Reflection on the Bucharest Communique and mutual recognition

- Extended Outline -

Today's challenges

The worst **economic and financial crisis** in decades has hit Europe hard, making the unemployment rate to double the digit figures in 2010, a level not seen for a decade. **Global competition** from emerging countries has also been added to the concern that the EU is falling behind the US in terms of productivity growth. European countries are struggling to find ways to deal with **migration** and **cohesion**, and **demographic change** is having an increasing impact on our societies. The steady gains in economic growth and job creation witnessed over the last decade have been wiped out and **10% of the active population are now unemployed** (Europe 2020 - A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth).

The exit from the crisis should be the point of entry into a new sustainable social market economy, a smarter, greener economy, where prosperity will come from innovation and from using resources better, and where the key input will be knowledge. This should help us tap into new sources of sustainable growth and create new jobs to offset the higher level of unemployment our societies are likely to face in the coming years.

Proposed solution

Europe 2020 is the European Union's ten-year growth strategy. It is about more than just overcoming the crisis. It is about addressing the shortcomings of the growth model and creating the conditions for a different type of growth that is smarter, more sustainable and more inclusive.

Knowledge is the engine for sustainable growth. Skills are also important elements for Europe's economic and productivity growth and for job creation. **Lifelong learning** is the **best strategy to ensure good transition between jobs and occupations**, and in avoiding long-term unemployment leading to loss of human capital. In a fast-changing world, education, research, innovation, and creativity can make the difference.

Strengthening education and increasing its quality is therefore one of the most effective ways for recovering from the crisis. Raising the quality of Europe's education goes hand in hand with greater mobility to acquire new knowledge and languages, gaining experience living and studying abroad and building networks.

Learning mobility – the means of enriching human capital through acquisition and exchange of knowledge, development of linguistic and intercultural competences — can contribute to the development of the right type of skills and stimulate the innovation potential of individuals**. For "Smart, sustainable and inclusive" growth, Europe therefore needs more mobile well-educated graduates** with the right types of knowledge and skills, and it has to draw more effectively on the innovation potential of higher education institutions and their staff. The EU 2020 strategy set a target for this objective: **by 2020 at least 40% of the younger generation should have a degree or diploma**. In the same line, the EU ministers agreed on November

2011 on the 20% mobility target according to which **by 2020 at least 20% of higher education graduates should have conducted all or part of their studies abroad**.

However, a successful EU2020 relies on a **partnership for progress**, combining **Member States' commitment to take action at national level**, and the harnessing of all the developed instruments to make the most of the potential at EU level.

Current academic recognition legal framework

The basic prerequisite for **successful international mobility is recognition** of academic credits and of higher education qualifications. There are no common binding rules within the framework of the European Union for academic recognition, but there is an overarching principle of fair recognition set out in the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC)[1], applicable to the European Higher Education Area. The Lisbon Convention calls for recognition of entry requirements, study periods, and degrees, "unless substantial differences can be shown" by country, institutional type or individual institution, and programme. In the same line, the principle of equal access to education within the MS for European Union citizens also facilitates academic recognition, limiting the possibility of MS to refuse recognition of degrees. Furthermore, the NARIC network (National Academic Recognition Information Centre) promotes fair recognition within the EU and monitors the implementation of the LRC through its activities and projects.

In the vast majority of countries (30) in the EHEA, higher education institutions take the final decisions on recognition of foreign qualifications for the purpose of further studies. This fact increases the risk that decisions are taken without the knowledge of the LRC, or all the other tools developed for the facilitation of recognition. Confusing nomenclature (undergraduate "Master" degrees or "academies" focussing on Bachelor education) also complicates recognition practices. For this reason overarching qualifications frameworks have been adopted at both EHEA (the three Bologna cycles) and EU level (European Qualifications Framework Life Long Learning – EQF-LLL): to facilitate the recognition process. Nonetheless, the 2012 Bologna Implementation Report shows that there are still recognition problems in instances of access to the next cycle, when bachelor degrees do not give access to master studies.

Talented students are prevented from fulfilling their potential because of recognition obstacles which they have to overcome when they want to migrate between systems. The autonomy of HEIs is important, and recognition decisions can and should be taken easier at the institutional level, but this autonomy should not be used as an excuse to refuse access to education. Information exchange and sharing of best practices among countries and organisations could help develop and improve recognition practices, and for this reason the European Commission supports financially such initiatives.

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[1] Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, 1997.

Advantages of mutual recognition

Recognition is important for promoting international education and promoting cross-border mobility of students, researchers and workers. Moreover, it promotes mutual understanding and rapprochement among different nations. Academic recognition constitutes an **important policy tool for achieving Europe 2020 goals and reinforcing the European Higher Education Area**. Without commitment to and implementation of EU 2020 and the EHEA policies at national level, these cannot become an effective reality.

Programmes developed jointly by universities from different countries and awarding joint degrees have the potential to stimulate developments in various action lines promoted by both the EU Modernisation Agenda and the Bologna process (they require joint curriculum development, joint quality assurance and joint decisions regarding mutual recognition of parts of programmes acquired at partner institutions). Moreover, the establishment of joint programmes or degrees inevitably lead to sounder recognition, above all, solving the remaining recognition issues of study periods and credits by partner institutions. Some countries acknowledge that their involvement in organising joint degrees or programmes stimulate them to become more familiar with each other's education systems, which will also encourage more effective recognition throughout Europe[2].

