

# SPHERE Seminar Report

## “Recognition: Implications for cross-border access to higher education and mobility”

10-11 June 2019

Technical University of Moldova,  
the Republic of Moldova

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## Table of content

<b>Introduction</b> .....	3
The topic .....	3
<b>Objectives</b> .....	3
<b>Attendance</b> .....	4
<b>Preparation for the seminar</b> .....	4
<b>Summary of pre-survey results</b> .....	4
<b>Highlights from the seminar discussions</b> .....	5
Scope, principles and procedures of recognition procedures.....	5
Automatic recognition of academic qualifications – developments in the EHEA .....	6
Recognition of professional qualifications .....	6
Recognition of credit for periods of study abroad, from the perspective of higher education institutions .....	7
The student perspective on recognition .....	8
Recognition of prior learning, digital approaches and new types of credentials.....	8
<b>Conclusions, take-aways and recommendations for HEREs, HE institutions and systems</b> .....	9

## Introduction

### The topic

The focus of the HERE seminar was on **recognition** - in particular, the transnational recognition of qualifications and credit mobility. Hosted by the Technical University of Moldova on 10-11 June 2019, it aimed to offer an overview to the Higher Education Reform Experts (HEREs) and to colleagues from the National Erasmus+ Offices (NEOs) on this topic, while adopting a twin-track approach, catering for the needs of both those who have been working on the topic for the past years, as well as those who are now beginning with the basics.

The main issues covered by the seminar were:

- International recognition conventions
- The development of automatic recognition under the Bologna Process, and the European Education Area
- Recognition of credit mobility
- Recognition of professional qualifications and the extent to which it is increasingly embedded in international trade agreements
- Other related processes and developments such as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), the digitalisation of recognition instruments (the Europass and the European Student Card), the emergence of “new credentials” (micro credits, badges, nano degrees etc.), and the recognition of qualifications and study periods of refugees.

This report summarises the results of a pre-survey on the topic that was conducted prior to the seminar, as well as the presentations and discussions at the event. It provides several conclusions for the HERE and their higher education systems. In annex, additional supporting documentation can be found.

### Objectives

1. Gaining a clear view of current priorities and activities in the field of recognition of qualifications.
2. Understanding the place of recognition in the context of national and institutional policies on internationalisation.
3. Appreciating and discussing the need for relevant staff development at system and institutional levels.
4. Assessing the gap between national provision and international good practice, with a view to identifying possible future TAMs and other SPHERE actions.

## Attendance

The seminar was attended by 67 participants. This included 42 HEREs and 16 NEOs from 23 countries. The HEREs had very different profiles, including ministry representatives, vice-rectors, heads of QA departments and international relations units, etc.

## Preparation for the seminar

The SPHERE Team developed [a reader](#) and conducted a pre-survey to assess participants' needs and interest and to gather good practices on the topic.

## Summary of pre-survey results

**Fifty-one participants from 18 countries responded to the presurvey.**

The results are particularly rich and interesting and should be read as a complement to this report. A few selected outcomes are presented:

- **Level of knowledge and experience:** 32 (63%) respondents stated that they consider themselves well-informed on the recognition of qualifications, whereas 18 (35%) said that they would need basic introduction to the topic. This allowed to organise parallel sessions for participants with different levels of knowledge and experience.
- **Participation in regional recognition conventions:** 24 (47%) participants reported their country being a signatory to a regional recognition convention, with half (12) of these respondents saying that they are actively involved in its implementation; 17 participants (33%) said that they did not know whether their country is part of any regional convention.
- **Who is in charge of recognition?:** Most of the respondents (23, i.e. 45%) said that in their countries, the ministry is responsible for the recognition of higher education qualifications obtained in another country; 17 respondents (33%) confirmed that several stakeholders share common responsibility in this sense, namely the ministry, the national quality assurance/accreditation agency and the higher education institutions. If it is the higher education institution which has the recognition responsibility, then the final recognition decision is mostly made at the level of rectorate.
- **Substantial difference:** 20 (39%) of the respondents stated that they are not familiar with the concept of “substantial difference” in the context of recognition; Another 20 (39%) said that they had heard of it, but did not know how it works.
- **Recognition based on comparability or identity of qualifications:** 42 (82%) of the respondents confirmed that in their countries, the culture and practice of recognition is based on a requirement that prior study abroad must be comparable, in terms of learning outcomes, to what would have been studied at home. However, 22 (43%) affirmed that it must be identical. This indicated that the distinction is not well understood.

