

## ADVANCING AUTOMATIC RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS IN THE EHEA

# Towards a Common Legal Framework on Automatic Recognition

### INTRODUCTION

This note draws on the outcomes of the Council of Europe's Ad Hoc Working Group on Automatic Recognition and recent discussions held during the March 2025 plenary meeting of the Steering Committee for Education (CDEDU). In response to ongoing disparities in the implementation of automatic recognition across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the Council of Europe is preparing the groundwork for a new legal instrument that would establish shared principles and modalities to support the automatic recognition of qualifications. Building on the Lisbon Recognition Convention and aligned with the Council of Europe's Education Strategy 2024–2030 "Learners First," this initiative

seeks to promote mutual trust, enhance mobility, and foster greater academic cooperation across Europe. Automatic Recognition of qualifications has been a recurring theme in various Ministerial Communiqués of the Bologna Process, beginning with the Bucharest Communiqué in 2012 and continuing through to the most recent 2024 Tirana Communiqué. These Communiqués reflect the ongoing commitment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to achieve automatic recognition, with each successive declaration reinforcing the importance of removing barriers to the recognition of qualifications and facilitating mobility across the EHEA.



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There are different definitions of automatic recognition, as well as different ways to implement automatic recognition, and different understandings of its meaning and concept. Essentially, it refers to the right of a qualification holder to have their degree recognised without the need for a separate assessment.

According to *the EU Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad (2018/C 444/01)*, Member States, building on the Lisbon Recognition Convention, should put in place, by 2025, automatic recognition.

According to the Treaty on the *Automatic recognition of Higher Education Qualifications* that entered into force on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2024 between the Benelux and the Baltic States, the States Parties recognise, without any procedure, a higher education qualification at the same level of the corresponding qualification issued in accordance with the legislation of the other Parties.

## RELEVANT DISTINCTIONS FOR RECOGNITION

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### AUTOMATIC VS PROCEDURAL

Automatic recognition implies that no natural or legal person can impose any procedure upon holders who wishes to make use of their degree.

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### GENERIC VS SPECIFIC

Automatic recognition is only guaranteed as generic recognition, i.e. regarding the level of the degree. Nevertheless, it is expected that the recognition of the general level of the degree will make a stronger case for the specific recognition, i.e. in a particular study field.

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### ACADEMIC VS PROFESSIONAL

In the Council of Europe context, the recognition is confined to academic recognition of degrees, i.e. seen from the angle of their value as learning qualification. It is therefore not targeting the EU regulated aspects of access to professions under the EU Directive on professional recognition (Directive 2013/55/EU).

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### AUTOMATIC VS AUTOMATED

Automatic recognition should also not be confused with an IT-supported automated recognition that is currently applied between some countries.

## KEY ISSUES

### 01 **Fragmented Implementation Despite a Shared Commitment**

The Lisbon Recognition Convention of 1997 sets out a clear principle: holders of a qualification from a signatory country should have fair, flexible, and transparent access to recognition procedures in other countries. Yet, in practice, implementation remains uneven and fragmented. Recognition procedures vary significantly from one country to another, leading to inconsistencies, confusion, and delays for students and graduates. Despite the Convention's spirit of cooperation, procedures and criteria continues to pose significant obstacles to mobility and trust across education systems.

### 02 **Automatic Recognition: Patchy Progress and Conceptual Confusion**

According to the 2022 monitoring report of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee Bureau, only 20 EHEA countries have formally established automatic recognition through their competent authorities, while 31 others report partial or informal implementation. In some cases, legal frameworks support automatic recognition; in others, it exists only in practice, without any formal guarantees. This reveals a critical problem: there is no common understanding of what automatic recognition entails, and countries apply it in incompatible or inconsistent ways. As a result, students face uncertainty and unequal treatment depending on where they obtained their qualifications and where they seek recognition.

### 03 **Widespread Automatic Recognition Still a Distant Goal**

The 2024 Bologna Process Implementation Report confirms that widespread automatic recognition remains far from reality in the EHEA. Only 19 systems apply it broadly across all EHEA countries, while 16 apply it selectively, and 13 systems have no system-level automatic recognition at all. These figures highlight a stark gap between political commitments and practical implementation. For students and staff, this means that cross-border mobility is still hindered by systemic disparities, undermining the goals of the EHEA.

