two-day meeting included case studies presented by the representatives of Austria, Flanders, Denmark, Estonia, France, Greece, Italy, Norway and Slovenia, covering both national and institutional policies and initiatives as well as examples of cross-country collaboration in the Baltic, Benelux and Nordic countries and a range of Erasmus+-co-funded projects. Details on the case studies are in the annex.

Outcomes will contribute to further consideration of this topic in the Austrian Presidency Conference on “The new Student: Flexible Learning Paths and Future Learning Environments” on 20-21 September, as well as in the ET2020 Working Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education. The outcomes will also be useful in considering recognition and access issues with regard to the development of European universities.

Objective and focus

The objective of the peer learning activity was to explore how – for the purpose of accessing or continuing higher education – the higher education systems and institutions recognise:

- the qualifications awarded in another Member State;
- the outcomes of prior learning, including non-formal or informal learning, whether that has taken place either in the same Member State as the proposed study programme or in another Member State; and/or
- a combination of qualifications and prior learning.

The meeting addressed two major policy issues. Firstly, it followed the publication of the Commission’s proposal for a Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad for the purpose of further study². Secondly, in line with the goal that the higher education population should reflect the diversity of the population as a whole, it focused on recognition of prior learning as a means of widening opportunities for access and completion³.

Outcomes

Participants were enthusiastic about sharing their experiences and working together to improve recognition procedures across Europe. The concept of automatic recognition was the focus of much discussion, with emphasis placed on the importance of a clear and agreed definition of what it is, in order to ensure consistent terminology, such as that provided by the Lisbon Recognition Convention⁴.

¹ In addition to Austria and Denmark, Belgium (Flanders), Estonia, France, Greece, Italy, Norway, Slovenia and Spain participated.

² https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/recognition_en_act_part1_v6.pdf

³ Yerevan communiqué:

http://media.ehea.info/file/2015_Yerevan/70/7/YerevanCommuniqueFinal_613707.pdf

⁴ https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/recognition/lrc_en.asp

With regard to the recognition of prior learning, gaps were identified between policy, legal framework and implementation. While Member States have committed to taking concrete steps to provide individuals with the right to validate their learning by the end of 2018⁵, many of the participating countries stated that they did not yet have such procedures in place.

Despite the strategies and policies developed at national, regional and EU levels to enhance recognition and access to higher education, the conclusions showed that progress was uneven across countries and higher education institutions.

KEY MESSAGES

The importance of national rules for the recognition of foreign qualifications and prior learning.

A legal framework for recognition is important. With regard to the recognition of foreign qualifications, with the exception of Greece, all participating countries have ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention and consequently adjusted the contents of their national legislation and regulations. Despite growing formal compliance with the five key principles⁶, in practice challenges remain and there continues to be divergence in practice.

With regard to the recognition of prior learning, participants stated that national regulations should ensure that individuals have the right to be assessed, that there is no difference in the documented outcomes as compared to formal learning, and that it is incorporated into the national qualifications framework and the external quality assurance system. In practice there is significant variation across countries. Some countries (Estonia, Belgium (Flanders), Greece, Slovenia) have no regulation in place for access to higher education on the basis of recognition of prior learning although there may be rules applicable after the admission (Estonia, Slovenia). In some cases, recognition of prior learning includes only formal education. France has introduced legislation that ensures the right to be assessed, consequently expanding the number of potential beneficiaries. In Austria, authorities have introduced project-based recognition in order to encourage uptake by higher education institutions.

The current lack of data on the take-up of diverse access routes to higher education may point to a lack of policy focus. A survey among national member unions of the European Student Union has identified the lack of interest among governments as one of the key reasons for sub-optimal implementation of recognition of prior learning. Of the 12 participating countries, only Norway collects regular data from students.

Countries with clear objectives are likely to have more effective policy mixes. Policies that support recognition typically cover: i) national legislation for the recognition of foreign qualifications and prior learning; ii) consistent implementation of Bologna tools and reforms; iii) mechanisms for dialogue between government, institutions and

⁵ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32012H1222%2801%29>

⁶ 1) Applicants have right to fair assessment; 2) there is recognition if no substantial differences can be proven; 3) legislation or guidelines encourage comparing of learning outcomes rather than programme contents; 4) in cases of negative decisions the competent recognition authority demonstrates the existence of substantial difference; and 5) applicants have right to appeal the recognition decision.

stakeholders; (iv) incentives for institutions and learners; and (v) monitoring and evaluation.