- **Credit recognition:** When it comes to the recognition of credits obtained in transnational mobility programmes, 22 (43%) respondents said that it is the central level of the higher education institution in charge of this, whereas for 19 (37%) respondents respective faculties and departments are responsible; ministries and national quality assurance/accreditation agencies appear to be the least likely to be in charge of this aspect.
- **Recognition of prior learning:** For 28 (55%) of the respondents the recognition of prior learning was a familiar concept; however, only 25% said that in their countries the recognition of prior learning is well established in a regulatory framework; only 6 respondents (12%) further stated that the recognition of prior learning is well established in institutional practice.
- **Recognition of qualifications held by professionals:** 31 (61%) respondents said that they do not have any experience with the recognition of qualifications held by professionals seeking to enter their country. On the other hand, 36 (71%) of the respondents are of the opinion that in their country, professional disciplines (e.g. medicine, engineering, accountancy) are taught with a view to allowing graduates to seek employment abroad.

## Highlights from the seminar discussions

### Scope, principles and procedures of recognition procedures

After the welcome remarks, the SPHERE Team gave a presentation on the rationale of the seminar, the pre-survey results (see above), and the programme.

Allan Bruun Pedersen (Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science and Vice-President of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee) presented<sup>1</sup> an analysis of the state of play in the regional conventions, as well as the plans for a global convention. Some of the main takeaways were:

- Regional conventions are legal documents that promote the mobility of students and labour force in the different global regions; once ratified by states, they are valid for all HEI and central recognition authorities and should be implemented in national legislation.
- Currently, two regional conventions are in force, i.e. the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1999) and the Asia-Pacific Convention (2018). Each signatory country is required to establish a National Information Centre, which informs on the national education system and the recognised institutions, recognition procedures and principles and supports HEI in their recognition decisions.
- The regional conventions stipulate that full recognition shall be provided, unless the recognition authority can prove substantial differences between the foreign qualification and a comparable national qualification. In the absence of an established definition, it is agreed that substantial differences must be related to one of the five components of a

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<sup>1</sup> All the presentations are available on the seminar website:  
<https://supportthere.org/moldova2019/page/documents-presentations-5>

qualification: level of the qualification, learning outcomes, study workload, quality of the programme, profile of the qualification (i.e. academic, professional, vocational)

- Regional conventions are based on a mutual trust in the quality of qualifications.
- **A global convention on recognition** was agreed on in April 2019 and is expected to get formally adopted at the UNESCO General Conference in November 2019; it follows the same procedures and principles as the regional conventions.

Feda Al-Tamimi (Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Jordan) offered a reflection on the recognition procedures for students with a refugee status in Jordan. Jordan has received many thousands of refugee students from Iraq and Syria, as well as historically from Palestine. They are allowed to access and complete higher education programmes but receive certification only if they entered with appropriate documentation. Jordan's experience suggests that bilateral agreements are more effective than regional conventions.

### Automatic recognition of academic qualifications – developments in the EHEA

Jenneke Lokhoff (Nuffic) and Ana Mateus (NARIC, Portugal) offered an overview on approaches to build capacity in recognition by streamlining procedures and rendering them more transparent. Some of the central takeaways were:

- Automatic Recognition is recognition on **system level** and leads to the automatic right to be considered for entry to the next level (Bachelor=Bachelor, Master=Master). The Automatic Recognition envisaged by the European Higher Education Area and European Education Area<sup>2</sup> requires the implementation of the three-cycle system with references to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF and EHEA QF), a Quality Assurance (QA) system based on the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.
- Four different models or approaches for the implementation of Automatic Recognition were presented, keeping in mind that transparency to all stakeholders regarding procedures and criteria used is key. Tools for HEI working with automatic recognition were also cited: 'EAR-HEI manual' and STREAM platform<sup>3</sup>, an online training platform for admissions officers.

