

## **BENELUX HIGHER EDUCATION MINISTERS AGREE ON AUTOMATIC RECOGNITION OF HIGHER EDUCATION DEGREES ACROSS THE THREE COUNTRIES**

On May 18, 2015 the five Ministers in charge of Higher Education of the BENELUX countries agreed on a BENELUX Decision on the automatic mutual generic level recognition of higher education degrees in the Benelux. This Decision is a clear expression of the mutual trust of the BENELUX authorities in each other's higher education systems and in particular in the quality assurance mechanisms underpinning them.

This Decision guarantees the legal right to each citizen to automatic degree recognition of any officially recognised Bachelor or Master degree obtained in the three countries of BENELUX. Such degrees will be automatically recognized as of equivalent – Bachelor or Master -level, without mediation of any recognition procedure whatsoever.

The BENELUX Decision is confined to the recognition of the degrees seen from their value as *learning qualifications* (so-called “academic” recognition). It is therefore not targeting the EU regulated aspects linked to the recognition of certain *professions* under the EU Directive on Professional Recognition. Nevertheless, the Decision is certainly expected to have a positive effect on labour and professional mobility across the three countries, as was announced in the recommendation on cross border labour mobility of the Benelux Committee of Ministers on the 11<sup>th</sup> of December 2014. Its limitation to *generic* recognition (recognition of the general “level” of the degree) will undoubtedly make a stronger case for the more *specific* recognition of degrees in a particular study field.

This Decision is an important step towards administrative simplification. The abolishment of the time- and cost-consuming recognition procedures will certainly benefit both individual graduates as well as public authorities. The complicated – and sometimes expensive - procedures for recognition of higher education degrees were indeed a serious practical obstacle for individual citizens, while the waste of resources of such lengthy procedures for public authorities should not be underestimated.

Moreover, the BENELUX Decision is a genuine break-through both at the level of the BENELUX countries as well as in the context of the European Union and the wider European Higher Education Area, who have put automatic recognition of degrees and qualification high on their agendas.

It is, first of all, a welcome complement to the earlier partial agreements of automatic recognition within the BENELUX, e.g. between the Netherlands and Flanders, stipulated in the bilateral agreement on the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation, the mutual recognition between the three Communities of Belgium as guaranteed by the Belgian Constitution, and the regulations on automatic recognition of several European degrees applied by the Luxembourg Government.

In European context the BENELUX Ministers in charge of Higher Education have always been the first to advocate that mutual trust, based on the observance of the common quality standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area should be the main guiding principle for higher education cooperation in Europe.

**The BENELUX Decision can therefore also be considered as the first concrete regional achievement to the common European goal of automatic recognition of degrees and qualifications and stronger convergence in higher education.**