Road to Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Access Qualifications (ARAQUA)
1 December 2022 – 30 November 2024

RECOMMENDATIONS
on automatic recognition
of HE access qualifications
in the ARAQUA countries

2024

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Rationale of the recommendations

The recommendations focus on encouraging and supporting automatic recognition of general secondary education qualifications and vocational education and training (VET) qualifications giving access to higher education (HE), i.e. **HE access qualifications.** 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 in the country where the qualifications have been issued. In the terms of these recommendations, only **general access to HE programmes** is explored, i.e., those HE access qualifications, which legally allow their holders to apply for admission to HE programmes without any specific limitations. If qualifications provide rights to access only to a particular HE programme or institution in the country of their issuance, additional evaluation is necessary and such procedures are out of scope of automatic recognition.

According to 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), **automatic recognition of HE access qualifications** is explained as "the right for holders of a qualification of a certain level that has been issued by one Member State to be considered for entry to a higher education programme in the next level in any other Member State, without having to go through any separate recognition procedure".

Thus, automatic recognition of a qualification for the purposes of further learning removes the necessity for procedures related to credential evaluation to determine the NQF level of the qualification and relevant eligibility rights. Yet the automatic recognition of a qualification does not ensure **admission** to the desired HE study programme; the candidates still are subject to admission procedures. HEIs have rights to stipulate specific admission requirements.

The automatic recognition does not limit or lift any procedures related to **checking the authenticity** of credentials and the status of awarding institution. In the case of automatic recognition, HEIs and ENIC/NARIC offices may verify whether the particular HE access qualification is authentic and whether the qualification ensures access to HE programme in the home system of education.

In case of specific qualifications and eligibility rights, ENIC/NARIC offices or other competent authorities should be consulted.

In the terms of ARAQUA project, desk studies in eight countries were conducted to map all the qualifications, which grant access to HE in Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Romania, Slovakia and the United Kingdom. In total, 21 HE access qualifications were identified and described in the comparative report. HE access qualifications included in the comparative report and the recommendations were mapped between 2022 and 2024. These recommendations were composed considering the results of study carried out in the ARAQUA project countries; however, general principles could be applied also to other countries. In order to embrace existing differences in the national qualifications and education systems of the ARAQUA project countries, the document captures a broader perspective than could be observed in a single country or system.

According to the conclusions of the comparative study, the ARAQUA team proposes that the **succeeding HE access qualifications could be subject to automatic recognition** between the project partner countries (see Table 1).

Table 1
HE access qualification subject to automatic recognition in the project partner countries

Country	HE access qualification subject to automatic recognition
DK	The Higher General Examination Programme (stx) *(Almen studentereksamen (stx))* The Higher Commercial Examination Programme (hhx) *(Merkantil studentereksamen (hhx))* The Higher Technical Examination Programme (htx) *(Teknisk studentereksamen (htx))*
DK	The Higher General Examination Programme (stx) – 2-years *(Almen studentereksamen (2-årig stx))*
DK	Danish Higher Preparatory Examination *(hf-eksamen (2-årig hf))*
DK	General Upper Secondary Education for Refugees and Immigrants *(Gymnasiale indslusningsforløb for flygtninge og indvandrere (GIF))*
DK	Vocational Education Examination Qualifying for Access to Higher Education (EUX) *(Erhvervsfaglig studentereksamen i forbindelse med erhvervsuddannelse (EUX))*
DK	The Higher Preparatory Examination (hf-single subject) *(Højere forberedelseseksamen (enkeltfag))*
EE	Certificate of General Secondary Education *(Gümnaasiumi lõputunnistus)*
EE	Certificate of Vocational Secondary Education *(Kutsekeskhariduse lõputunnistus)*
IT	State Exam Diploma upon the Conclusion of the Upper Secondary School Course *(Diploma di Esame di Stato conclusivo dei corsi di istruzione secondaria superiore)*
LV	Certificate of general secondary education *(Atestāts par vispārējo vidējo izglītību)*
LV	Diploma of vocational secondary education *(Diploms par profesionālo vidējo izglītību)*
MT	Matriculation Certificate
MT	AM – Advanced Matriculation
RO	Baccalaureate degree *(Diploma de bacalaureat)*
SK	Maturita Examination Certificate *(School-leaving Examination Certificate) (Vysvedčenie o maturitnej skúške)*
UK – England & Wales	General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE A Level)
UK – Scotland	Scottish Higher

The HE access qualifications stated in Table 1 **should not undergo regular credential evaluation procedures** for the purposes of access to HE programmes.

Additional evaluation is necessary for the following qualifications to be subject to automatic recognition (due to various EQF levels 3-5 awarded) between the project partner countries (see Table 2).

Table 2
HE access qualification requiring additional evaluation in the project partner countries

Country	HE access qualification requiring additional evaluation
DK	Evidence of Training Certificate (VET) *(Skolebevis)*
DK	Danish Higher Preparatory Examination *(hf-eksamen (2-årig hf))*
DK	The Higher Preparatory Examination (hf-single subject) *(Højere forberedelseseksamen (enkeltfag)*
DK	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*)

The **evaluation procedure should be implemented for the qualifications** mentioned in Table 2 in order to state the related eligibility rights of the holder of qualification in the country of issuance.