### 04 **Complexity and Lack of Coherence Undermine Trust**

A feasibility study commissioned by the Council of Europe for the Ad Hoc Working Group identified at least four different approaches to automatic recognition in Europe, ranging from legally binding treaties to informal practices with no legal basis. This diversity reflects a troubling lack of coherence. The reliance on non-binding arrangements, discretionary national lists, and de facto practices weakens legal certainty and fuels mistrust between systems. At the same time, recognition procedures remain overly complex, slow, and administratively burdensome, creating unnecessary barriers for learners and institutions alike.



## ADVANCING TRUST, CLARITY AND CONSISTENCY

# Towards a New Legal Instrument on Automatic Recognition

Through extensive consultations with students, higher education institutions, public authorities, and the Benelux Secretariat of the Treaty on Automatic Recognition, the Council of Europe's Ad Hoc Working Group has laid the groundwork for a new legal instrument that will bring significant innovation and added coherence to the recognition of qualifications.

At the heart of this initiative is a transformative shift: the proposed instrument aims to codify the right of students and graduates to automatic recognition of their qualifications –whether obtained domestically or abroad – without facing unjustified barriers. This marks a clear evolution from existing fragmented practices, offering a predictable and rights-based approach to recognition.

Unlike existing treaties that often focus on technical procedures or bilateral commitments, this new instrument will define the foundational principles and conditions necessary to make automatic recognition both effective and meaningful. It will not prescribe recognition outcomes, but instead create a robust and transparent framework that supports implementation, fosters mutual trust, and reduces administrative burden for institutions

## FURTHER READING & RESOURCES



↘ **10 SEPT. 2024**  
**C. FINOCCHIETTI, ENIC PRESIDENT**  
30 years of the ENIC Network:  
A journey of cooperation and progress in  
recognition of qualifications



↘ **18 DEC. 2024**  
**M. PERSOONS, CHAIR OF THE STEERING  
COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION**  
Towards the automatic recognition of  
qualifications: the Council of Europe role



↘ **EUROPEAN EDUCATION AREA**  
Council Recommendation on promoting  
automatic mutual recognition of qualifications  
and learning periods abroad

“ This initiative represents a concrete step forward in realising the long-standing goal of fair, transparent, and efficient recognition across borders.

and students alike. Crucially, the new instrument will go beyond reaffirming existing commitments. It will consolidate and complement the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the recently adopted Multilateral Treaty on Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications (Benelux and Baltic States, 2024). Together, these three texts will form a coherent and mutually reinforcing legal architecture, providing countries with a shared framework of principles, standards, and obligations – while preserving institutional autonomy and academic freedom, which are essential for trust between systems.

Ultimately, this initiative represents a concrete step forward in realising the long-standing goal of fair, transparent, and efficient recognition across borders. By enhancing mobility, strengthening cooperation, and promoting equitable access to opportunities, it will make automatic recognition a practical reality – not just a political aspiration. The draft concept of this new instrument will be presented for discussion at the Plenary Meeting of the CDEDU in September 2025.

## GOOD PRACTICES & FURTHER READING



↘ **13 MAY 2024**  
Entry into Force of Multilateral Treaty on  
Automatic Recognition of Qualifications of  
Benelux and Baltic States Celebrated in Brussels

## THE PROJECT AND WORKING GROUP COUNTRIES COMPOSITION

The Ad Hoc Working Group on Automatic Recognition of Qualification is composed by representatives of Armenia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Georgia, Italy and Latvia. It is also composed by representatives of the European University Association, EURASHE, EURODOC, the European Commission, EQAR, UNESCO and the EHEA Secretariat.

## COUNCIL OF EUROPE EDUCATION STRATEGY 2024-2030 “LEARNERS FIRST”

The preparation of the European Space for Citizenship Education is part of the Education Strategy “Learners First” adopted at the 26<sup>th</sup> session of the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education of the Council of Europe in September 2023 and falls within Pillar 1 of the Strategy: Renewing the Democratic and Civic Mission of Education.



↘ **LEARNERS FIRST**  
Council of Europe Education  
Strategy 2024-2030

