

## Automatic recognition in the Nordic Region

**A policy paper initiated by the Nordic Council of Ministers on ways forward to implement automatic recognition of qualifications among the Nordic countries.**

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**Danish Agency for Science and Higher Education**

## 1. Automatic recognition in the Nordic region: Background and terms of reference

Recognition authorities in all Nordic countries have since 2004 cooperated intensively on recognition of foreign qualifications within the framework of the Reykjavik Declaration. The focus of attention has been the "Gränshinder-projekt"<sup>1</sup> which has aimed at removing obstacles for recognition of higher education qualifications in the Nordic region.

The Nordic recognition offices have formalised cooperation in the field of recognition by establishing the NORRIC-network (Nordic Recognition Information Centres) as an addendum to the ENIC-NARIC Networks, which are the European networks of recognition offices established by the Council of Europe/UNESCO and the European Commission respectively.

Several projects on recognition of Nordic qualifications initially funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers have dealt with recognition of Nordic qualifications as well as Nordic approaches to recognition of qualifications from selected countries and regions throughout the world, evaluation of the Nordic recognition offices' principles and procedures and much more.

The Reykjavik Declaration was revised in 2016 partly as a regional response to the new concept of automatic recognition and with the aim of promoting the Nordic region as front-runner in the field of international cooperation within higher education.

Furthermore, cooperation within recognition at European level takes place within the European Council's and UNESCO's "Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region", the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC).

The LRC adopted in 1997 outlines a basic framework for fair recognition of foreign qualifications and has established a strong and well-functioning cooperation between recognition authorities in Europe as well as in Australia, Canada, Israel, New Zealand and USA.

All Nordic countries have signed and ratified the convention.

### The mandate of the working group

The revised Reykjavik Declaration have clear aims for improving mutual recognition of qualifications within the Nordic Region:

- Higher education qualifications from the region are recognised in the other Nordic countries.
- The Nordic countries work together in pursuit of the goal of adopting systems for automatic recognition of comparable qualifications in higher education in the region, as per the aims of the European Higher Education Area.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://NORRIC.org/projects/barriers>

- The Nordic countries continue to strengthen administrative and methodological co-operation on the evaluation of qualifications obtained in Nordic and other countries, e.g. by establishing working groups and the ongoing exchange of information and good practices in higher education, in particular via the NORRIC Network. The relevant ministries, authorities and higher education institutions in the Nordic region will be actively involved in the co-operation and information exchange.
- National bodies continuously review the way in which the Declaration is implemented and applied, identify topical or actual developments that require special attention, and actively involve relevant stakeholders in this work.<sup>2</sup>

Following the revised Reykjavik Declaration, the Nordic Council of Ministers has in cooperation with the NORRIC-offices set up a mandate in pursuit of the goal of adopting systems for automatic recognition of comparable qualifications in higher education in the region.

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For this purpose, a group of experts has been established with representatives from all NORRIC Offices as well as representatives from Nordic higher education institutions and students. The task of the group is to discuss possible ways for implementing a system of automatic recognition within the Nordic region.

The mandate from the Nordic Council of Ministers states:

*"The outcome of the work will be a report (policy paper) with recommendations for the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Nordic Ministries responsible for higher education, NORRIC offices, and higher education institutions".*

### **Limitation of the mandate**

The project group mandated to submit this policy proposal about automatic recognition within the Nordic Region is composed of staff from the Nordic ENIC-NARIC Centres (NORRIC Offices), representatives from Nordic universities and university colleges/universities of applied science and Nordic student organisations. The NORRIC network consists of the recognition offices in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

However, The Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland are also signatories to the Reykjavik Declaration.

Automatic Recognition is a concept initiated, developed and discussed among the Bologna and EU-EEA countries. In this respect the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland have not been part of the discussions on automatic recognition taking place in the context of the Bologna Process or EU-EEA. Furthermore, they have not been part of the NORRIC cooperation and the ongoing activities within the network since 2003.

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<sup>2</sup> Nordic Declaration on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education The Reykjavik Declaration (Revised 2016)

Therefore, this project is limited to discuss the possibilities and challenges of implementing automatic recognition in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

However, mobility and recognition for holders of qualifications from the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland is also important. Therefore it is important to work further to look into how the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland can reach the goals set in the Reykjavik Declaration.

An initial recommendation would then be to proceed examining the possibility of implementing automatic recognition of qualifications obtained in the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland based on the same pre-conditions as in the other Nordic countries.

Furthermore, this paper deals only with academic recognition and recognition for employment activities not related to regulated professions, since this is the natural scope of both the Reykjavik Declaration and the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

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### **The composition of the group is as follows**

#### Chair:

Allan Bruun Pedersen, Danish Agency for Science and Higher Education, (NORRIC Denmark)

#### Members:

Ole-Jørgen Torp, Director of Academic Affairs, Norges miljø- og biovitenskapelige universitet (representing Nordic University Cooperation (NUS))

Annika Stadius, Head of Student Services at Arcada University of Applied Sciences, Finland (representing the Nordic institutions of professionally oriented higher education/institutions of applied science)

Rolf Lofstad Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NORRIC Norway)

Cecilia George, Swedish Council for Higher Education (NORRIC Sweden)

Gisli Fannberg, University of Iceland (NORRIC Iceland),

Saara Louko, Finnish National Agency for Education (NORRIC Finland)

Julian Lo Curlo, National Union of Students in Denmark (representing the Nordic students)

Rasmus Black, Danish Agency for Science and Higher Education, (NORRIC Denmark)

Peder de Thurah Toft, Nordic Council of Ministers

The mandate period was from 1 August 2018 until 31 March 2019 and later extended until 31 October in agreement with the secretariat of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

## 2. Executive summary

Automatic recognition of educational qualifications has been on the international agenda for almost a decade, both within the EU and among the countries cooperating within the Bologna Process and constituting European Higher Education Area. Many countries and regions in the area have entered into various types of mutual agreements on automatic recognition. Setting up systems for automatic recognition of comparable qualifications of higher education in the region is also mentioned as a common Nordic goal in the revised Reykjavik Declaration between the governments of the Nordic countries from 2016.

On this background, the Nordic Council of Ministers decided to appoint a group of experts to discuss ways of implementing a system of automatic recognition within the Nordic region.

A working group was established consisting of credential evaluation experts from all five Nordic national centres for academic recognition of foreign qualifications, as well as representatives from the Nordic university sector, the sector for Universities of applied science as well as student unions. The group was chaired by the Danish recognition centre. The steering committee consisted of the 5 heads of the Nordic recognition centres.

Åland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland were not represented in the working group. Consequently, the group did not cover qualifications from Åland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland, as all three areas have autonomous education systems.

The group has met at three meetings. The mandate period was from 1 August 2018 until 31 March 2019 and later extended until 31 October in agreement with the secretariat of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The group's work has focused on describing and defining automatic recognition and putting it in context with the international agreements of recognition, most notably the Lisbon Recognition Convention as well as the Nordic agreement on Admission to Higher Education from 1996.

The project group has according to its mandate adopted the definition of automatic recognition established both within the EHEA cooperation and adding the definition agreed on at European Union Level, which also implies automatic recognition of qualifications at upper secondary level giving general access to higher education studies as well as courses and exams taken within study periods abroad as part of a learning agreements between institutions and students.

Automatic recognition of an educational qualification is a fact when the qualification is given general access to higher education programmes at the next level in any other Nordic country the same way it gives general access to studies at the next level in the home country. This without having to go through any separate recognition procedure. This shall not prejudice the right of a higher education institution or the competent authorities to set specific evaluation and admission criteria for a specific programme. It does not prejudice the right to check, if the qualifica-

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tion is authentic and, in case of an upper secondary education and training qualification, if it gives access to higher education in the country of origin. In this sense, automatic recognition deals with the accepting of the level of the qualification and the academic rights for access to further education at the next level as defined by the national authorities/institutions in the home country.

Automatic mutual recognition of the outcomes of a study period abroad: at higher education level, the right to have the learning outcomes of a learning period recognised as agreed beforehand in a learning agreement and confirmed in the Transcript of Records, in line with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).

Automatic recognition is also about smoother recognition procedures in order to make educational qualifications portable across country borders limiting the bureaucracy to a minimum. This procedural aspect of automatic recognition is also being discussed in the report.

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### **General conclusions and recommendations**

A very positive outcome of this working group is that it can undoubtedly be concluded that the Nordic institutions of universities and university colleges of applied science as well as the student organisations report no barriers for recognition of Nordic qualifications in relation to applications for admission to studies in the Nordic countries. In this respect, de facto automatic recognition is implemented in the Nordic region. Automatic recognition is essentially about giving applicants the full and automatic right to apply for admission to the next level of study thus recognising the level of the applicants' qualifications and placing them in the pool of eligible candidates among whom the HEIs can select for the final admission decision based on the specific admission requirements.

*In repeat: De facto automatic recognition is implemented by Nordic higher educational institutions.*

Furthermore, when looking at the recognition practices in the Nordic recognition centres the general findings of the working group are that higher education qualifications and upper secondary educational qualifications giving general access to higher education in the Nordic home country are being fully recognised in all other Nordic countries. It varies between countries as to what extent the educational institutions in the country are legally bound to follow the level that the national recognition centre puts a certain qualification at or if the recognition statements from each centre are merely recommendations. While it has been difficult for the group positively to confirm that the assessments made by the NORRIC Offices are also being accepted at the same general level at the higher education institutions, there is nothing to suggest that this is not the case regardless of the status of the recognition statements issued by the recognition centres.

The group has identified a few qualifications that some countries find challenging for automatic recognition. One example is the 1-year master's degrees awarded in Finland and in Sweden. Only 2-year master programmes exist within the ordinary education systems in Norway and Denmark. Norway and Denmark do not recog-

nise the 1-year degree as comparable in level to the 2-year national master degrees. Consequently, the 1-year degrees may not give direct access to studies at PhD-level in Norway or in Denmark. Furthermore, in Norway there are certain upper secondary qualifications for which the concept of automatic recognition is challenging to implement.

Two surveys have been conducted to establish the current state of play of recognition of Nordic qualifications. The NORRIC offices have reported on their recognition standards of all Nordic higher education qualifications as well as access qualifications at upper secondary level giving general access to higher education studies. The survey was completed in order to present a precise picture of the extent to which Nordic qualifications are recognised in all Nordic countries and in order to pin point if there are concrete qualifications, which currently are not recognised.

Furthermore, HEI and student representatives have completed a survey among their members to establish if there are any potential recognition barriers at institutional level.

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Also covered, however to a limited degree, is the automatic mutual recognition of the outcomes of a study period abroad. The group did not find any specific barriers regarding the recognition of achievements when returning to the home institution from a study abroad in the Nordic region.

#### *Recommendations*

Generally, the group recommends that educational institutions recognise the same formal rights for access to the next level of study for higher education qualifications as are applied to the qualifications in the home country. However, this is not universally the current situation for all higher education qualifications and upper secondary access qualifications.

The working group has agreed that it should be recommended to apply the same rights of access in other countries as the qualifications give in the country of origin. However, in Norway, this interpretation raises legal challenges in certain cases. This also applies to cases where the application of automatic recognition from one perspective may be considered as discriminatory against national citizens if the same rights of access does not exist for national citizens or if the same type qualification giving general access in the country of origin does not exist in the country, where recognition is sought.