The recommendations elaborated within the project refer to general practices of recognition and there can be different approaches for bilateral agreements.

1 Considering various features of HE access qualifications

The results of the desk studies conducted in the project partner countries led to the conclusion that HE access qualifications issued in the project countries could be subject to automatic recognition. However, some general principles as regards features of the HE access qualifications should be taken into account to foster transparency and build mutual trust between the countries.

The following aspects of HE access qualifications should be considered:

- Different **grading systems, passing grades, assessment systems, specific range of subjects studied and study subjects for the final examination** used in the Member Countries should not be an obstacle to the automatic recognition of HE access qualifications. The type of qualification (general or VET) should also not pose an obstacle and their automatic recognition should be facilitated. If a specific type of qualification is required for a particular HE study programme, the type of qualification should be evaluated in the admission procedure.

- For HE access qualifications to be subject to automatic recognition, they must be included in the **national qualifications framework** (NQF) in the country of issuance. In most cases,

HE access qualifications are at NQF level that includes a reference to EQF level 4 with the corresponding learning outcomes. If a HE access qualification has a different NQF level, additional evaluation of credential is necessary.

- The education institution providing education programmes leading to HE access qualifications (and institutions awarding HE access qualifications) and education programmes leading to HE access qualifications must be **quality assured and recognised by the state** for the issued HE access qualifications to be subject to automatic recognition, e.g. qualifications and/or education institutions are included in the relevant databases or registers.

- According to the results of ARAQUA study, the **nominal duration** of primary and secondary education (formal education experience) leading to HE access qualifications in the partner countries is 12-13 years. A 1-year difference in the duration of formal education experience should not be considered as a substantial difference hindering automatic recognition of HE access qualifications.

- Automatic recognition and equal access should be 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.

- Consideration of alternative pathways may enhance mobility, inclusivity and access; however, private HEIs may be constrained by their individual programme or institution licensing agreements.

2 Considering contextual aspects impacting HE access qualifications

Furthermore, automatic recognition of HE access qualifications requires systematic approach, i.e. the context of qualifications subject to automatic recognition should be considered. Appropriate mechanisms should be provided for the automatic recognition of qualifications to be possible.

Regarding the conclusions of the ARAQUA study, the following aspects should be highlighted:

- Legal framework (where applicable) of the countries should facilitate and support the automatic recognition of HE access qualifications with the respect to autonomy of HEIs.

- The national authorities (e.g. ENIC/NARIC offices) should provide accessible and transparent information about access qualifications (NQF/EQF level, content, pathways, grading system, examinations, etc.).

- Where possible the national authorities should provide digital (online) tools for publishing quality assured information about HE access qualifications to ensure comparability of qualifications.

- The automatic recognition of HE access qualifications is usually based on rigorous research and the mutual trust in education systems of the involved countries.

- ENIC/NARIC offices and HEIs should work together to foster the opportunities for capacity building (to streamline and encourage automatic recognition).

- Bilateral or multilateral agreements on mutual recognition of qualifications increase the trust and comparability between countries with higher volume of student exchange.

- The signatory countries of the bilateral or multilateral agreements should ratify the Lisbon Convention and/or Global Convention, implement a quality assurance system according to the European Standards and Guidelines and reference/compare their NQF to the EQF.

- Online national databases should be developed for checking the authenticity of HE access qualifications; the databases are becoming increasingly relevant in relation to the digitalised processes and fraud prevention.

- Countries should consider the shift towards digital credentials that are easily identifiable and verifiable; thus, fostering the automatic recognition of HE access qualifications.

3 List of minimum requirements for HE access qualifications to be subject to automatic recognition

The analysis and comparison of the project partner countries' education systems and HE access qualifications allowed the development of a list of minimum requirements for HE access qualifications to be subject to automatic recognition. The project team is aware of the fact that this list is not exhaustive, but may be helpful in supporting broader mapping of HE access qualifications suitable for automatic recognition in EHEA countries informed by the ARAQUA study.

For HE access qualifications to be subject to automatic recognition the following conditions should be taken into account:

- The qualification should provide general eligibility rights of the holder to apply for admission at HE programmes.

- The qualification should be included in NQF with the reference to EQF level 4 and the corresponding learning outcomes.

- The qualification should be awarded by institution or awarding body that is quality assured, and the education programme leading to the qualification should be quality assured or approved by the ministry/respective agency, i.e. provider and programme should have undergone quality assurance procedures established in the country.

- The qualification should be identifiable/confirmed by a legible document and supported by transparency tools and publicly accessible information.

- The HE access qualifications should enjoy public confidence for the purpose of progression and successful participation in higher education within the national context.

The ARAQUA team invites the ENIC and NARIC networks to use these recommendations as a reference to facilitate automatic recognition of HE access qualifications in the EHEA and support implementation of the Council Recommendation (2018) on automatic recognition of qualifications.

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