### Recognition of professional qualifications

Howard Davies (SPHERE Team) gave an overview of the existing EU legislation which regulates the recognition of professional qualifications, including Mutual Recognition Agreements concluded with third countries, which are built on Free Trade Agreements, and initiatives to design transnational competence-based curricula:

- The [EU Directive 2005/36/EC \(consolidated version 2016\)](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area_en) regulates recognition of professional qualifications within EU member states, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway. It stipulates automatic recognition – different and unrelated to the automatic recognition

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<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area_en)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.enic-naric.net/stream-the-online-training-platform-for-admissions-officers.aspx>

mentioned above – for seven sectoral professions: medical doctor, dentist, general care nurse, veterinary surgeon, midwife, pharmacist, architect. Recognition, in this case, does not necessarily grant the right to practice.

- Under the Directive's General System, there are professions without commonly agreed basic training conditions. Case-by-case analysis determines whether there is "substantial difference" between what is held and what is required; if "substantial difference" exists, host Member States can require an adaptation period or an aptitude test.
- A third case under EU legislation are professions that have their own Directives (e.g. lawyers, sailors)
- Mutual Recognition in Free Trade Agreements: the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement was used as example
- Transnational competence-based curricula aim at reducing professional protectionism in the Internal Market and increasing cross-border service provision.

Mary Gobbi (University of Southampton, UK) presented on the recognition of professional qualifications in nursing. She stressed the importance of patient safety as a prime consideration in the design and delivery of training programmes in the area of healthcare. These had to be based on competences which were unambiguous, supported by theory and practice, based on international consensus as well as appropriate to local conditions. In the field of general care nursing, the labour market is global. Hence the importance of maintaining not only the level of professional competence, but also its relevance, in the light of technological advances, demographic change, epidemiological factors and regulatory considerations.

Mohammed Salheen (Ain Shams University, Egypt) added his reflections on the recognition of professional qualifications in Egypt, with a particular focus on the engineering field.

### Recognition of credit for periods of study abroad, from the perspective of higher education institutions

Paul Leys (University of Ghent) discussed how recognition of credit mobility is done at the University of Ghent. In his presentation, he emphasised the following:

- Recognition is a crucial factor for student mobility, with the credit transfer being the first step of recognition.
- The golden rule of recognition of credit mobility within the framework of inter-institutional agreements is: *all credits gained during the period of study abroad or during the virtual mobility – as agreed in the Learning Agreement (LA) and confirmed by the Transcript of Records – should be transferred without delay and counted towards the student's degree without any additional work by or assessment of the student.*
- After credit transfer, grade conversion is the next step of recognition. Grade conversion still poses challenges (due to different grading systems, fair conversion, transparency, etc.). one of the tools proposed for grade conversion is [Egracons](#).

Two HERE case studies on institutional recognition practices were presented by Liudmila Alieva (North Caucasus University, Russia) and Larisa Buguian (Technical University of Moldova).

### The student perspective on recognition

Rajko Golovic (European Students' Union) offered an insight into the practices around recognition from a student perspective. His intervention was complemented by a HERE student – Bushra Akileh (University of Jordan) and by a student from the Republic of Moldova – Cristina Voroneanu (Students Alliance of Moldova). Some highlights were:

- A great majority of National Student Unions support automatic recognition, however important challenges remain in its implementation such as non-consistent implementation, lack of trust among EHEA countries and lack of governmental interest
- The European Students' Union recommends:
  - Simplification of recognition procedures
  - Implementation of Bologna tools in a proper, systematic and thorough manner
  - Further development of the Diploma Supplement
  - Recognition of Prior Learning should be part of national HE strategies

### Recognition of prior learning, digital approaches and new types of credentials

Howard Davies (SPHERE Team) and Michael Gaebel (SPHERE Team) presented on the topic, followed by two case studies from Arayik Navoyan (French University of Armenia) and Madina Mansurova (Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan).

