



**ERASMUS+ PROGRAMME
GRANT AGREEMENT FOR AN ACTION
AGREEMENT NUMBER – 2014-3619/001-001
PROJECT NUMBER – 559252-EPP-1-2014-BE-EPPKA3-BOLOGNA**

Automatic recognition at system level in Flanders

The law of 10 July 2013 introduced the possibility of enacting the automatic recognition of higher education degrees following the statements in the Bucharest Communiqué with regard to automatic recognition:

'We (the ministers) are determined to remove outstanding obstacles hindering effective and proper recognition and are willing to work together towards the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees, building on the tools of the Bologna framework, as a long-term goal of the EHEA.'

As a kind of a follow-up of the Bucharest communiqué in which the ministers declared their willingness to work together towards the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees, some progressive and international minded members of the Flemish Parliament asked the minister to draft some new rules and legislation leading towards automatic recognition of degrees awarded in an EHEA country. They considered automatic recognition as one of the key components of a consolidated EHEA. In collaboration with those members of the Parliament we have drafted the new rules and those rules were laid down in the law of 10th July 2013. The law introduced the possibility of enacting the automatic recognition of higher education degrees at system level on 2 conditions:

- *a self-certified qualifications framework for higher education that is in compliance with the European Qualifications framework for higher education (the Dublin descriptors)*
- *and a system of quality assurance in line with the ESG.*

A QF and the system of QA are the 2 structural elements of which the full and proper implementation is needed in order to build mutual trust in our systems. Recognition is built on trust.

Furthermore the law has laid down/has fixed the automatic recognition of all accredited degrees and study programmes if the accreditation has been conferred/granted by an EQAR registered agency. At first glance that looks as a rational and evident rule and a logical consequence of the implementation of the structural reforms. But in practice there are and there could be some difficulties when applying that rule and there could be some

unintended consequences. What in case a programme is no longer accredited? What in case of a system in which universities are considered as self-accrediting institutions and only some programmes offered by university colleges have to be accredited?

The parliament has opened up a possibility. It is up to the government to implement and to make that possibility a reality. As in many higher education policy areas implementation is the key. We have a limited experience with enacting automatic recognition of degrees by applying the criteria put forward in the law: a self-certified qualifications framework for higher education and a system of quality assurance in line with the ESG. We have to explore new paths and ways to handle this matter. We have to investigate whether national higher education systems may fulfil our conditions and criteria. That kind of investigation is not an one way investigation but rather a dialogue between the stakeholders involved, in particular the ministries, the institutions and the quality assurance agencies of the countries involved.

The outcomes of the EQAR International Seminar on the role of National Qualifications Frameworks and Quality Assurance in Recognition shows clearly that implementation of the general principle of Automatic recognition as it is laid down in our regulation has to address a lot of challenges as there are:

- How to evaluate the system of quality assurance in other country in light of criteria and conditions defined in our law with regard to automatic recognition;
- The co-existence of institutional review/audit and programme evaluation and/or accreditation;
- What about the recognition of older, pre-Bologna qualifications;

Objectives of the project:

To explore new ways and new paths to handle the issue of automatic recognition of foreign degrees in Flanders;

To develop a process for implementing and putting in practice the new regulations with regard to automatic recognition;

To learn from each other and to come to a better understanding of the different systems of higher education and exchange knowledge and ideas with the partner countries.

In order to put in practice the new regulations a common understanding of the two higher education systems involved as well as of the two qualifications frameworks and the two systems of quality assurance is needed. That is a necessary step in our decision-making process to come to the final decision by the government.

Target groups of the project:

- Students from the partner country wishing to continue their study in Flanders;
- Graduates from the partner country coming to Flanders and entering the labor market;
- Employers dealing with graduates from the partner country;
- Higher education institutions receiving applications from students of the partner country for continuing their students in Flanders;

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We have organized three country workshops: Denmark, Poland and Portugal. The aim of this country seminar was to investigate whether in case of Portugal and the Portuguese higher education system the criteria and the conditions laid down in the law, are met substantially.

We will also organize a final international seminar by the end of April 2016.

Minutes of the different meetings will be available. The outcomes of the discussions with each partner country will be laid down in a final document considering the question whether the legal conditions and criteria for automatic recognition are fulfilled or not.

We will also issue a final document with our findings and experiences and based on that some recommendations how to tackle the issue of automatic recognition in the EHEA will be formulated. That document may be used as the background document for the final international seminar.

Results:

Three draft governmental enactments declaring the degrees of country X as being equivalent with the bachelor c.q. master c.q. PhD at system level in Flanders;

Background document for the final international seminar on automatic recognition;

A report of the final seminar including some recommendations with regard to automatic recognition of degrees;

Impact:

Better recognition of degrees and increased and smoother mobility of students and graduates. The importance of the link between qualifications frameworks, quality assurance and recognition in the EHEA has clearly been shown.

Speeding up the discussions on recognition within the EHEA leading to automatic recognition of HE degrees within the EHEA.

Enriching the debate about the shifting paradigms: equivalence, recognition and acceptance.

Encouraging other countries to develop similar systems as steps towards a system of general automatic recognition within the EHEA.

Further implementation of the principle of automatic recognition and extending the implementation to other countries based on the methodology that has been tested with the three pilot countries as a part of the overall responsibilities of the division for higher and adult education.

Pathfinder group:

The PfG recommends to the EHEA ministers *'to ensure that qualifications from other EHEA countries are recognised on an equal level with domestic qualifications, for exemple through enacting specific legislation to achieve this objective'*

EHEA vision in the Yerevan communiqué:

'to achieve an EHEA where our common goals are implemented in all member countries to ensure trust in each other's higher education systems; where automatic recognition of qualifications has become a reality so that students and graduates can move easily throughout it;'

Commitment in the Yerevan communiqué:

'to ensure that qualifications from other EHEA countries are automatically recognized at the same level as relevant domestic qualifications;'

The automatic recognition has no juridical impact on the professional recognition. It doesn't imply the professional recognition but it may facilitate it in case it is needed. It is limited to automatic academic recognition.

A key element of the follow-up is the communication towards the institutions, students, employers, the public sector.

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.