Dialogue and collaboration are crucial.

Cooperation and dialogue between higher education institutions and national authorities are important in order to ensure optimal development and implementation of recognition procedures. Legislation will not necessarily guarantee quality results and take-up of recognition by learners, institutions and the labour market if enabling policies including information, awareness raising and communication are not in place to build trust between stakeholders and promote transparency.

A focus on dialogue and knowledge sharing is essential to ensure sustainable and scalable results. Authorities can facilitate knowledge sharing by encouraging the development of a platform and networks which target higher education institutions, students and/or staff. For instance in Slovenia, the rules for evaluation of foreign qualifications were agreed at institutional level, but the procedures for aligning recognition with the online admission system were developed in cooperation with higher institutions and the ministry.

Authorities can encourage institutions to develop appropriate mechanisms for recognition of prior learning and permeability to overcome barriers to recognition. Cooperation between authorities and providers is also necessary to ensure that recognition of prior learning is documented in such a way that decisions can be verified. In Austria, the quality assurance agency has developed recommendations for recognition of non-formal and informal learning⁷ in collaboration with 11 universities, and supports their implementation. These initiatives, including visits from experts to higher education institutions, are financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Research. In Italy, the Ministry of Higher Education and Research has encouraged a network of universities to focus on lifelong learning including recognition of prior learning⁸. This network has developed guidelines for the recognition of prior learning, which are available for all institutions.

Civil society can play a strong role. To be able to address the changing demands for recognition and access by learners, the world of work and broader society, there is a need for an ongoing dialogue that includes civil society. In Denmark, a tripartite agreement between social partners and the state has been in place since 2017 including a dedicated working group with employers, employees, higher education institutions and Ministries. These efforts should be opened up to the wider society.

Raising awareness among learners of all ages and employers may require new policies, developed in broad cooperation with policy makers, academia, labour market actors and civil society. The key issue is how to identify and address the needs of the learners and the small and medium-sized enterprises which dominate most economies.

The discussion also showed that the implementation of recognition policies will require greater collaboration to remove silos. This need is particularly felt in the area of recognition of prior learning, which requires cooperation between the

⁷ AQ Austria (2016). Anerkennung und Anrechnung non-formal und informell erworbener Kompetenzen. Empfehlungen zur Gestaltung von Anerkennungs- und Anrechnungsverfahren. https://www.aq.ac.at/de/analysen-berichte/dokumente-analysen-berichte/AQ_Anerkennung-2016-inklU4-und-bmwfw-2.pdf?m=1480945502

⁸(RUIAP Rete Universitaria Italiana per l'Apprendimento Permanente <http://pro2.unibz.it/projects/blogs/ruiap/>)

ministries in charge of education and employment. One suggestion was that national-level dialogue could link to the results of the national reports on implementation of validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Regional agreements and cooperation are a positive development but only the first step in the road towards scaling up recognition at European level.

There is significant action at the regional level action to implement automatic recognition of foreign qualifications for access to higher education, which can serve as an inspiration for action at a European level. Examples of regional cooperation include the agreement on the automatic academic recognition of qualifications in the Baltic states, the AdReN collaboration which aims to enhance automatic recognition in the Adriatic area, and the Benelux Decision which ensures that all qualifications, from short cycle to doctorates are automatically recognised the region. In the Nordic countries, the Reykjavik Declaration covers full recognition of access and higher education qualifications in the region. Nordic countries are also strengthening their cooperation in recognition of qualifications obtained in countries outside of the region, for instance through transparency and recognition tools such as the Nordic-Baltic admission manual for admissions officers⁹.

Portability should be the guiding principle in the recognition of foreign qualifications among Member States, but it requires mutual trust.

Participating countries acknowledged the importance of the portability of recognition decisions so that the competences recognised by a competent authority in one country in terms of the information gathered and the verification of the authenticity of the qualifications would not need to be re-examined elsewhere. Greater efforts are needed to build trust within both the European Union and the European Higher Education Area. Better coordination may require a greater role for recognition authorities. More efficient dissemination of the results and outputs of Erasmus+-funded projects is also required in order to embed good practice at system level.

Digital tools, such as Blockchain, offer great potential. An ongoing Erasmus+ project is exploring the potential of blockchain technology in recognition of qualifications portability of qualifications and reduction of fraud¹⁰.