- In the area of RPL, major questions were asked – but not answered in the time available. They concerned the issues surrounding the currency of experience (for how long does it remain valid), how to measure experience (and how much experience to measure), who should assess prior experience and how can equitable treatment be assured.
- Several emerging European Commission initiatives were introduced:
  - [The European Student Card](#) initiative is currently under development, building on and integrating other recently developed approaches such as the [Erasmus Without Paper](#) and the experience of the [EMREX](#) initiative. In addition, [the Europass](#) is being revised, and it is not yet clear how it will relate to the European Student Card (as both record mobility and the use of digital Diploma Supplement).
- One of the breakout groups that followed focussed on new types of credentials, such as micro credits, batches etc. They are provided by institutions in order to award learning that is not intended to result into degrees, e.g. for extracurricular student activities and lifelong learning offers. But they are also used by other providers, such as businesses, NGOs etc., and in both cases the question arises on whether they can be converted in credits that could count for degrees, and whether they actually offer alternative tracks to the learning opportunities presently offered by HEI.
- Most participants confirmed that their students use learning opportunities such as MOOCs and online courses as an addition to their university studies. Usually, this was regarded as

a useful addition that would help students to get employment and also pave the way to further study. Some participants regretted that their institutions did not make a comparable offer, due to lack of resources or initiatives, and also due to legal obstacles. But there was also concern that such offers could replace HE study: employers are often not interested in academic degrees as they would not provide the skills and abilities industries need. Inaccurate examinations and fraud further undermined the trust in higher education. In this regard, big multinationals such as Google and Amazon that offer jobs to young people without degrees were a source of much concern. This also provoked an interesting discussion on whether and how universities should provide what industry needs, and how to ensure that learning is attractive and focuses on education, as opposed to being a hunt for credentials.

- Provision of lifelong learning was seen as important task for higher education institutions, as it could bring some funding into the institution, but also reorient curricula, and enhance education quality.

## Conclusions, take-aways and recommendations for HEREs, HE institutions and systems

### 1. Recognition of qualifications is a complex topic, in terms of principles, procedures and actors involved

Participants showed a high interest in the principles and procedures around recognition of academic and professional qualifications, as well as credit recognition, following a period of mobility abroad. The seminar discussions delved into the complexity of the topic, among others discussing the role of stakeholders who bear the responsibility of recognition – ministries, higher education institutions, accreditation/recognition agencies or a mix of them.

### 2. Successful, transparent and systematic recognition of foreign qualifications presupposes the involvement of several stakeholders and does not occur in isolation

Implementation of recognition procedures requires engagement at different levels:

- Institutional (from all the staff involved in recognition and QA)
- National/regional (e.g. in terms of law, transparency tools, national information centres)
- International (e.g. recognition conventions, internal umbrella organisations and peer learning)

### 3. Balancing the concept of “substantial difference”

Fair and transparent recognition is not only a question of legal principles and procedures or technical comparisons; it is also a culture, policy and mindset. This implies accepting differences in context and, when confronted by substantial difference, assessing it by asking whether learning outcomes are comparable rather

than whether course inputs are identical. Balancing between accepting foreign qualifications for their value and respecting the quality of one's own qualifications fosters the potential for mutual trust in quality of qualifications. All speakers stressed the importance of trust: conventions, legislative and regulatory measures should reinforce it, rather than merely compensate for its absence.

**4. More capacity building events should be organised around the topic of recognition of qualifications and credits**

The recognition landscape within EHEA remains diverse, with still a non-consistent implementation of all the Bologna tools and principles, including the ones around recognition. That is why, additional capacity building events should be further organised on recognition procedures, including recognition of prior learning. New developments in recognition- such as emerging digital European instruments, new credentials and the recognition practices for students with a refugee background should be also constantly mapped and peer learning activities should be organised around them.

5. Future events would include the study visits, seminars and conference in 2020, as well as the TAMs scheduled on the basis of the forthcoming call. The question would be which aspects of recognition to examine further and at what level of detail. The pre-survey to the Moldova seminar had asked about familiarity and had used the results to set up a twin-track programme. The evaluation questionnaire had inquired about which aspects of recognition to prioritise. It was agreed that, in addition to these investigations, a post-seminar survey would be undertaken to throw further light on how to approach this complex topic in the most practical and productive way.