A major topic for discussion in the group has been the question as to what are the preconditions for making a certain type of qualification fit for automatic recognition. Most Nordic upper secondary qualifications and higher educational qualifications are automatically accepted in the Nordic region when it comes to general access to the next level of study. Few qualifications, e.g. the 1-year master mentioned above, are regarded by some countries as being substantially different from the corresponding national qualification, which may create difficulties for implementing automatic recognition in those countries. In addition, in Norway, certain upper secondary qualifications are difficult to accept for general access to higher education, as this, from a legal point of view, may be discriminatory to holders of comparable national qualifications.

Different models exist for automatic recognition including legal agreements, non-legal agreements, official unilateral legal decisions on recognition of specific foreign qualifications, as well as *de facto* automatic recognition.

The working group recommends that it should be explored further to what extent the recognition practices of the national recognition centres can be promoted and made transparent to all stakeholders, while at the same time taking into consideration that a legal agreement not necessarily is a way forward considering different legal set-ups in the countries and considering the fact that not all higher education qualifications are accepted for automatic recognition in all other Nordic countries.

The working group recommends to pursue the goal of automatic recognition through voluntary commitments by the recognition centres and to continue to secure and develop the *de facto* automatic recognition state of play in the Nordic region. This is based on the fact that automatic recognition in general is *de facto* implemented in the Nordic region and that Nordic as well as European higher education cooperation is mainly based on voluntary cooperation and recommendations and furthermore that not all Nordic countries have specific legislation on recognition or issue legally binding recognition decisions.

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The working group recommends securing and implementing *de facto* automatic recognition by being transparent and open on standards of recognition on public national websites as well as on the common NORRIC website, [www.norric.org](http://www.norric.org).

The working group recommends continued close cooperation between Nordic HEIs and NORRIC centres on information on recognition standards of Nordic qualifications as well as information on Nordic educational systems and qualification structures.

The working group recommends that the Nordic organisations of universities and universities of applied sciences as well as the Nordic student organisations actively promote the concept and implementation of automatic recognition among their members.

The group thus recommends proceeding examining the possibility of implementing automatic recognition of qualifications obtained in the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland. This needs to be done through evaluating the level of implementation of the same automatic recognition pre-conditions as in the other Nordic countries in cooperation with authorities from the Faroe Islands and Greenland.

Regarding the automatic recognition of study periods the group recommends that higher education institutions systematically follow the recommendations of the EAR-HEI manual and the ECTS Users' Guide. Flexible learning agreements has been suggested as a tool for the benefit of students and home institutions for swift handling of changes to a prior recognition agreement for planned studies abroad.

Portability of recognition decisions issued by Nordic recognition authorities has been identified as a way of easing bureaucratic procedures for someone consecutively asking for recognition of his/her qualifications from more than one Nordic

recognition centre. The group has asked the Nordic ad hoc working group on digitalisation in recognition to look further into the technical aspects of the exchange of information between the recognition authorities.

Results and recommendations are foreseen to be disseminated to Nordic stakeholders at a joint seminar in collaboration with the ad hoc group on digitalization.

### **3. Automatic recognition in context: Definition, European Higher Education Area, European Education Area and The Lisbon Recognition Convention**

#### **Automatic recognition: Background and definition**

The concept of automatic recognition first surfaced in the Bologna-ministerial communiqué in 2012, the Bucharest Communiqué. Ministers from all the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) agreed to set down a pathfinder group working towards the implementation of automatic recognition within EHEA.

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The background for setting down the pathfinder group stemmed from the European Commission wanting to push forward mobility of students within Europe and which claimed that the most common complaint from European citizens in the area of higher education was complaints about lack of recognition of educational qualifications within the European Union.

The pathfinder group consisted of recognition experts throughout Europe as well as stakeholders from the higher education area. Denmark and Sweden participated in the work.

Most notably the Pathfinder group came up with a definition of automatic recognition used ever since:

*Automatic recognition of a degree leads to the automatic right of an applicant holding a qualification at a certain level to be considered for entry to a programme of further study at the next level in any other EHEA-country (access)".<sup>3</sup>*

Automatic recognition thus means that educational qualifications from any EHEA-country should automatically be fully recognised at degree level. The pathfinder group came up with the catchphrase: "A bachelor is a bachelor is a bachelor".

The idea was and is that if we in the framework of the Bologna process could claim that we have built a European Higher Education Area, it would be contradictory if qualifications from EHEA-countries were not recognised at the same level in other EHEA-countries. Automatic recognition is meant to facilitate mobility in a more flexible and less bureaucratic way.

However, the concept of automatic recognition has been subject to many misunderstandings ever since. We will therefore clarify the concept here.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/2015\\_Yerevan/72/3/EHEA\\_Pathfinder\\_Group\\_on\\_Automatic\\_Recognition\\_January\\_2015\\_613723.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/2015_Yerevan/72/3/EHEA_Pathfinder_Group_on_Automatic_Recognition_January_2015_613723.pdf)

Firstly, automatic recognition in academic recognition (not professional!) aims at improving access to further study throughout Europe. In applications for admission to further study there is a distinction between access and admission. Access means the right to apply and be considered for admission to a study. Access in terms of automatic recognition means that general upper secondary qualifications giving general access in the country of origin must give general access to higher education programmes in other EHEA-countries. Furthermore, it means that if a bachelor degree gives access to master level studies in the country of origin it should also give access to master level studies in all other EHEA-countries.

Access in terms of automatic recognition thus means that you have the right to apply for admission and that your application for admission to further studies cannot be denied on the basis that your entrance qualifications are not considered comparable with the entrance qualifications in the country where admission is sought. Or put in another way: if an applicant's general upper secondary qualification or bachelor degree gives the right to apply for admission to studies at the next level in the home country the same right to apply for admission to further study should automatically be recognised in any other EHEA country.

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HEIs can thus still:

- Reject admission to short or first cycle programmes based on the fact that the applicant's access qualifications do not meet the specific admission requirements in terms of requirements for a certain grade average, requirements of having passed subjects at a certain level in their general access qualifications, e.g. physics at a certain level for a mechanical engineering bachelor programme, and other specific admission requirements for admission to a particular programme. Likewise, a HEI can still reject admission to a master level programme from an applicant with a foreign bachelor degree if the bachelor degree's profile or subject specific learning outcomes are deemed not relevant for admission to the specific master programme.
- A HEI can still decide to conditionally admit an applicant with an EHEA bachelor degree and demand that the applicant must pass supplementary courses at bachelor level before final admission to the master programme, if it is evaluated that the applicant's bachelor degree is relevant for admission but it lacks substantial courses necessary to progress to the specific master programme.
- A HEI can still decide, which applicants they will admit to a master level programme among the pool of applicants, who meet all the requirements for admission, if admission is restricted to a lower number of study places than the number of qualified applicants.

The definition of automatic recognition thus means *the right to apply for further studies (access)* but not *the right to be admitted (admission)*. The Higher Education Institution (HEI) will still in an automatic recognition system have full rights to select the students that they admit to their programmes. HEIs can and will decide if the applicants meets the specific admission requirements to the programme.

In this respect the full autonomy of HEIs to decide on admission is safeguarded also with the implementation of automatic recognition

### **Automatic recognition in the European Higher Education Area**

Following the report on automatic recognition by the pathfinder group Bologna-Ministers agreed on working towards implementing automatic recognition within EHEA in 2020.

However, the monitoring of the implementation of Bologna-tools, including recognition, which is carried out prior to each ministerial meeting has shown that progress in implementing automatic recognition remains slow.

The Ministerial Paris-Communiqué of 2018 thus reiterated its commitment to automatic recognition by stating, "In order to further develop mobility and recognition across the EHEA, we will work to ensure that comparable higher education qualifications obtained in one EHEA country are automatically recognised on the same basis in the others, for the purpose of accessing further studies and the labour market".

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The latest Paris communiqué does thus not have any time limit for implementing automatic recognition, but it now emphasises that automatic recognition also should apply to recognition on the labour market outside the area of regulated professions.

While the Bologna process and the EHEA has its focus on higher education qualifications, a recent initiative within the European Union also aims to include the upper secondary access qualifications giving general access to higher education.

### **European Commission initiative: A European Education Area**

Because of the slow pace of implementing automatic recognition, the European Commission has put forward a recommendation for EU-member states and associated countries to speed up the process of implementing automatic recognition among the member states.

"The COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad" builds on the work on automatic recognition carried out in the context of the Bologna Process but it also adds the automatic recognition of study periods abroad, provided the mobility period has taken as part of an agreed exchange between European HEIs and following a learning agreement on credit transfer of courses and ECTS set down in the learning agreement between the home institution and the student."

Furthermore, the recommendation states that automatic recognition should also apply to vocationally oriented upper secondary qualifications giving general access to higher education programmes in the country of origin. This means that a "combined" qualification as e.g. auto mechanic, which encompasses general subjects preparing for higher education programmes and giving general access to higher education programmes, should also be automatically recognised in terms of the graduate's right to access higher education programmes in other countries.

The automatic recognition, however, does not relate to the recognition of the vocational qualification as auto mechanic, which will still be an individual recognition procedure and decision according to national regulations.

The Council Recommendation was adopted unanimously by the European Council on 26 November 2018<sup>4</sup>. The recommendation aims to contribute on the establishment of a European Education Area, where automatic recognition should be a reality by the year 2025.

Based on this context and with the recommendation from The Nordic Council of Ministers, the working group decided in its work also to include upper secondary qualifications giving general access to higher education in the home country as well as study periods as mentioned by the council recommendation. By including upper secondary access qualifications giving general access in the home country and study periods in its work, the working group widens up the scope for the possible identification of barriers to recognition in the Nordic region with an aim to promote recommendations to overcome these while at the same time being in line with the purpose and the mandate of the group.

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Including upper secondary general access qualifications is perfectly in line with an "Agreement concluded by Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden on Admission to Higher Education", which stipulates that The parties undertake a reciprocal obligation to grant to applicants domiciled in another Nordic country admission to their respective public courses of higher education on the same or equivalent terms as applicants from their own countries. An applicant who is qualified to apply for admission to higher education in the Nordic country in which he/she is domiciled is also qualified to apply for admission to courses of higher education in the other Nordic countries."<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the inclusion of automatic recognition of study periods widens the scope and definition of automatic recognition. It is important to underline that automatic recognition related to full educational qualifications (e.g. an upper secondary access qualification or a bachelor's degree) is different from automatic recognition of study periods. The automatic recognition of study periods relates to the full recognition of study periods as agreed in a learning agreement between HEIs and the student and it relates to the fact that automatic recognition also implies faster and more flexible recognition procedures. This includes as swift as possible procedures for immediate responses to changes in the content of study periods, if agreed courses are not offered or other unforeseen changes are necessary to secure the recognition of all courses taken at a foreign institution as part of a study period abroad.

### **The definition of automatic recognition used by the project group**

*Automatic mutual recognition of a qualification:* Holders of an officially recognised qualification from a Nordic country, which gives general access to studies at the next level in the home country, must have access to apply for admission to a

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<sup>4</sup> Recommendation text: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H1210\(01\)&rid=6](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H1210(01)&rid=6)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.norden.org/en/declaration/agreement-concluded-denmark-finland-iceland-norway-and-sweden-admission-higher>

higher education programme at the next level in any other Nordic country, without having to go through any separate recognition procedure. This shall not prejudice the right of a higher education institution or the competent authorities to set specific evaluation and admission criteria for a specific programme. It does not prejudice the right to check, if the qualification is authentic and, in case of an upper secondary education and training qualification, if it gives access to higher education in the country of origin. In this sense automatic recognition deals with accepting the level of the qualification and its access to the next level as defined by the national authorities/institutions in the home country

In the terminology of the Bologna Pathfinder Group automatic recognition is also about smoother recognition procedures in order to make educational qualifications portable across country borders limiting the bureaucracy to a minimum. This procedural aspect of automatic recognition will also be discussed in this report.

*Automatic mutual recognition of the outcomes of a study period abroad:* at higher education level, the right to have the learning outcomes of a learning period recognised: as agreed beforehand in a learning agreement and confirmed in the Transcript of Records, in line with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Concretely, it means applying the rule set out in the 2015 ECTS Users' Guide that states that: "all credits gained during the period of study abroad or during the virtual mobility – as agreed in the Learning Agreement and confirmed by the Transcript of Records – should be transferred without delay and counted towards the students' degree without any additional work or assessment of the student".

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### **The Lisbon Recognition Convention**

All initiatives regarding automatic recognition build on the international agreement on recognition of access and higher education qualifications, the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC). The LRC is the only legal text within the EHEA. Once ratified, its principles and procedures must be followed by central recognition authorities as well as higher education institutions. The LRC is thus the international legal agreement which all Nordic Countries have signed and ratified and thereby committed themselves to recognise foreign qualifications according to the principles and procedures outlined in the convention. The convention both applies to recognition taking place at HEIs and at NORRIC offices.

The LRC is a framework outlining some basic principles and procedures for fair recognition:

- Applicants must have access to fair recognition
- Recognition authorities should grant full recognition unless the authority can prove substantial differences between the foreign qualification and the comparable national qualification
- Recognition procedures should be completed within reasonable time.

Following the LRC a number of subsidiary texts have been adopted outlining practice and examples in a much more detailed way than the convention itself explicates.

The LRC also sets an important direction for the culture of recognition, since the concept of full recognition unless substantial differences can be proven in fact reverses the proof of burden from the applicant to the recognition authority in cases, where full recognition cannot be granted.

At the same time, the principle of full recognition unless substantial differences can be proven also obliges the competent recognition authority to investigate the quality of foreign qualifications with a view to securing that foreign qualifications should only be recognised if it is assessed that the applicant's qualifications makes him or her likely to succeed in further education or within the job market as persons with similar national qualifications. Competent recognition authorities thus work in a duality within the framework of the LRC of securing fair recognition and not denying recognition based on minor differences while at the same time safeguarding the quality of national educational systems.

It must however also be stressed that The LRC stemming from 1997 does not mention automatic recognition. In this respect neither the LRC, the Bologna-ministerial communiqués nor the EU-EEA recommendations on automatic recognition are legally binding commitments.

The LRC tries, therefore, to balance two potentially conflicting aspects; that of the door opener and that of the gatekeeper. Recognition is a door opener for mobility across borders and inclusion of holders of foreign qualifications in said country. On the other hand, it is also a gatekeeper by not providing recognition to false qualifications or to qualifications, which are considered to be substantially different to comparable national qualifications.

### **Automatic recognition and the Lisbon Recognition Convention**

Automatic recognition thus goes one step further than the LRC, since it implies that qualifications should be recognised at degree level without evaluating possible substantial differences between the foreign and the similar national qualifications.

The fact that ministers at both EHEA and European Union level have committed themselves to work on automatic recognition and thus take further steps towards securing recognition than the principles and procedures outlined in the LRC is based on two significant developments within higher education in Europe: Mutual trust and common tools.

European countries have worked together for 20 years in higher education within the framework of the Bologna Process with the aim of facilitating student exchanges, HEIs' are working together in cross border i projects and offering joint programmes thus in general creating transparency and mutual understanding of our national educational systems. Furthermore, very specific tools for securing this transparency, comparability of systems and trust in the quality of European higher education systems have been developed and agreed upon. Automatic recognition relies on the pre-conditions that countries have implemented these transparency and quality tools such as the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality As-

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surance (ESGs), ECTS and Diploma Supplement and a three cycle higher education system. The necessary pre-conditions will be elaborated further and taken into consideration in recommendations.

In conclusion, the mutual understanding and trust in European higher educational systems established through 20 years of cooperation in the framework of the Bologna Process paired with very specific common transparency and quality tools have initiated Europe to work towards implementing automatic recognition with the purpose of securing even more European mobility within our educational systems and labour markets. Furthermore, cooperation and mobility within the Nordic region has been ongoing long before the start of the Bologna Process creating mutual trust in the Nordic countries' educational systems and a basis for pushing automatic recognition forwards within our region.

#### **4. Nordic agreements in recognition**

The mandate of the Nordic Council of Ministers on working towards automatic recognition within the Nordic region is thus based on the European developments described above.

The Nordic project is a regional response to automatic recognition with an aim of enhancing the long-standing cooperation in the field of recognition among the Nordic countries. Regional approaches have been endorsed by the Bologna ministers as initial steps towards implementing automatic recognition within EHEA.

As described above, the revised Reykjavik Declaration from 2016 has clear aims to secure that higher education qualifications from the region are recognised in the other Nordic countries and the aspiration that the Nordic countries work together in pursuit of the goal of adopting systems for automatic recognition of comparable qualifications in higher education in the region.

The Reykjavik Declaration is an agreement and an expression of a goal committed to the establishment of the Nordic region as an educational region not bound by any national barriers where Nordic students can move freely within the region to study without worrying about having their qualifications recognised. The Reykjavik Declaration is a framework within which competent recognition authorities should cooperate and find concrete measures to realise the aims of the declaration. This is what the NORRIC Offices have worked towards for many years and what higher education institutions in many ways have realised when they have partnered up for student exchanges and common Nordic projects within the Erasmus+ programme and Nordplus.

As briefly described above, besides the Reykjavik Declaration the Nordic ministers in 1996 adopted an "Agreement concluded by Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden on Admission to Higher Education".

The agreement states, "The parties undertake a reciprocal obligation to grant to applicants domiciled in another Nordic country admission to their respective public courses of higher education on the same or equivalent terms as applicants from

their own countries. An applicant who is qualified to apply for admission to higher education in the Nordic country in which he/she is domiciled is also qualified to apply for admission to courses of higher education in the other Nordic countries.”

This Nordic agreement also regulates the flux of students within the Nordic region trying to establish a fair economical balance in situations where mobility among countries is unbalanced in terms of numbers of Nordic students studying for free in another Nordic country.

The Nordic agreement on admission is in many ways an expression of automatic recognition within the Nordic region. However, differences in educational systems within the Nordic region as well as differences in national legislation on recognition leave questions unanswered as to which rules and principles to apply when looking to define if a student from another Nordic country is eligible to apply for admission. For example, will an applicant with a bachelor of applied science/professional bachelor's degree be considered for access to master level programmes in another country, which do not have a binary system of education? Or if a country offers short cycle qualifications with access to top up bachelor programmes, how will the rights of applying for admission be interpreted in another country in which short cycle qualifications are not offered?

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The Nordic agreements are quite open for interpretation and are as such instruments setting a direction for full mutual recognition and even automatic recognition within the Nordic region. In this respect, the group's mandate is to investigate automatic recognition at a more practical level and to describe to which extent automatic recognition already exists in practice and to try to identify any barriers to its further implementation and the reasons behind these barriers.

## 5. The legal setting of recognition in the Nordic countries

It is important to investigate the legal setting of mutual recognition in the Nordic region. Recognition takes place in different national contexts. Most notably there is a distinction between countries issuing legally binding recognition decisions and countries issuing advisory statements. This difference in status obviously has an impact on which measures can be taken to implement automatic recognition in the Nordic countries. For instance if a country has no specific legislation on recognition or does not issue legally binding decisions of recognition, while other countries do have legislation committing the recognition authorities to issue legally binding decisions it will not be feasible to recommend a legally binding Nordic agreement on automatic recognition.

### National legislation on recognition

#### *Denmark:*

According to Danish legislation, Danish ENIC-NARIC issues legally binding level assessment decisions for certain specific situations including:

- A public education institutions decision on admission to a study programme

While Danish ENIC-NARIC determines the general level of an educational qualification, the individual educational institutions hold the right to admit students to specific study programmes. This includes the evaluation of subject levels and translation/interpretation of grades, excluding only the GPA calculation for EU and EEA countries plus Switzerland that is being handled centrally by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

*Finland:*

The Finnish National Agency for Education is the ENIC-NARIC centre in Finland. The Finnish ENIC-NARIC is a competent authority that issues decisions on recognition of foreign qualifications for labour market purposes. The decisions concern access to regulated professions, recognition of studies that are part of the eligibility requirements for a regulated profession and eligibility for a civil servant position for which a higher education degree is required.

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The recognition decisions are legally binding and based on the Act on Eligibility for Public Posts Provided by Higher Education Studies Completed Abroad 1385/2015, the Act on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications 1384/2015 and the Teaching Qualifications Decree 986/1998.

Decisions on student admission and checking the applicants' eligibility for further study are made in higher education institutions. The Finnish ENIC-NARIC advises HEIs upon request on the eligibility for further study that foreign qualifications give in the country of origin.

The Finnish ENIC-NARIC also prepares advisory statements on foreign vocational qualifications. The advisory statement describes the qualification and the professional and academic rights it gives in the country where it was completed. Comparisons to qualifications that are part of the Finnish system of education are not made but rather the qualification is described in terms of the system of education it belongs to. The advisory statements are not based on national legislation and they are not binding.

*Iceland:*

The duties of Iceland's ENIC/NARIC office are limited to academic recognition. Professional recognition is handled by the various ministries (as competent authorities) under the direction of the Ministry of Education. The ENIC/NARIC-unit does not make binding assessments; it merely provides guidance or counselling regarding recognition. There are no laws or regulation on academic recognition in Iceland except a provision in the higher education act which states that Icelandic higher education institutions must respect international agreements on the recognition of higher education and qualifications to which Icelandic authorities are party of.

*Norway:*

Academic recognition at the HEIs and in NOKUT (Norwegian Enic-Naric) is regulated through the Act on Universities and university colleges (LOV-2005-04-01-15<sup>6</sup>). The act distinguishes between "General Recognition", a system-based

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<sup>6</sup> <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2005-04-01-15>

recognition by NOKUT, and a subject based recognition by the HEIs. The system of academic recognition is further regulated in the Regulation on Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education and Higher Vocational Education.

Admission to 1st cycle is regulated through [Forskrift om opptak til høgre utdanning](#) (Regulation concerning Admission to Higher Education). With a few exceptions, all applications are submitted to – and processed by - The Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service (NUCAS).<sup>7</sup> The assessment of the applications for admission, and the decisions on admission are made by the higher education institutions. For applicants from abroad, including the Nordic countries, there is a mandatory list of all international school leaving certificates, diplomas and qualifications that are considered comparable to the general admission requirements to Norwegian higher education, called the GSU-list (Generell studiekompetanse fra utlandet). As the GSU-list is part of the regulation on admission and must be adhered to by all the higher education institutions, there is in practice a system of automatic recognition for admission to Norwegian higher education. Furthermore, the GSU-list is published on NOKUT's website, visible for all to see. It is also available at NUCAS' website, on the admissions' portal, with further practical information and explanations organised by country. See also chapter 8.

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Concerning recognition of higher education qualifications, NOKUT's criteria and their operationalization is normative for the HEIs, but HEIs have the autonomy to deviate if required. This model ensures a sector-wide approach to recognition. To inform the HEIs, NOKUT's decisions are published to a database shared by all HEIs. NOKUT arranges annually a few one-day seminars with country information. In addition, the Norwegian ENIC-NARIC has published a country-database, currently including 59 countries / educational systems.

NOKUT has a policy to give advice to HEIs, which contacts NOKUT in recognition matters. NOKUT has since, 1 January 2019, been mandated to provide recognition for foreign post-secondary and Tertiary Vocational Education and Training (TVET) qualifications (ISCED levels 4 and 5), and have since 2016 been mandated to implement to provide recognition for selected Upper-Secondary Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualifications.

#### *Sweden:*

Sweden does not have a specific recognition law, nor any explicit legislative reference to the recognition work executed by the Swedish ENIC-NARIC. The recognition statements, which are issued by the Swedish ENIC-NARIC are not legally binding, and have the main purpose to inform potential employers and other stakeholders about the level and general profile of the foreign qualification. Recognition statements on foreign academic as well as upper secondary education are also generally accepted by the HEIs.

#### **Different legal settings within the Nordic region**

As described above differences in the legal setting on recognition exist among the Nordic countries. Most notably is the distinction between countries issuing legally

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.samordnaopptak.no/info/english/>

binding recognition decisions: Denmark, Finland and Norway. In Finland, these decisions concern professional rights for the labour market, there are no decisions or statements for academic recognition purposes. In Iceland and Sweden assessments of foreign qualifications take place in the form of advisory statements to either the applicants themselves or to national HEIs for their decisions on admission.

These differences must be noted and taken into account when applying models for the implementation of automatic recognition in the Nordic region and for the conclusions and recommendations put forward in this report.

## **6. Models of automatic recognition and pre-conditions for automatic recognition**

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As stated above automatic recognition refers to the automatic rights to access the next level in another educational system, as the qualification would have given access in the home country. Different Erasmus+ projects have discussed various models of implementing automatic recognition based on developments and experiments within EHEA.

### **The four models of automatic recognition (The Paradigms project)**

The working group recognises and appreciates the findings of the Erasmus+ NARIC- project New Paradigms in Recognition (“Paradigms”)<sup>8</sup>. The project period was 2016-2018 and the project was co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union.

The aim of the Paradigms project was to provide recommendations that can support ENIC-NARIC centres and national governments to develop policies on the implementation of automatic recognition as per the 2015 communique of the ministerial conference of European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The Paradigms project identified four different models of Automatic Recognition:

Model 1: Legal bilateral and multilateral agreements

Model 2: A legally binding unilateral list of degrees

Model 3: Non-legal bilateral and multilateral agreements

Model 4: “De facto” automatic recognition

Model 1: Bilateral agreements exist between countries with legally binding recognition decisions as well as countries where recognition decisions are advisory.

Model 2: A second model with a legally binding character is automatic recognition based on a list of qualifications from specific countries. This model is not based on a bi- or multilateral agreement, as countries can decide unilaterally which qualifications from which countries to include.

Model 3: A third option is for countries to come to advisory multi-lateral non-legalistic recommendations among selected countries on mutual recognition of each

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/paradigms/>

other's qualifications. This includes the Nordic-Baltic admission Manual (to be explained in Chapter 7).

Model 4: A fourth and last option for automatic recognition of qualifications is 'de facto' automatic recognition. The Paradigms project found that many EHEA countries already automatically accept bachelor and master qualifications from quality assured comparable degrees in other EHEA countries, without referring to formal procedures or agreements on automatic recognition.

#### *Ad model 4*

Regarding model 3 and 4, multi-lateral voluntary recommendations and 'de facto' automatic recognition, the Paradigms project identified criteria that can be used to decide if a country qualifies for de facto automatic recognition.

Four criteria were found often to be used when ENIC-NARIC centres apply 'de facto' automatic recognition to qualifications from other countries:

- The implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention
- The existence of a three-cycle system of qualifications
- The referencing of a national qualifications framework to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the EHEA- Framework
- A quality assurance system based on the ESG's

The implementation of the LRC secures a common ground for principles and procedures of recognition and a three-cycle system of education makes comparability easier and more understandable.

Well-defined and agreed quality assurance systems is the foundation for building mutual trust of the quality of our Nordic education systems. The establishment of national qualifications frameworks and their referencing to overarching European frameworks adds another layer of transparency of educational systems and of quality as well, since the referencing processes to the overarching frameworks is carried out in cooperation with neutral international experts. For the latter part, a warning must be raised due to some uneven referencing of qualifications to the EQF. Finally, the implementation of a three-cycle system of higher education makes the educational systems more compatible.

Furthermore, the formal rights attached to a qualification should be taken into consideration. If a qualification does not give access to the next level of studies in the country of origin, it would be hard to argue that the same qualification should give access to studies in another Nordic country. What could be expected here is that if a qualification only give restricted access to studies at the next level, it should also give restricted access to similar programmes in other Nordic countries.

However, when deciding if automatic recognition can be applied to qualifications from a certain country transparency of the educational system and of individual qualifications including information on accreditation and transparency tools such as Diploma Supplement are vital elements.

#### *Pros and cons of the four models*

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Each of the four models have their pros and cons. The legalistic approaches provide a clear legal framework and a high degree of transparency for the stakeholders, while coming to an agreement or arrangement may be a long and complex process. Furthermore, changes in educational systems and degree structures may call for revision of legal acts through which automatic recognition is implemented.

The voluntary models may be simpler to develop and to agree on between countries and by the recognition authority; however, the non-legalistic approach leaves some room for ambiguity as to its scope and impact meaning a somewhat lower level of transparency. The advantages of voluntary models are primarily the fact that they can be applied relatively easily and for model 4 there is no long process required to reach a mutual agreement with another country or other countries.

The main recommendations of the Paradigms project to ENIC-NARIC centres and national governments was that transparency is key regardless of the implementation model chosen for automatic recognition. Procedures and criteria used for automatic recognition should be clear to all stakeholders.

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The working group is hesitant to recommend the development of legally binding agreements on automatic recognition between the Nordic countries. The Nordic countries have a long-standing tradition of voluntary governmental cooperation in many sectors including the educational sector. The cooperation has helped to build a high level of mutual trust, which should ensure that non-legalistic approaches to automatic recognition should be the adequate approach to automatic recognition. A legalistic agreement on automatic recognition would build in an unnecessary rigidity and will not in itself solve any unsettled issues as a legal agreement would probably be a reflection of current recognition practices and not be a "reform tool": This implies that any unresolved questions are better overcome by working together finding reasonable practical solutions.

Furthermore, legislation on recognition among the Nordic countries differ. Some countries issue legally binding decisions while other countries issue advisory statements on recognition.

#### Recommendations

- **In accordance with the traditions of voluntary cooperation in education among the Nordic countries and in the absence of specific legislation on recognition in some Nordic countries, the working group recommends to base implementation of automatic recognition by voluntary non-legalistic means.**
- **For the further development of automatic recognition in the Nordic region the group recommends that the NORRIC offices base implementation of automatic recognition on five main criteria:**
  - o **The implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention**
  - o **The existence of a three cycle system of qualifications**
  - o **The referencing of a national qualifications framework to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the EHEA-Framework**
  - o **A quality assurance system based on the ESG's**

- **The formal rights attached to the qualification regarding access to the next level in the country of origin**

## **7. Nordic models of standardised recognition decisions and advisory statements**

No bilateral agreements of automatic recognition exist between Nordic countries. However, different approaches outlining recommendations for standard recognition decisions and advisory statements have been developed among and within the Nordic countries.

### **The Nordic-Baltic Admission Manual**

The Nordic-Baltic admission manual is a non-legalistic transparency and recognition tool for admission officers at educational institutions in the Nordic and Baltic countries: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden. The admission manual was developed between the NORRIC offices and the ENIC-NARIC centres of the Baltic countries. Although the Nordic-Baltic recognition manual was and is an important step towards automatic recognition among the Nordic countries, the manual was developed by the NORRIC offices without the participation of Nordic and Baltic HEIs. Recommendations put forward in this policy paper has the benefit of the participation of representatives of Nordic HEIs and students thus strengthening the transparency and dissemination of the recommendations on recognition outlined in the Nordic-Baltic Manual.

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The project was completed in 2016 and resulted in a website with recommendations for HEIs in the Nordic and Baltic regions.<sup>9</sup>

The manual aims to present guidance on recognition of higher education qualifications and to provide a basis for more automatic and smooth recognition of qualifications from the Nordic-Baltic region. The manual outlines the existing higher education qualifications (excluding adult and further education qualifications) and their recommended level comparability across the Nordic and Baltic region.

The recommendation is that qualifications at the same level should give automatic access to the next level of study in other countries in the Nordic-Baltic region as it gives access in the country to which educational structure it belongs.

The manual's comparison table shows higher education qualifications. However, all access qualifications of each country are listed in the description of each country's education system. The access qualification are not covered by the specific recommendations for automatic recognition, but are outlined under the presentation of each country's education system.

The Nordic-Baltic Admission Manual can be placed under model 3 of the implementation models of automatic recognition (advisory non-legalistic recommendations on mutual recognition).

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<sup>9</sup> <https://norric.org/nordbalt>

## Country handbooks

The NORRIC offices in Norway, Sweden and Denmark have to some extent online information on the standard level comparison/assessment for qualifications from different countries, including Nordic countries. Finland has published charts of foreign education systems on the new website. Iceland is planning to make similar information accessible online. This information helps to make recognition decisions and advisory statements more transparent even though it does not replace or substitute the ordinary assessments of an individual's foreign qualification.

The formats used vary between the NORRIC centres but the purpose is the same; to inform stakeholders including employers, education institutions and individuals with foreign qualifications how foreign qualifications are recognised. These online tools help to enhance the level of transparency with regard to the recognition of qualifications from specific countries. The online tools reveal that some qualifications are subject to *de facto* automatic recognition while others are treated on a case-by-case basis.

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### *In Denmark:*

The Danish "Landehåndbogen" (EN: Country handbook) includes information on education systems in currently 36 countries including all other Nordic countries. The country handbook also includes information on the standardized assessment of specific educational qualifications from the different countries. Not all qualifications from the 36 countries are given automatic recognition. However, the country handbooks information on assessment standards helps to enhance transparency and perhaps also to make recognition less bureaucratic (swifter procedures).

### *In Norway:*

NOKUT initiated automatic recognition of comparable Nordic academic higher education qualifications in June 2018. The automatic recognition is a voluntary supplement to NOKUT's ordinary General Recognition of higher education. Holders of selected Nordic qualifications may opt to download a standardized statement about the automatic recognition of their qualification from NOKUT's web site, rather than submitting an individual application for recognition. Since the new Automatic Recognition can be downloaded without any individual case processing, the statement says nothing about an individual's course of study. The statement compares qualifications at the system level only. By comparing application numbers before and after the introduction of this voluntary automatic recognition system, there are indications that it has reduced the number of applications from holders of comparable Nordic qualifications.

NOKUT's "Landdatabase" (EN: Country database) includes information on education systems in currently 59 countries. The country database also includes information on NOKUT's recognition of specific educational qualifications from the different countries. The aim of the country database is to give information on the public on foreign education systems and to provide information on how NOKUT recognises foreign qualifications from the countries included in the database.

*In Sweden:*

UHR (Enic-Naric Sweden) published a recognition tool, “Bedömningstjänsten” in June 2019. Bedömningstjänsten is a database with information on foreign credentials at secondary, post-secondary and higher education level, connected with information how the credential is recognized in Sweden. Currently information on 35 countries, including all Nordic countries with the majority of the qualifications described in the Nordic-Baltic admission manual are presented in the tool. Instead of applying for recognition of a qualification, an applicant can download a non-personal recognition statement from the tool. Hereby UHR hopes to “demystify” the issue of foreign versus Swedish degrees, and facilitate recognition as well as informed decisions on automatic recognition (i.e. level recognition).

Please see: <https://www.uhr.se/bedomning-av-utlandsk-utbildning/bedomningstjanst>

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Conclusions and recommendations

- **The group recommends that the Nordic organisations representing students and higher education institutions in cooperation with the NORRIC Offices actively promote the concept of automatic recognition targeted towards all Nordic HEIs and promote transparency of Nordic qualifications for which automatic recognition can be applied.**
- **The group furthermore recommends that the NORRIC-offices dedicates a chapter on their common website, [www.norric.org](http://www.norric.org), which informs HEIs about the concept of automatic recognition, the precondition for applying automatic recognition as well as providing links to Nordic agreements and the EHEA and EU-EEA documents recommending the implementation of automatic recognition.**

## 8. Cooperation between HEIs and NORRIC offices in recognition

All Nordic countries have longstanding traditions for cooperation on recognition between central recognition authorities and national HEIs. The NORRIC Offices have all developed support mechanisms and tools assisting their national HEIs with their recognition decisions. The NORRIC Offices were all established with the task to build up expertise in recognition of foreign qualifications and to assist stakeholders with information on foreign qualifications.

*Denmark*

The Danish ENIC-NARIC supports the Danish educational institutions in their admission of student with foreign access qualifications. This includes organising yearly national seminars taking up pressing admission issues, organising meetings for the exchange of experience as well as providing assistance through a designated hotline for questions to specific foreign qualifications in relation to an admission decision. These initiatives all help to smoothen admission procedures for all stakeholders.

An examination handbook (Eksamenshåndbogen) is published online with information and recognition standards for 134 countries, 5 international upper secondary access qualifications as well as 18 regions/territories for countries with a federal system.

Applicants for study programmes are not required to have a general level assessment from Danish ENIC-NARIC to send with their application for admission to a programme.

However, if the Danish ENIC-NARIC has issued an assessment for an individual's qualification, a Danish publicly recognised educational institution is obliged to consider that recognition decision when admitting the student. This implies that an educational institution cannot deny admission with the argument that the foreign education does not meet the general entry-level requirement if the Danish ENIC-NARIC recognises the foreign qualification as comparable in level to a Danish qualification giving general access to the said study programme.

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#### *Finland:*

The higher education institutions, as well as other education institutions, prepare the admissions criteria and make the decision on student admissions. National legislation, the Universities Act and the Universities of Applied Sciences Act, specifies the qualifications that give access to higher education studies. Foreign qualifications that in the country in question give access to higher education, give access to higher education also in Finland. The institutions decide on recognition of prior learning.

The Finnish ENIC-NARIC does not have a formal role in the student admissions process. Higher education institutions and education providers can ask the Finnish ENIC-NARIC for advice on, for instance, the official status of an awarding institution or the academic rights that a foreign qualification gives in the country of origin. In this way, the Finnish ENIC-NARIC supports the work done in institutions.

#### *Iceland*

The Icelandic ENIC/NARIC Office is by contract with the Ministry located within the biggest university in Iceland (University of Iceland) in the Division for Academic Affairs of the central Administration. Its role is to advise and serve all higher education institution, other institutions and ministries and individuals in the country concerning matters of academic recognition.

The Office evaluates all foreign qualifications regarding access/admission to the University of Iceland and has access to the university's application system and records its evaluations directly into the system. The other universities send their documents regarding access/admission by e-mail to the ENIC/NARIC office, which evaluates them and responds by e-mail. The higher education institutions do not have to follow the guidance of the ENIC/NARIC office, but the general impression is that the Icelandic HEIs follow the advice given by the Icelandic ENIC-NARIC Office.

Besides evaluating the level of the qualification the ENIC/NARIC office also converts grades (for guidance) into the Icelandic grading system for the institutions if grade average is a determining factor in the admission.

The ENIC/NARIC office has held seminars on recognition in the higher education institutions when asked to.

*Norway:*

NOKUT – in cooperation with The Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service (NUCAS) – is in charge of deciding the GSU-list, which sets the access requirements for higher education for holders of foreign qualifications. The list is updated twice a year. From the point of automatic recognition, one can argue that the list creates automatic recognition for holders of comparable Nordic and foreign qualifications.

For admission to higher education, the GSU list is mandatory and must be adhered to. See also Chapter 5 on the legal setting. For recognition at other levels, the higher education institutions are free to deviate in the assessment of the weight given to these access qualifications.

For recognition at other levels, NOKUT's criteria and their operationalization is normative for the HEIs, but HEIs have the autonomy to deviate if required. This model ensures a sector-wide approach to recognition. To inform the HEIs, NOKUT's decisions are published to a database shared by all HEIs. NOKUT arranges annually a few one-day seminars with country information. In addition, the Norwegian ENIC-NARIC has published a country-database, currently including 59 countries / educational systems.

NOKUT has a policy to give advice to HEIs, which contacts NOKUT in recognition matters, and NOKUT offers a service called *turbovurderinger* (fast-track assessments) to facilitate HEIs on the admission to Ph.D. programs.

*Sweden:*

The recognition of foreign upper secondary education is based on joint guidelines for evaluating foreign credentials developed by ENIC-NARIC Sweden and adopted by HEI's through representatives in a working group within the Association of Swedish Higher Education (SUHF).

The guidelines consist of more detailed regulations concerning the application of the Higher Education Ordinance and Statute Book of the Swedish Council for Higher Education. Swedish Council for Higher Education/ENIC-NARIC Sweden has its task to evaluate to evaluate subject levels and translation/interpretation of grades in foreign upper secondary education programmes, which are used in the numerus clausus for admission to Bachelor programmes and courses. The joint guidelines are documented in the web-based Qualification Assessment Manual (Bedömningshandboken).

A working group within the Association of Swedish Higher Education (SUHF) has agreed on more detailed regulations concerning the application of the Administrative Procedure Act and the Higher Education Ordinance. This is to facilitate the

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transparency and smooth handling of applications in the voluntary joint admissions process to higher education institutions. This means that there are joint guidelines for the academic level-recognition of foreign qualifications, with the practical consequence that admissions officers at Higher Education Institutions assess each other's files and have agreed to accept each other's decisions on access to first and second level educational programmes respectively.

Higher education institutions decide on admission to specific study programmes. ENIC-NARIC recognition statements are not compulsory in an application for further studies, but can be used by HEIs as a guiding document. ENIC-NARIC Sweden supports the Swedish educational institutions in the academic recognition work, primarily through providing information about recognition methodology and foreign higher education systems together with a Message Board in a database.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

The longstanding cooperation between NORRIC Offices and HEIs provide an excellent basis for securing implementation of fair recognition based on the Lisbon Recognition Convention as well as for securing national consistency of recognition decisions. All central recognition offices provide guidance on specific institutional recognition questions and trains admission officers in the principles and procedures of fair recognition based on the LRC. In combination with the longstanding cooperation between the NORRIC offices on matters both relating to recognition of qualifications from specific countries and regions as well as to the general recognition practices this serves as a fundamental strength of the Nordic region.

The group recommends

- **NORRIC Offices and HEIs should continue strengthening their cooperation and secure that recognition and the concept of automatic recognition is put on the agenda in relevant educational seminars, conferences and PLA's in both national and Nordic contexts.**

## **9. Barriers to automatic recognition in the Nordic region: Higher education and upper secondary access qualifications**

### **General recognition of full degrees carried out by NORRIC-Offices**

General recognition of full degrees is mainly carried out by the NORRIC Offices.

The working group carried out a small survey on the recognition standards of Nordic degrees among the NORRIC Centres. All offices have been asked to report on possible barriers of recognition of full degrees from other Nordic countries.

The survey revealed only a few barriers to automatic recognition. The results from the survey show that one can argue that automatic recognition of comparable Nordic qualifications, in accordance with the revised Reykjavik Declaration and the Paris Communique, is a reality. However, regarding what is described as de facto automatic recognition, in accordance with the wider scope of the Council Recommendation, the survey revealed only a few challenges, which probably only applies to smaller groups of potentially mobile students.

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Finland, Iceland and Sweden reported that they in general fully recognise all Nordic upper secondary and higher education qualifications based on the principle, that if they give access to the next level of study in their home country they are also granted recognition for access to the next level of studies in Finland, Iceland and Sweden.

Denmark and Norway reported that the recognition of the Swedish 1-year master level degree currently might be difficult to fit into an automatic recognition system. Sweden and Finland (Universities of applied sciences, in certain fields of study) are currently the only Nordic countries, which offer both 1- and 2-year master level programmes both giving access to doctoral studies. Doctoral studies have a nominal duration of 4 years in Sweden. Denmark and Norway consider the 1-year Swedish master degree to be a substantial difference compared with the 2-year master degrees in Denmark and Norway. Legal requirements for access in Denmark and Norway to studies at the doctoral level requires the completion of national two years master degrees or foreign master level qualifications at the same level. Danish Institutions can admit applicants with a Swedish 1 year master level degree on the basis of recognition of prior learning, which is a decision taken by the institutions from case to case which thus does not fit into a system of automatic recognition. Norwegian master's degree programmes of shorter duration than two years do not give direct access to Norwegian doctoral programmes.

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In Denmark, the introduction of a 1-year master level degree (Akademisk Overbygningsuddannelse) is being prepared and proposal of legislation is set to be forwarded in late 2019. This degree will open for considerations of full recognition of the Swedish 1-year master degree. However, it is still unclear whether the programme will prepare for direct access to doctoral programmes in Denmark and in this respect automatic recognition of the Swedish 1-year master programme as defined as giving access to the next level of study may not be resolved by introduction of the 1-year Akademisk Overbygningsuddannelse in Denmark.

Norway reported that qualifications with a shorter duration might not fit into a system of automatic recognition due to the detailed legal access requirements in Norwegian legislation and the fact that qualifications may be considered as substantially different. In this sense, short cycle qualifications from other Nordic countries may prove challenging in relation to automatic recognition, because they do not give general access to studies at the next level, based on substantial differences. However such applicants can be individually assessed based on the profile, level and the formal rights attached to the qualifications in their home countries.

Furthermore, Norway reported legal barriers for recognising certain general upper secondary qualifications from other Nordic countries, based on the fact that a holder of a national qualification cannot obtain a general upper secondary qualification if one has failed in one or more subjects. In the other Nordic countries, one may complete the full qualification based on a grade point average score above the pass level, even though students have failed exams.

Finally, Norway also reported that they do not recognise vocational upper secondary qualifications for access to the next level since comparable national qualifications does not fulfil the requirements of the regulation concerning access to higher education in Norway.