Agreements on mutual recognition reduce difficulties and obstacles to those who having received a diploma in one country wish to continue their studies or pursue professional activities in another country. **Mutual recognition** of higher education diplomas **strengthens** therefore **academic cooperation and promotes knowledge dissemination**; **consequently, higher education acquires an international characte**r while the acquaintance with the world achievements in the field of education assist in **upgrading the skills** of students, researchers, lecturers and experts. Moreover, mutual recognition not only contributes to the recognition of qualifications in higher education, but it also prevents the necessity of multiple accreditations for joint programmes and institutions operating across borders.

Instruments and tools developed for better academic recognition

A series of **transparency and translation tools** have been developed within Europe to increase the level of trust and to make the diverse system more comparable and compatible. The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the Diploma Supplement(DS), the qualification frameworks – both national(NQFs) and overarching (FQ-EHEA and EQF-LLL)– the European Standards and Guidelines, and the shift to learning outcomes, are all meant to create the link of trust which facilitates smooth recognition of foreign academic degrees.

An overarching system for quality assurance, next to the self-certification and referencing processes of national qualifications to the FQ-EHEA and to EQF-LLL should solve the trust issue in academic recognition. For this reason the EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register

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[2] 2012 Bologna Implementation Report

for Higher Education) was set up. The same holds for the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA). Should all these developments function well in practice, then we might be even closer to automatic recognition.

The European Commission's support for academic recognition

The European Commission will continue to **support the exchange of best practices in recognition** through activities organised within its Thematic Working Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, as well as through funding of NARIC projects. Being responsible for academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study, not just in the Member States of the EU, but also in the EEA countries and Turkey, all the NARICs should help achieving the long term Bologna goal. They could also help building bridges between education systems and qualifications, and act as forum for further development of recognition policies.

The EAR Manual, a **NARIC project**, constitutes an important means of spreading good practices and implementing the principles of fair academic recognition, and be used as driver for national policy change. Supporting good recognition practice by the ENIC-NARIC network is therefore necessary, given the role of the network in monitoring and implementing the principles of the LRC and in promoting the use of goof recognition practices.

Recognition is one of the cornerstones of the EU in cooperation in higher education, as our education programmes promote and organise mobility both for shorter and longer periods. Going on learning mobility would not be attractive if we cannot reassure people that their qualifications gained abroad will be recognised. The **Erasmus for All** programme will expand the possibilities for European citizens to go on both shorter credit mobility and degree mobility in and outside Europe. To make this attractive it must be ensured that recognition procedures are fair, clear, transparent and consistent. The Erasmus for All programme will make recognition processes smoother for credit mobility through the use of the Erasmus University Charter and students' learning agreements. Mobility cannot take place without recognition.

Furthermore, as follow up to the Bologna long term goal on automatic recognition, the European Commission acts as a facilitator and coordination point for the **pathfinder group**. The pathfinder group was set up with the participation of several Bologna countries (BE-fr, Be-nl, DE, DK, EE, LU, NL, PT, SE, SI), to build on the existing Bologna tools but not be bound by them, and explore ways through which to achieve automatic academic recognition within the group by 2015.

<u>Key points for academic recognition</u>

- There is a strong need for a **shift from equivalence of individual diplomas to a more systemic, generic level recognition**. A bachelor should be recognised as a bachelor anywhere within the EHEA. A change in culture and trust is needed for stimulating the right steps which will lead towards the realisation of the long term Bologna goal.

- Fair academic recognition can become reality by **linking Quality Assurance processes with checking how HEIs tackle admission of foreign qualifications** and how they respect the LRC.

- Diversity leads to innovation and creativity, and it cannot be standardised or captured in comparative frameworks. **Mutual trust is therefore crucial** for the success of Higher Education reforms in Europe and beyond.

- The Bologna Process provides a framework for common efforts to reform and modernise our higher education systems. We have to **take advantage of the support and experience of others** in order to achieve the long term goal of automatic recognition.

- When implementing the **FQ-EHEA** and **EQF-LLL** by developing their own national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), the EU MS should self-certify their NQFs to the three Bologna cycles, and they should also reference them to the corresponding 6-8 levels of the EQF-LLL. If the implementation process of these instruments will be conducted timely within the EU, then there should be fewer problems in recognition of academic degrees, since national qualifications should be translated through the same system of tools.

- **Mutual recognition** contributes to the realisation of a space without barriers and restrictions. Based on a conditional exchange of trust in each other's procedures, **stakeholders learn to accept the diversity of others**, dismantling the artificial obstacles which were created due to the lack of trust.

- **A step before automatic recognition is mutual recognition, based on conditional trust**. By using the solutions established in mutual recognition agreements to overcome obstacles in academic recognition and by **gradually building trust** and getting to know 'the other way of doing things', all actors involved might realise one day that such agreements are no longer needed. The spill over effect will have fulfilled its role and European higher education systems will have converged into a compatible and comparable system. I hope - and trust – that in this spirit, you will have a fruitful and enriching meeting today.