

DECLARATION ON RECOGNITION OF HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Trg BiH 1/V, Sarajevo
Bosnia and Herzegovina

Fax. +387 33 561 701
Tel. +387 33 561 700

mail: rcc@rcc.int
website: www.rcc.int



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Preamble

Taking into account the commitments undertaken in the Multi-Annual Plan on Regional Economic Area we aim to deliver on these commitments and to actively contribute to the European Higher Education Area and European Education Area;

Acknowledging that in an increasingly globalised context, students and graduates should be able to make the best possible use of all learning opportunities;

Recognising the importance of mobility of students and regional cooperation in higher education, for personal development and increased employability of students, and in particular the development of inter-cultural skills; fostering the internationalisation and enhancing quality of higher education; and strengthening of peaceful and democratic societies;

Convinced that through joint regional cooperation we will consolidate the efforts to align in full with the principles of the European Higher Education Area outlined in the Bologna process Communiqués and the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Recognition Convention), as well as 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;

We hereby undertake to attain the automatic mutual recognition¹ of higher education qualifications based on the principles set out in this Declaration on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the Western Balkans² while taking into full respect the diversity of higher education systems and of the University autonomy.

Access to higher education

In principle, a secondary education qualification of the European Qualifications Framework (hereinafter: EQF) Level 4 giving access to higher education should be recognised for the purpose of giving access to higher education, without prejudicing a higher education institutions' or the competent authorities' right to set specific admission criteria for specific programmes or to check authenticity of documents.

Furthermore, we commit to grant automatic recognition of general education qualifications and of Matura exams where they are organised for the purpose of giving access to higher education, without prejudicing a higher education institutions' or the competent authorities' right to set specific admission criteria for specific programmes or to check authenticity of documents.

Recognition of short cycle qualifications

In principle, the short cycle qualifications, of minimum duration of one or two years or 60 or 120 ECTS, awarded in the public, accredited higher education institution should be

recognised, where foreseen, in line with the European Qualifications Frameworks and in line with the relevant legislation, without prejudicing a higher education institutions' or the competent authorities' right to check authenticity of documents.

For the purpose of employment, the competent authority, should automatically issue a document attesting that the short cycle degree, of minimum duration of one or two years or 60 or 120 ECTS, awarded in the public, accredited higher education institution should be recognised based on the assessment of the learning outcomes at an appropriate level of the European Qualifications Framework as foreseen by the relevant legislation, without prejudice to check the authenticity of documents by competent authorities.

For the purpose of continuing academic studies, ECTS acquired during the short cycle degree, of minimum duration of one or two years or 60 or 120 ECTS, awarded in the public, accredited higher education institution should be recognized as respective ECTS of a first cycle degree, where possible and in line with the learning outcomes of the receiving study programme, by the receiving higher education institution, without prejudicing the higher education institutions' right to set specific admission criteria for specific programmes or to check the authenticity of documents.

Recognition of first cycle qualifications in higher education

In principle, the first cycle degrees, in duration of minimum three to four years or 180 to 240 ECTS, awarded in the public, accredited higher education institution should be recognised as an EQF Level 6 degree³, without prejudicing a higher education institutions' or the competent authorities' right to set specific admission criteria for specific programmes or to check authenticity of documents.

For the purpose of employment, the competent authority, should automatically issue a document attesting that the first cycle degree, of minimum duration of three to four years or 180 to 240 ECTS, awarded in the public, accredited higher education institution is recognised as an EQF Level 6 degree⁴, without prejudice to check the authenticity of documents by competent authorities.

For the purpose of continuing academic studies, the first cycle degree, of minimum duration of three or four years or 180 or 240 ECTS, awarded in the public, accredited higher education institution should give access to second cycle studies, without prejudicing the higher education institutions' right to set specific admission criteria for specific programmes or to check the authenticity of documents.

Recognition of second cycle qualifications in higher education

In principle, the second cycle degrees, of minimum duration of one to - two years or 60 - to 120 ECTS, awarded after completion of the first cycle study programme in the public, accredited higher education institution should be recognised

as an EQF Level 7 degree. The appropriate sub-level of the EQF 7 will be determined in accordance with the relevant legislation.

For the purpose of employment, the competent authority, should automatically issue a document attesting that the second cycle degree, of minimum duration of one to two years or 60 to 120 ECTS, awarded after completion of the first cycle study programme in the public, accredited higher education institution is recognised as an EQF Level 7 degree, as foreseen in the relevant legislation, without prejudice to check the authenticity of documents by competent authorities. The appropriate sub-level of the EQF 7 will be determined in accordance with the relevant legislation.

For the purpose of continuing academic studies towards the third cycle studies, the second cycle academic degree, of minimum duration of one to two years or 60 to 120 ECTS, awarded in the public, accredited higher education institution should give access to third cycle studies, as foreseen in the relevant legislation, without prejudicing the higher education institutions' right to set specific admission criteria for specific programmes or to check the authenticity of documents.

Recognition of integrated first and second cycle degrees

In principle, the integrated second cycle degrees, of minimum duration of five to six years or 300 to 360 ECTS, respectively, awarded in the public, accredited higher education institutions, should be recognised as an EQF Level 7 degrees without prejudicing a higher education institutions' or the competent authorities' right to set specific admission criteria for specific programmes or to check authenticity of documents.

For the purpose of employment, the competent authority, should automatically issue a document attesting that the integrated second cycle degrees, of minimum duration of five to six years or 300 to 360 ECTS, respectively, awarded in the public, accredited higher education institutions, is recognised as an EQF Level 7, in accordance with the relevant legislation, without prejudice to check the authenticity of documents by competent authorities.

For the purpose of continuing academic studies, the integrated second cycle degrees, of minimum duration of five to six years or 300 to 360 ECTS, respectively, awarded in the public, accredited higher education institutions, should give access to third cycle studies, without prejudicing the higher education institutions' right to set specific admission criteria for specific programmes or to check the authenticity of documents.

Recognition of study periods abroad

Periods of study completed abroad within the framework of higher education programme provided by the public, accredited higher education institution shall be recognised with a view of granting transfer of maximum credits relevant to the programme.

In cases when periods of study abroad have been completed according to a previous agreement between higher education institutions a full credit transfer shall be granted without a delay in accordance with the established agreement.

Advancing regional cooperation in higher education

In light of this Declaration, we encourage all higher education institutions and competent authorities to respond to requests aimed at checking the authenticity of higher education qualifications within two weeks and free of charge.

We take the commitments outlined in this Declaration to be of utmost importance, therefore we mandate the Working Group on Recognition of Academic Qualifications, under auspices of Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and Education Reform Initiative of South East Europe (ERI SEE) to report annually on the implementation of the Declaration on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the Western Balkans.

In view of enhancing recognition procedures to the benefit of all graduates, we further mandate the Working Group on Recognition of Academic Qualifications to initiate expert discussion and prepare expert recommendations on recognition of higher education qualifications issued prior to the implementation of the Bologna system of three cycle studies and the third cycle academic degrees by the next Western Balkan Summit in 2020.

In light of developments of qualifications frameworks in the Western Balkans we task the WG to carry out a comparison of the established qualifications frameworks to facilitate further recognition of qualifications in the region

Acknowledging the importance of fostering transparency and building trust in each other's higher education systems to achieve automatic mutual recognitions, we commit ourselves to align our quality assurance systems with the most recent Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). In line with the European Higher Education Area key commitments we aim to ensure that external quality assurance is performed by agencies that comply with the ESG.

To facilitate these goals, we will engage in bi-/multi-lateral exchanges with partners that have established and have mature quality assurance systems. We will actively use the peer-learning opportunities, e.g. staff exchanges between Quality Assurance bodies or ministries, offered within the context of the Bologna Process or initiated in the context of joint regional cooperation. We also encourage our Quality Assurance bodies to actively participate in existing European and regional networks or associations, i.e. European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education. We further mandate the Regional Cooperation Council and Education Reform Initiative of South East Europe to jointly establish an informal Western Balkans Network of Quality Assurance bodies with an aim of supporting the alignment with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, as well as to work jointly on implementation of the ESG with an aim of preparing harmonised operational guidelines and procedures for external quality assurance, i.e. accreditation and reaccreditation of institutions or programmes. We also mandate the Working Group on Recognition of Academic Qualifications to discuss possibilities of cooperation and participation in ongoing initiatives aimed at ranking higher education institutions or to propose a model for ranking higher education institutions in the Western Balkans.

¹ Without prejudice to check the authenticity of documents by competent authorities.

² This Declaration is without prejudice to the existing agreements on recognition of higher education qualifications in the Western Balkans and it does not apply to recognition of professional qualifications.

³ For qualification in duration of four years or 240 ECTS, the competent authorities may award corresponding levels within the National Qualifications Frameworks in line with the relevant legislation.

⁴ Ibid.