Following the barriers to automatic recognition reported by the different NORRIC offices, the working group has had substantial discussions on the recommendations. The working group has agreed on the fact that it should be recommended to apply the same rights of access in other countries as the qualifications give in the country of origin. However, in Norway, due to legal barriers, there are obstacles to this principle. This applies to cases where the application of automatic recognition from one perspective may be considered as discriminatory against national citizens if the same rights of access does not exist for national citizens or if the same type of qualification giving general access in the country of origin does not exist in the country, where recognition is sought.

NOKUT has therefore submitted a text addressing input on the matter, based on the Norwegian legal perspective.

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### **Additional comments from NOKUT regarding the definition of automatic recognition**

NOKUT strongly supports a system of automatic recognition of comparable qualifications, and Norway has in effect implemented such a system for the vast majority of Nordic degrees, as well as for admission to higher education.

The present report builds on the following definition of automatic recognition:

*Access in terms of automatic recognition thus means that you have the right to apply for admission and that your application for admission to further studies cannot be denied on the basis that your entrance qualifications are not considered comparable with the entrance qualifications in the country where admission is sought. Or put in another way: if an applicant's general upper secondary qualification or bachelor degree gives the right to apply for admission to studies at the next level the same right to apply for admission to further study should automatically be recognised in any other EHEA country.*

The report also states:

*Automatic recognition is thus recognition without the concept of examining substantial differences.*

This definition can be argued to be in line with the 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)<sup>10</sup>. However, it is important to stress that this definition is wider than the definitions of the Revised Reykjavik Declaration of

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<sup>10</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H1210\(01\)&rid=6](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H1210(01)&rid=6)

2 November 2016<sup>11</sup> and the EHEA Paris Communiqué of 28 May 2018<sup>12</sup>, where AR is restricted to *comparable* qualifications.

**The definition of Automatic Recognition chosen in this report can lead to differences in treatment between national and international students and applicants.**

Examples from the following two areas serve to illustrate this:

1. Qualifications from higher education
2. Access and admission to HE based on qualifications from upper secondary school

**Regarding certain higher education qualifications**

The vast majority of qualifications from higher education are undoubtedly comparable, and fit nicely into a scheme for automatic recognition (AR). However, the definition of AR used in this report becomes challenging because it disregards the central concept of *mutuality*. If the country of study *itself* does not recognise a certain qualification for access, it must follow that similar qualifications from other countries should not be recognised either.

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1. If the definition of automatic recognition chosen in this report is used, holders of Swedish one-year master's degrees must be granted access to third-cycle studies (Ph.D.) in Norway. However, the comparable Norwegian one-year master's degree is an exception in the Norwegian degree structure and does not give direct access to the third cycle. Norwegian higher education institutions will, as a rule, only consider applicants as eligible for admission to doctoral programmes with a two-year master's degree, a five-year integrated master's degree or similar international qualifications. These qualifications meet the general access requirements set out in the Recommended Guidelines for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree (PhD) issued by Universities Norway<sup>13</sup> and the corresponding Ph.D. regulations laid down by the relevant higher education institutions.

For that reason, to automatically recognise the one-year master for access to the third cycle, in line with the definition of this report, is problematic, as it would lead to formal differentiation of treatment between Norwegian and Swedish applicants. It could also be seen as restricting institutional autonomy in Norway.

2. Another example is professional bachelor degrees if they do not give general access to the second cycle in the country of study. These qualifications would not be comparable to Norwegian bachelor's degrees even in the same field of study since all Norwegian bachelor's degrees give access to second-cycle studies. Whether universities or universities of applied science award such qualifications, is not relevant. The crucial point is the access to the second cycle. If AR is implemented the way the report proposes, students awarded a professional bachelor degree would have

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.norden.org/en/node/4773>

<sup>12</sup> [http://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial\\_declarations/EHEAParis2018\\_Communique\\_final\\_952771.pdf](http://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/EHEAParis2018_Communique_final_952771.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.uhr.no/en/f/p3/i8fa43786-ff61-4007-8e3c-6bb6e5fb26fb/150415\\_recom-mende\\_guidelines\\_for\\_the\\_doctor\\_of\\_philosophy\\_degree\\_phd.pdf](https://www.uhr.no/en/f/p3/i8fa43786-ff61-4007-8e3c-6bb6e5fb26fb/150415_recom-mende_guidelines_for_the_doctor_of_philosophy_degree_phd.pdf)

access in Norway for a master's degree that they would be formally barred from accessing in the country that awarded the bachelor's degree.

### **Regarding access and admission to higher education based on qualifications from upper secondary school**

The mutual right to access to higher education in the Nordic countries is set down in the Agreement concluded by Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden on Admission to Higher Education<sup>14</sup>. The agreement states that an applicant from one Nordic country has access to higher education in another Nordic country "on the same or equivalent terms as applicants from their own countries". Article 3 stipulates that foreign applicants must "meet such requirements on terms corresponding to those required of applicants from the host country."

The same principle of equal treatment is specified in the Lisbon Recognition Convention (Article IV.1 and IV.3) and also in the definition of Automatic mutual recognition of a qualification in the EU Council Recommendation, which clearly states that AR "does not prejudice the right to check, if the qualification is authentic and, in case of an upper secondary education and training qualification, if it really gives access to higher education in the Member State of issuance (...)". With this mitigation, Norway has for a long time implemented the principle of automatic recognition for all Nordic applicants who meet the general entrance requirements for higher education in their home country.

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However, there are cases where the definition of automatic recognition proposed in this report would pose a major challenge. Two issues in particular have surfaced, both related to differences in legislation regarding access to higher education.

1. The first concerns *vocational education and training (VET)* at upper secondary level. If a VET qualification does not give access to higher education in the student's home country, it seems unreasonable that a comparable VET qualification from another country should give access just because it gives access there. This would lead to unfair competition for the students with domestic VET qualifications that do not give access to higher education and would not be in line with the Agreement concluded by Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden on Admission to Higher Education<sup>15</sup>.
2. The second issue is that of failed examinations or courses on the student's school leaving certificate. If the access requirements for domestic applicants specify that all courses must be passed, it would be unfair treatment to grant access to students with failed courses from other countries.

In NOKUT's view, the definition of automatic recognition proposed in this report could therefore have unintended negative consequences. It would also seemingly go against central principles of the existing Nordic agreements and the principle of mutuality.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.norden.org/en/declaration/agreement-concluded-denmark-finland-iceland-norway-and-sweden-admission-higher>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.norden.org/en/declaration/agreement-concluded-denmark-finland-iceland-norway-and-sweden-admission-higher>

## Concluding remarks

NOKUT strongly supports a system of automatic recognition of comparable qualifications, and in our view, the Norwegian system of recognition is compatible with the definitions of automatic recognition in both the revised Reykjavik Declaration and the EHEA Paris Communiqué."

This ends NOKUT's additional comments and is followed by the working groups' general conclusions and recommendations regarding the reported barriers to automatic recognition within the Nordic region.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The implementation of automatic recognition of full degrees is for most Nordic qualifications possible and not object to any barriers. At institutional level, HEIs and students report that Nordic learning mobility is free and not barred by any major obstacles.

At a central level, almost all Nordic qualifications are currently de facto automatically recognised. However, barriers for automatic recognition still exist for some specific Nordic qualifications. These barriers are mainly rooted in detailed national legislation regarding access, which in some cases may oblige competent recognition authorities not to fully or automatically accept recognition of these qualifications. On the other hand the longstanding Nordic cooperation within education and the compatibility of Nordic higher educational systems with common tools such as, quality assurance in line with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, the use of ECTS, and national qualifications frameworks referenced to the EHEA Framework and the EQF as well as three-cycle higher education systems has provided a solid foundation of general mutual trust of Nordic educational systems and qualifications. This mutual trust and compatibility of the educational systems may give reasons to look at the legal barriers and to the interpretation of legal barriers for the qualifications, which currently are not recognised for access to the next level of study.

- **As a general rule Nordic recognition authorities is recommended to recognise the same formal rights for access to the next level of study for higher education qualifications as it is applied to qualifications in the home country. This also relates to qualifications that may only give partial access/restricted access to studies at the next level. In these cases, the same partial and restricted access should be applied in other Nordic countries.**
- **As a general rule, all upper secondary qualifications giving general access to higher education studies within the first cycle in the country of origin it is recommended that they also give general access at the same level in other Nordic countries.**

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- **Furthermore, upper secondary qualifications giving partial or restricted access to certain studies within the first cycle in the country origin should also be granted access on the same conditions in the other Nordic countries.**
- **In cases where national legal requirements may prevent qualifications from other Nordic countries to be granted access to the next level, it is therefore recommended to revisit national legislation regarding access and/or to be flexible in the interpretation of possible barriers to recognition and as a last resort consider applying rights of access through recognition of prior learning.**

## 10. Automatic recognition of study periods

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It is the full responsibility of the HEIs to recognise credits from study periods taken abroad.

A study period in this respect is defined as a structured mobility period abroad based on an agreed learning agreement between the sending and host institution and the student. The student returns back to the sending institution after the study period, after which the sending institution transfers the achieved credits into the programme at the home institution.

Credit transfer of courses achieved outside structured mobility periods lies outside the scope of this report.

As mentioned in the beginning of the report, automatic recognition in relation to study periods is essentially different from the core concept of automatic recognition of full degree, which is focusing on automatic access to the next level. Automatic recognition of study periods concerns procedural issues for speedy and smooth recognition of credits achieved through structured mobility periods in accordance with the existing Learning Agreement.

The group representatives of the Nordic Student Organisations and the Higher Education sectors have conducted a small survey among their members. Based on this they were not able to identify any major issues of barriers in relation to the recognition of study periods abroad in other Nordic countries.

The findings of the survey is supported by data extracted from the Erasmus+ programme. It is mandatory for students in an Erasmus exchange to fill in an online report on the exchange period and herein report on recognition issues following the end of the study period. Furthermore, the institutions are obliged to fill in a mobility tool in which they must report the ECTS achieved during the study period.

The tables below gathered for the Erasmus Dashboard show a high degree of recognition of courses and exams taken within a study period abroad in another Nordic country. The data are based on the self-reporting of students.

## 2015

<b>KA103 outgoing</b>	<b>Full recognition</b>	<b>Partial recognition</b>
Finland	81 %	16 %
Denmark	88 %	10 %
Norway	87 %	10 %
Sweden	84 %	13 %
Iceland	83 %	14 %

## 2016

<b>KA103 outgoing</b>	<b>Full recognition</b>	<b>Partial recognition</b>
Finland	86 %	12 %
Denmark	89 %	10 %
Norway	88 %	10 %
Sweden	84 %	13 %
Iceland	89 %	7 %

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## 2017

<b>KA103 outgoing</b>	<b>Full recognition</b>	<b>Partial recognition</b>
Finland	86 %	12 %
Denmark	89 %	10 %
Norway	89 %	9 %
Sweden	89 %	9 %
Iceland	88 %	11 %

The figures show a high degree of full recognition. Finland's slightly lower figures have been analysed by checking the open responses and based on these answers, the partial recognition was mostly based on the student's own wishes / activities: the grades were poor, which meant that they did not want full recognition, had less courses than originally planned or failed the planned courses.

This indicates that full recognition of study periods is not a possibility since there may be valid reasons for not recognising study periods taken abroad. Also in Denmark, HEIs have reported that students have not asked for recognition of certain courses due to the fact that they got poor grades or a pass grade which cannot be used to evidence a high final grade point average. Thus, the data above supports the reporting by Nordic student and HEI representatives that there do not appear to be major barriers to the recognition of study periods across the Nordic countries and that at a practical level automatic recognition is implemented and working for the benefit of mobility of students.

### **A practical problem of recognition**

One barrier mentioned by HEIs and also by the European Commission in several reports on recognition is that the preparation of study periods abroad is a process which must be carefully prepared and that the agreement between institutions and learning agreements between the home institution and the student must be completed well in advance of the actual beginning of the study period.

This may collide with the planning of courses offered by the host institution. In some cases, courses agreed in the learning agreement may not be offered by the host institution due to change of staff, not enough students signing up for elective courses and other reasons, which the host institutions will only have clarity of shortly before semester start.

For that reason, students on exchange may only find out the changes in the semester plan when arriving at the host institution. This calls for immediate and flexible reactions from both students and the home institutions in order to secure that credit for a full semester can be granted when returning to the home institutions.

The European area of Recognition Manual (EAR HEI) has been endorsed as good practice by all EHEA-members. The manual provides very clear guidance on recognition of study periods abroad and for good practice in case a learning agreement cannot be fulfilled due to courses not offered by the host institution. The Manual recommends "HEIs should ensure that any changes to the content of the learning/training agreement are acceptable to all parties and that a fast procedure for altering the learning agreement exists" and to "confirm agreement of modifications to the learning/training agreement in writing".<sup>16</sup>

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### **Conclusions and recommendations**

The overall conclusion from Nordic HEIs is that the full recognition of study periods taken within the context of an agreement among the home and host institution and where the requirements of recognition is explicated in a learning agreement is in fact already in place. This is evidenced by data on recognition from the Erasmus+ programme indicating that there are no major issues with the recognition of study periods within the Nordic region. Furthermore, there are no institutional reports on barriers to recognition in relation to giving access to study programmes in another Nordic country for holders of Nordic qualifications.

The available data shows that there is a very high degree of full recognition. In cases where full recognition is not granted this is due to students failing courses or not asking for full recognition for the purpose of repeating the course in the home country to get better grades or to even get a grade to be calculated in a final grade point average as grading of courses abroad are often not converted into the grading system of the home institution but merely given a pass grade. Furthermore, students who have not fully fulfilled the courses as stated in the learning agreement cannot expect full and automatic recognition of courses taken in an exchange in cases where they never took the agreed course or changed courses without the agreement of the home institution.

The work within this report has shown that there is relevant data on recognition of study periods and clear indications that HEIs and students do report recognition results after the completion of a study period abroad. However, it is important for implementation of automatic recognition that all HEIs systematically collect data on recognition of study periods to monitor the fulfilment of learning agreements

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/European%20Recognition%20Manual%20Second%20Edition.pdf>

and to provide secure data for explaining the cases when students do not receive recognition of all courses and exams taken as part of a study exchange.

It seems that barriers to full and automatic recognition are more related to practical problems and to some extent to the lack of monitoring of recognition related to study periods.

This leads to the following recommendations:

- **HEI's should systematically follow the recommendations of the EAR-HEI manual and the ECTS User's Guide on credit mobility in context of student exchange.**
- **Changes in semester plans calls for flexible recognition learning agreements: It should be communicated in the learning agreement that students have the responsibility to immediately report any possible change in the learning agreement to the home institution.**
- **That the student in close cooperation with the home institution should take immediate action on agreeing on possible substitute courses for courses stated in the learning agreement, which is not offered by the host institution. HEIs must set structures and mechanisms in place to efficiently take such actions without harming students' academic progression abroad.**
- **The home institution should sign the altered learning agreement to secure full credit transfer, when the student returns to the home institution.**
- **Institutions should systematically register recognition data in the Erasmus Dashboard when students return from study periods abroad as well as systematically register and monitor recognition of study periods within the Nordplus Programme.**

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## 11. Flexible recognition procedures

Another aspect of automatic recognition so far only mentioned briefly, is the idea of exploring possible improvements of recognition processes using modern technologies and portability of recognition decisions. On this background, this policy paper also touches on possible ways of implementing speedier and less bureaucratic procedures for recognition of Nordic qualifications as well as the pre-conditions for the portability of recognition decisions within the Nordic region.

For this purpose, the expert group of the Nordic automatic recognition project has initiated cooperation with the Nordic working group on digitalisation in recognition, which had its first meeting on 18 March 2019 in Oslo. However, since the digitalisation group has only started its work at the end of the project period for the AR working group it will be important to pick up the results from the digitalisation group, which may create an even better background for automatic recognition in the Nordic region.

A time consuming issue within recognition is verification of applicants' qualifications. Furthermore, verification of qualifications is vital for combating educational fraud.

New digital technologies for transferring secure and verifiable student data for the purpose of recognition creates potential and promising answers to reducing case processing time, securing better quality of data as well as combating educational fraud.

These possibilities are currently being dealt with in the Nordic group on digitalisation. It is important to take conclusions and recommendations from the digitalisation group, which may give support to the implementation of automatic recognition in the Nordic region. The digitalisation group explores different European projects of transferring secure and verifiable student data and if thoroughly developed these projects and technologies will be important instruments for implementing the aspects of automatic recognition in the meaning of speedier and less bureaucratic recognition processes. Data on applicants qualifications transferred directly from HEI's to competent recognition authorities with the consent of the holder of the qualifications will also be a potent tool to combat fraudulent documents.

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Along the same lines the digitalisation of the Diploma Supplement is also explored at European Commission level, which also has the potential of transferring students data in a verifiable manner.

There is thus a great potential for having a joint Nordic seminar with the aim of disseminating results of the two different working groups and its interrelated conclusions and recommendations.

#### *Portability of recognition statements*

The group has identified a potential for the individual NORRIC offices to consider other NORRIC offices' recognition statements when assessing a qualification that was previously assessed by another Nordic country held by the same individual. This could be for both Nordic and for third country qualifications (qualifications achieved outside the Nordic region).

If the authenticity of a foreign qualification has been verified as part of the recognition process in another NORRIC office, this information may be conveyed to the next NORRIC office that is going to assess the same qualification from the same individual. This will shorten the case processing, as the authenticity of the papers presented is clear.

Also basic factual information of a qualification as collected by "the first" NORRIC office can be "reused" by the next NORRIC office that assess the same individual's foreign qualification. This does not neglect the fact that the NORRIC offices have very different ways of presenting an assessed qualification in the recognition statement. Some are more detailed than others are. However, information on status of the awarding institution and study programme and duration of study programme are "hard" facts that can quite easily be transferred and reused by other NORRIC offices.

### Conclusions and recommendations

The long-standing cooperation among the NORRIC Offices and among Nordic HEIs provides a clear basis for accepting the portability of the information gathered by another NORRIC office or Nordic HEIs in a recognition procedure. The acceptance of portability of information will make procedures for recognition of the same qualification in another Nordic country or Nordic HEI less bureaucratic and faster, since the basic information about the foreign qualifications is already gathered by a trustworthy competent recognition authority. Only the decisions on recognition need to be transformed into the system of the other Nordic country or HEI.

- **NORRIC Offices and Nordic HEIs should find practical approaches to accept the portability of information on foreign qualifications gathered in a previous recognition procedure by a competent recognition authority from of another NORRIC office or Nordic HEI.**
- **Arrange a joint seminar between the Nordic groups on automatic recognition and on digitalisation exploring digital solutions for transferring verifiable student data.**

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## 12. Overall conclusions and recommendations

### *The mandate, definitions, project methods and limitation of mandate*

On the basis of the revised Reykjavik Declaration from 2016 the Nordic Council of Ministers mandated a project group consisting of the 5 central Nordic recognition offices, the NORRIC Offices, and representatives from the Nordic Higher Education institutions from both the university sector and institutions from applied science as well as the Nordic student organisations to present a policy paper with recommendations for the implementation of automatic recognition within the Nordic Region.

The project group has worked from 1 August 2018 to the end of October 2019. The group's work has focused on describing and defining automatic recognition and putting it in context with the international agreements of recognition, most notably the Lisbon Recognition Convention as well as the Nordic agreement on Admission to Higher Education from 1996.

The project group has according to its mandate adopted the definition of automatic recognition established in the revised Reykjavik Declaration and within the EHEA cooperation. In addition, it has added the definition agreed at European Union Level, which also implies automatic recognition of qualifications at upper secondary level giving general access to higher education studies as well as courses and exams taken within study periods abroad as part of a learning agreements between institutions and students.

Automatic recognition has thus been defined as:

1. **Automatic mutual recognition of a qualification:** Holders of an officially recognised qualification from a Nordic country, which gives general access to studies at the next level in the home country, must have access to apply for admission to a higher education programme at the next level in any other Nordic country.
2. **Automatic mutual recognition of the outcomes of a study period abroad:** at higher education level, the right to have the learning outcomes of a learning period recognised: as agreed beforehand in a learning agreement and confirmed in the Transcript of Records, in line with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).<sup>17</sup>

The concept of automatic recognition has created some confusion among stakeholders. Thorough explanations of automatic recognition is therefore described in the first chapters in order to clarify for all stakeholders that AR means acceptance of qualifications at degree level with the purpose of access to the next level of study and that AR does not by any means imply the rights to be admitted to the next level of respected and student expectations of AR are levelled.

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The legal setting of recognition within the Nordic countries have been explored and explained together with previous work related to automatic recognition within NORRIC offices and at European level in order to investigate possible ways forward for implementing automatic recognition in the Nordic region.

Two surveys have been conducted to establish the current state of play of recognition of Nordic qualifications. The NORRIC offices have reported on their recognition standards of all Nordic higher education qualifications as well as access qualifications at upper secondary level giving general access to higher education studies. The survey was completed in order to present a precise picture of the extent to which Nordic qualifications are recognised in all Nordic countries and in order to pin point if there are concrete qualifications, which currently are not recognised.

Furthermore, HEI and student representatives have completed a survey among their member to establish if there are any potential recognition barriers at institutional level.

Discussions on the potential of the use of modern digital technology in terms of reducing the case processing time of recognition as well as combating fraudulent documents by transferring secure and verifiable student data from HEI's to competent recognition authorities have been examined to some extent, including also the portability of recognition decisions.

#### *Overall conclusions and recommendations for implementing automatic recognition within the Nordic region*

An initial recommendation stems from the limitation of the mandate, which does not include qualifications from the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland. The recommendation is that possible actions of implementing automatic recognition of

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<sup>17</sup> For the full definition and explanation please refer to page 8

qualifications from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden should be followed by actions to establish automatic recognition of qualifications from the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland provided they fulfil the same requirements as prescribed for the 5 Nordic countries. The group thus recommends proceeding examining the possibility of implementing automatic recognition of qualifications obtained in the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland. This needs to be done through evaluating the level of implementation of the same automatic recognition pre-conditions as in the other Nordic countries in cooperation with authorities from the Faroe Islands and Greenland.

The most significant overall conclusion of this project is that there is almost full recognition of all Nordic qualifications at both central and institutional level. Considering that the vast majority of students and applicants for recognition have their Nordic qualifications fully recognised within the current system of recognition following the principles and procedures of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, this clearly implies a potential of introducing a system of automatic recognition within the Nordic region.

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At institutional level no barriers for automatic recognition of Nordic qualifications are reported by institutions or students. This applies both to recognition of full degrees with the purpose of being eligible to apply for admission to programmes in another Nordic country and for the recognition of study periods as part of a learning agreement. This is indeed a very significant result, since as described above automatic recognition means the right to have qualifications accepted for access to the next level of study as applicants have in their home countries.

Furthermore, at central level, the level of the NORRIC Offices, almost all Nordic qualifications are recognised according to the principles and procedures based on the principles and procedures of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. In addition, almost all Nordic higher education qualifications are recognised according to the principles and definitions of automatic recognition. The barriers reported for introducing automatic recognition for all Nordic qualifications only relate to one higher education qualification and to some upper secondary qualifications.

These barriers mainly relate to detailed legal requirements for access, which prescribes specific requirements for access to the next level. In Denmark and Norway this relates to requirements of access to doctoral studies on the basis of 2-year national master level degrees and similar foreign master level degrees, which consequently means that Finnish and Swedish 1-year master degrees are not automatically accepted for access to doctoral studies.

In Norway, regulations for access to first cycle studies based on general upper secondary access qualifications stipulate that all exams must be passed to be eligible for admission, while in the other Nordic countries exams can be failed provided the grade point average result is above the minimum grades for failing the full exam. Furthermore, Norway does not have vocational upper secondary qualifications like Denmark and Finland, which give general access to first cycle studies. NOKUT has described challenges in the Norwegian system to this interpretation of automatic recognition of these qualifications on the basis of legal constraints and

that acceptance of some upper secondary qualifications may be discriminatory towards national citizens since these qualifications do not exist in Norway.

On this basis the project group recommends:

- **As a general rule Nordic recognition authorities are recommended to recognise the same formal rights for access to the next level of study for higher education qualifications as it is applied to qualifications in the home country. This also relates to qualifications that may only give partial access/restricted access to studies at the next level. In these cases, the same partial and restricted access should be applied in other Nordic countries.**
- **Furthermore, as a general rule all upper secondary qualifications giving general access to higher education studies within the first cycle in the country of origin should also give general access at the same level in other Nordic countries. Furthermore, it is recommended that upper secondary qualifications giving partial or restricted access to certain studies within the first cycle in the country origin should also be granted access on the same conditions in the other Nordic countries.**

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National legal requirements may prevent qualifications from other Nordic countries to be granted access to the next level of study. In such cases,

- **it is recommended that the legislation is revisited and/or that a flexible interpretation of possible barriers is favoured, and if all other means are exhausted, access based on recognition of prior learning is considered.**

Following the conclusions and recommendations above it can be concluded that even under the current system of recognition and its national legal settings based on the Lisbon recognition Convention, de facto automatic recognition in fact already takes place for the greater majority of qualifications within the Nordic region.

However, it is also concluded that some formal steps and pre-conditions are necessary to fully introduce automatic recognition within the Nordic region.

Automatic recognition goes further than stipulated in the LRC. While competent recognition authorities in the context of the LRC are obliged to recognise foreign qualifications unless substantial differences between the foreign qualification and similar national qualification can be proven, automatic recognition implies that recognition should be fully granted for the purpose of access to the next level of study without further investigations than the verification of the applicant's qualifications. Automatic recognition is thus recognition without the concept of examining potential substantial differences as it has already been concluded that no such exist.

This relies on 20 years of intense cooperation in European higher education within the framework of the Bologna Process. 20 years of cooperation, which has created both transparency and trust among European educational systems as well as a number of common tools related to transparency and the quality of European qualifications such as the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESGs), ECTS and Diploma Supplement and a three cycle higher education system. Furthermore, cooperation within education in the Nordic region has been ongoing for many years before the Bologna Process leaving an even more open room for enhancing a concept of automatic recognition in the Nordic region.

In this respect, the already existing full recognition of the majority of Nordic qualifications can be expanded into a system of automatic recognition based on the common tools of transparency and quality, which over the last decades have made our systems more compatible.

Therefore, the following recommendations can be forwarded:

- **For the further development of automatic recognition in the Nordic region the group recommends that the NORRIC offices base implementation of automatic recognition on five main criteria:**
  - **The implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention**
  - **The existence of a three-cycle system of qualifications**
  - **The referencing of a national qualifications framework to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the EHEA- Framework**
  - **A quality assurance system based on the ESG's**
  - **The formal rights attached to the qualification regarding access to the next level in the country of origin.**

The project group has also examined possible methods of implementing automatic recognition. This has been done by examining European projects on implementing automatic recognition and by establishing the legal setting of recognition within the Nordic countries as well as Nordic agreements on recognition and off course as explained above the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

An important statement is that the Nordic Agreement on Admission to Higher Education already stipulates “The parties undertake a reciprocal obligation to grant to applicants domiciled in another Nordic country admission to their respective public courses of higher education on the same or equivalent terms as applicants from their own countries. An applicant who is qualified to apply for admission to higher education in the Nordic country in which he/she is domiciled is also qualified to apply for admission to courses of higher education in the other Nordic countries.”

In this respect, a system of automatic recognition is already agreed upon. However, differences in educational systems within the Nordic region as well as differences in national legislation of access to higher education leaves a quite big ambiguous room for interpreting principles and rules for defining, when a student from another Nordic country is eligible to apply for admission. This project has tried to go further by creating transparency on specific recognition standards in order to investigate if Nordic applicants do have access to the same types of programmes as

their qualifications give access to in their home countries. In this respect, this paper has attempted to put meat and bones on the Nordic Agreement on Admission.

The examination of the legal grounds of recognition has displayed that not all countries have specific legislation on recognition, which is why the project group finds it more feasible to implement automatic recognition by voluntary means and by formalising the de facto recognition.

Furthermore, a lot of work has already taken place within NORRIC Offices on disseminating transparent, automated and general recognition standards for a number of Nordic and European qualifications. This includes the Swedish "Bedömningsjämbördighetsordningen", the Norwegian system of automatic recognition of comparable Nordic qualifications and the Danish "landehåndbog", that are already in use and establish a solid and already existing ground for implementing automatic recognition.

In conjunction to these national works, the NORRIC Offices in cooperation with the Baltic ENIC-NARIC Offices in 2016 published a Nordic- Baltic Admission Manual. The manual is a non-legalistic multi-lateral transparency and recognition tool for admission officers at educational institutions in the Nordic and Baltic countries. The manual provides recommendations for recognition for access to further studies of existing Nordic and Baltic qualifications.

In short, much ground has already been paved for the introduction of automatic recognition and the group recommends that:

- **In accordance with the traditions of voluntary cooperation in education among the Nordic countries and in the absence of specific legislation on recognition in some Nordic countries it is recommended to base implementation of automatic recognition by voluntary non-legalistic means.**
- **The group recommends that the Nordic organisations representing students and higher education institutions in cooperation with the NORRIC Offices actively promotes the concept of automatic recognition and further develops transparent information on qualifications for which automatic recognition can be granted on national websites.**
- **The group furthermore recommends that the NORRIC-offices dedicates a chapter on their common website, [www.norric.org](http://www.norric.org) , which informs HEIs about the concept of automatic recognition, the precondition for applying automatic recognition as well as providing links to Nordic agreements, and the EHEA and EU-EEA documents recommending the implementation of automatic recognition.**

As described there are no reported problems on recognition of study periods taken within the Nordic region as part of a structured learning agreement. However, reports from the European Commission has indicated that there may be some practical problems with the recognition of study periods.

The preparation of study periods abroad is a process that must be carefully prepared and that agreement between institutions and learning agreements between

the home institution and the student must be completed well in advance of the actual beginning of the study period.

This may collide with the planning of courses offered by the host institution. In some cases, courses agreed in the learning agreement may not be offered by the host institution due to change of staff, not enough students signing up for elective courses and other reasons, which the host institutions will only have clarity on shortly before semester start.

For that reason, students on exchange may only find out the changes in the semester plan when arriving at the host institution. This calls for immediate and flexible reactions from both students and the home institutions in order to secure that credit for a full semester can be granted when returning at the home institutions. These actions are already outlined in the European Higher Education manual for HEI's and the ECTS User's guide. However, the project group finds it feasible to emphasise the actions by recommending the systematic introduction of flexible learning agreements:

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- **HEI's should systematically follow the recommendations of the EAR-HEI manual and the ECTS User's Guide on credit mobility in context of student exchange.**
- **Changes in semester plans call for flexible recognition learning agreements: It should be communicated in the learning agreement that students have the responsibility to immediately report any possible change in the learning agreement to the home institution.**
- **Students should in close cooperation with the home institution take immediate action on agreeing on possible substitute courses for courses stated in the learning agreement, which is not offered by the host institution. HEIs must set structures and mechanisms in place to take such actions efficiently in order to secure the progression of studies. The home institution should sign the altered learning agreement and send it immediately to the student, so the student can start the courses knowing that recognition is guaranteed provided courses and exams are passed.**
- **Institutions should systematically register recognition data in the Erasmus Dashboard when students return from study periods abroad as well as systematically register and monitor recognition of study periods with the Nordplus Programme.**

Finally, the group has discussed the potential of new modern digital solutions to enhance the use of automatic recognition.

In this respect, initial contacts have been taken with the Nordic group on digitalisation also mandated by the Nordic Council of Ministers to examine the potential of implementing a more digital Nordic approach to recognition. The work of the digitalisation group has not been concluded before the deadline for this report. Recommendations for using digital technology for transferring secure and verifiable student data may release a potential for the purpose of automatic recognition in terms of both reducing case processing time as well as combating educational

fraud. This remains to be further coordinated with the results of the working group on digitalisation.

The group has identified a potential for NORRIC offices and Nordic HEIs to consider the portability of recognition statements from competent Nordic recognition authorities when assessing a qualification that was previously assessed by another Nordic competent recognition authority held by the same individual. This could be for both Nordic and for third country qualifications (qualifications achieved outside the Nordic region).

If the authenticity of a foreign qualification has been verified as part of the recognition process in another NORRIC office or a Nordic HEI, this information may be conveyed to the next NORRIC office or Nordic HEI that is going to assess the same qualification from the same individual. This will shorten the case processing, as the authenticity of the papers presented is clear.

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Therefore, the group recommends:

- **NORRIC Offices and Nordic HEIs should find practical approaches to accept the portability of information on foreign qualifications gathered in a previous recognition procedure by a competent recognition authority from of another NORRIC office or a Nordic HEI.**
- **Arrange a joint seminar between the Nordic groups on automatic recognition and on digitalisation exploring digital solutions for transferring verifiable student data.**

Finally, the participants and all the organisations involved in this project wishes to thank the Nordic Council of Ministers for the opportunity to examine ways forward for implementing automatic recognition within the Nordic region.

Once again the overall conclusion of the project has shown that full recognition of qualifications within the Nordic region is already in place for the majority of qualifications and that implementation of a system of automatic recognition is a next step forward. Automatic recognition can be achieved by promoting voluntary agreements based on certain pre-conditions and on implementation of tools of transparency and quality.

A few barriers may still exist for the immediate implementation of automatic recognition in the Nordic Region. In this respect the implementation of automatic recognition is not kicking in an open door, but for the vast majority of Nordic qualifications the passage for access to further studies and labour markets within the Nordic region has already been cleared for the benefit of Nordic societies in general.