Funding incentives can motivate institutions to enhance recognition and access to higher education.

National authorities can incentivise institutions to enhance recognition and access to higher education. While previous peer learning activities¹¹ have shown that performance-based funding and additional targeted funds can steer autonomous higher education institutions, the experience shared at this peer learning activity suggested

⁹ <https://norric.org/nordbalt/nordbalt-about>

¹⁰ "FraudSCAN - False Records, Altered University Diploma Samples Collection and Alert for NARICs" project: <http://www.cimea.it/en/projects/projects-recognition-of-qualifications.aspx>

¹¹ Such as the Dutch performance agreements; large scale funding incentives include Germany's Quality Pact for Teaching (Qualitätspakt Lehre) and the French Investment for the Future Programme (Programme investissement d'avenir PIA). PLA Paris

that national authorities make limited use of funding incentives in the recognition of foreign qualifications and of prior learning. In Estonia, the new performance-based funding model indirectly encourages institutions to improve their procedures for recognition of foreign qualifications: one of the performance indicators is the share of enrolled foreign students. From 2020, this will include the proportion of graduates who came from other countries. In other cases where incentives to encourage recognition of foreign qualifications exist, they tend to be soft and/or indirect, including guidance and recommendations or general encouragement to enhance mobility in universities.

Introducing national or regional funding for recognition of prior learning can support higher education institutions in enhancing implementation. In Denmark, higher education institutions can apply for state funding (taximeter) for recognition of prior learning, but there are indications that lack of knowledge among institutions about the availability and size of this funding has hampered take-up. Another reason may be that, despite the funding, some institutions may not perceive recognition of prior learning as a viable business case, if it results in less income from students who have acquired credits this way. The government has also financially supported institutional initiatives that enhance demand for, and knowledge about, part-time higher education provision and possibilities for employees, through information activities in cooperation with labour market organisations and local companies.

Countries may also take advantage of public-private funding for the implementation of recognition of prior learning. In France, validation of non-formal and informal learning is funded by public and private sources. In addition to state funding and candidates' own funding, regional councils fund information centres which provide information and support. Employment centres provide funding, for candidates who are seeking employment, for the costs not covered by regional councils. With regards to the validation of previous experience, companies may subsidise the costs of their employees¹². In Italy, public-private co-funding has been used in the recognition of prior learning at the regional level in Emilia Romagna¹³.

The development of a fair, high-quality recognition and access system requires support for skills development and acknowledgement of staff involved in recognition procedures.

In order to ensure transparent, rigorous and credible recognition procedures, regular information sharing and structured training for all staff involved in recognition procedures is necessary. While the lack of knowledge and information among recognition authorities hampers implementation at the institutional level, few countries reported specific training for employees involved in recognition, including academic staff. A notable exception is Estonia, where authorities have organised training in the evaluation of academic credentials from Finland and Latvia.

Acknowledging and rewarding the academic staff involved in recognition activities remains a challenge in many systems and institutions. Incentives for teachers involved in recognition of prior learning are limited or non-existent across countries. Developing incentive structures for the recognition of prior learning is important and could pave the way for cultural change in higher education institutions.

Further action at the EU level

¹² <https://vince.eucen.eu/validation-in-europe/france-2/>

¹³ <https://vince.eucen.eu/validation-in-europe/italy/>

Action at EU level can support higher education systems and institutions in developing fair, high quality recognition and access systems.

The European Commission contributes to strengthening evidence-based policies by commissioning comparative research, fostering training opportunities for staff in higher education institutions, supporting staff exchanges and funding cooperation between higher education institutions. In recognition, this could cover, for example: comparative analysis and research on the impact of recognition of prior learning including completion rates, employability and civic engagement; awareness raising campaigns of recognition of prior learning; projects involving both Programme and Partner countries in order to build knowledge and trust between countries; structured training for people working in recognition activities; and the development of digital tools, such as Blockchain and databases.

The open method of coordination helps enhance peer learning, networking and cooperation between governments, institutions and the HE community. Further exchanges between policy makers would be valuable, particularly in the area of recognition of non-formal and informal learning. The open method of coordination could also facilitate exchange of good practice and improved cooperation between education sectors and ministries, in order to break down silos.

Finally, EU support should continue to support improvements in the recognition of prior learning and qualifications of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers.