7. Recognition

7.1 Introduction

Recognition of qualifications and diplomas has been closely related to the Bologna process since its beginning (Bologna Declaration 1999). However, work on recognition already started long before the Bologna process, culminating with the *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region* or, as it is usually known, *Lisbon Recognition Convention,* in 1997. Lisbon recognition convention was later affirmed as the foundation for the work on recognition of qualifications within the Bologna process (Berlin Communique 2003).

Recognition of credits achieved through study periods abroad was of course another clearly accepted goal since the beginning of the Bologna process, contributing to its emphasis on international mobility.

However, recognition also developed into other directions within the Bologna process policies. In Bergen Communique in 2005, ministers for the first time explicitly mentioned recognition of prior learning as a goal (Bergen Communique 2005). This goal was set in the context of lifelong learning, but recognition of prior (informal or non-formal) learning also has positive connection to the later Bologna process goals, such as student-centred learning and flexible learning paths (Leuven Communique 2009).

7.2 Main findings

Bologna With Student Eyes surveyed the national unions of students on the state of recognition procedures in their national contexts with 16 questions about recognition of foreign qualifications and credits, automatic recognition, diploma supplement and recognition of prior learning. Below are some of the main findings.

Recognition of qualifications and credits

Assessment of foreign credits or qualifications is primarily being done by higher education institutions with 63% (27 out of 43) of the unions reporting they are responsible for this process, as opposed to recognition authorities and centres (for example: ENIC/NARIC offices) with 37%, or national governments with 23%. With regard to who is responsible for making the final decision about recognition, data shows the same picture as with assessment, except that only 14% of the unions (6 out of 43) report recognition authorities or centres as responsible for making the final decision. This suggests that even when these authorities have a role in the process, it usually consists of providing assessment expertise, while final decisions are made either by higher education institutions (more often) or national government (less often).

Foreign diplomas on the other hand are assessed by these three entities in almost equal share across countries – each of the entities was reported as responsible by around 40% of

the unions. Final decisions are less often made by recognition authorities or centres (25%), but still this is significantly more often than in the case of credits and qualifications.

When it comes to transparency, simplicity and non-discriminatory character of the recognition procedures, their excessive complexity appears to be the biggest barrier, with around 43% of the unions (18 out of 42) reporting that they do not perceive the recognition procedures as simple, as opposed to only around 26% of the unions (11 out of 43) that do. The situation is somewhat better with transparency, where around 37% of the unions agree that procedures are transparent and 32% believe they are not, and with non-discriminatory character, where 42% of the unions perceive recognition procedures as non-discriminatory, while around 16% do not. It is also encouraging that the number of students' unions that believe that recognition procedures are transparent has risen from 9 (24%) in 2015 to 16 (37%) in 2018.

Concerning the question of how demanding the recognition procedure is, the situation is best in credit recognition within a mobility programme (like Erasmus) where the unions' responses were overall mildly positive, even though around one third of the unions (13 out of 43) still perceived problems in accessibility of these recognition procedures. Recognition of degrees seemed to produce mixed responses, with the opinion about the onerousness of the procedure being split almost evenly along the middle. Finally, the situation is expectedly the worst in the area of credit recognition outside a mobility programme where more than half of the students' unions (53% or 23 out of 43) disagree that going through such a procedure is easy. Examining developments over the years, it is important to note that even though the situation is still clearly unsatisfactory, it has slightly improved since the last Bologna With Student Eyes in all three mentioned areas.

Automatic recognition

Automatic recognition of qualifications has been a goal of the Bologna process for at least six years (since the Bucharest Communique in 2012), and the students' unions across Europe have been supportive of this goal ever since. Data from the questionnaire for 2018 confirms this; almost all (93%) of the students' unions support automatic recognition fully or with only some concerns. In addition, around 47% (20 out of 43) of the unions consider automatic recognition a high or essential priority of the Bologna process.

When asked what is the most significant barrier to automatic recognition in their countries, students' unions report that it is mostly the fact that not all EHEA countries have consistently implemented all the Bologna tools, which is an answer chosen by over half of the respondents (54% or 22 out of 41). This barrier is closely followed by the lack of trust between EHEA countries, which was detected as a barrier by 46% (19) of the unions, and lack of government interest in automatic recognition, which 44% (18) of the unions see as a barrier. The situation has somewhat improved since 2015 in some other regards, for example the percentage of unions who perceive a lack of transparency as one of the main barriers has lowered from 38% (14) to 15% (6). Unfortunately, when it comes to the most widely perceived barriers listed above, the situation has remained more or less the same. This is especially worrisome as two significant tendencies emerge. The first one are national government's lack of interest which seems to persist through time, and the Bologna process, as a members-driven process, cannot fulfil its function if governments do not take responsibility for the implementation of agreed reforms. Secondly, two of the most widely

perceived barriers are actually interconnected. Without consistent and thorough implementation of all the Bologna tools and reforms in all the EHEA countries, it is extremely difficult to achieve high levels of trust between them, and this a necessary precondition for automatic recognition.

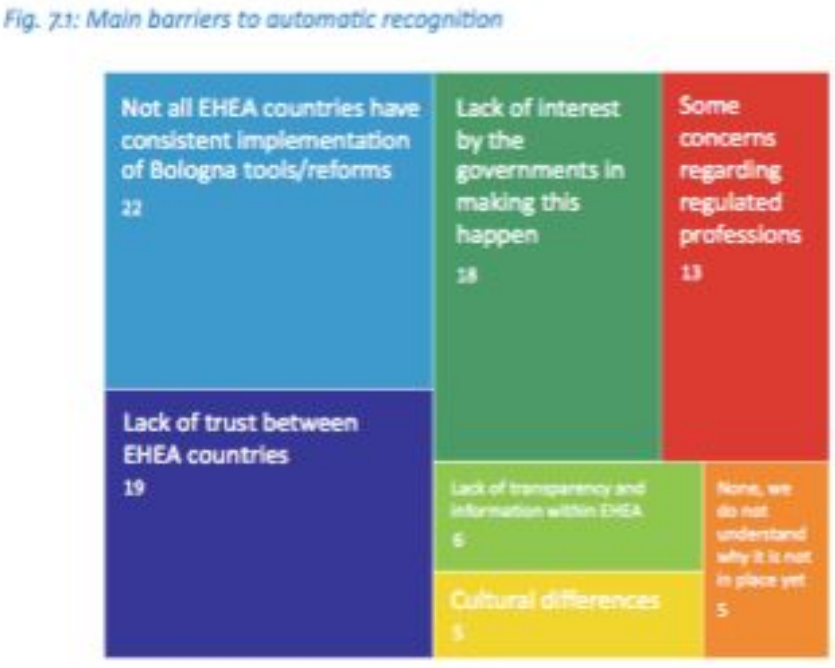

Figure 7.1 - Main barriers to automatic recognition

Recognition of prior learning

Recognition of prior, or informal and non-formal, learning has been the goal of the Bologna process since 2005 (Bergen Communique 2005) and is one of the commitments set in the most recent Yerevan Communique (Yerevan Communique 2015).

That informal and non-formal learning needs to be recognized has been the position of the European Students' Union for a long time, but it was always also stressed that such recognition can be used not only for access to higher education or the labour market, but also in complementarity with formal higher education. Judging by responses of the national students' unions, accomplished results in this area are completely unsatisfactory. Only 63% (27 out of 43) of the respondents reported having established procedures for recognition of prior learning or that such procedures are in a mature stage of development. This means that such procedures are effectively non-existent in almost 40% of the higher education systems, and this is utterly disappointing for a process for which all the stakeholders agree is very beneficial and much needed in contemporary societies. It is even more worrisome that according to the perspective of students' unions, the situation has not changed at all since 2015 when this commitment was clearly stated in the Yerevan Communique. This signals that there is a serious problem in getting procedures for recognition of prior learning implemented at the institutional level of our educational systems.

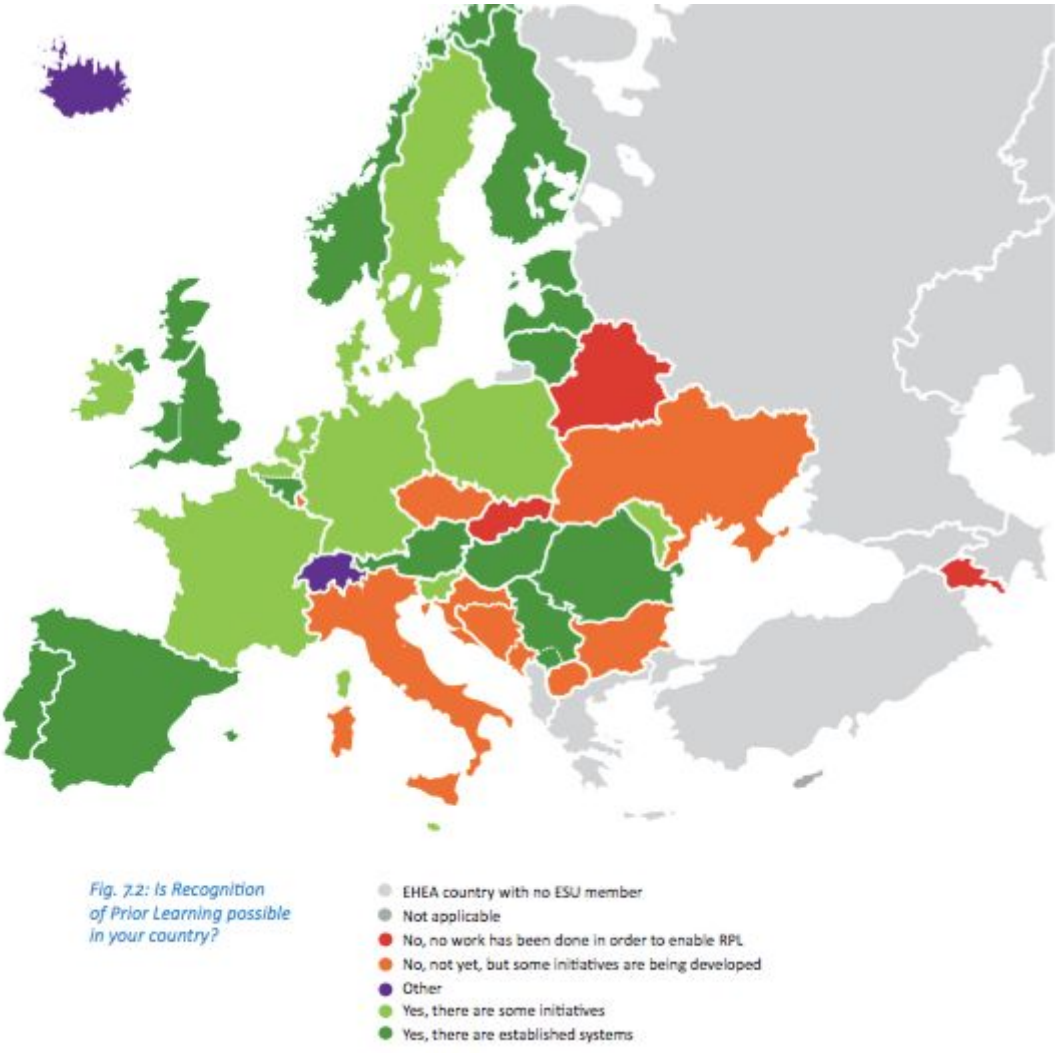

Figure 7.2 - Is Recognition of Prior Learning possible in your country?

In contexts where recognition of prior learning is possible and connected with formal education, it is primarily being used for covering part of the studies (being recognised and evaluated through ECTS) (86% of the respondents) or accessing higher education (65% of the respondents).

It is also interesting to note what the students' unions perceive as the biggest barriers to the recognition of prior learning. The most significant barrier appears to be a lack of trust in the validation of qualifications, as this answer was provided by two-thirds of the unions (25 out of 38). This echoes practical problems which stem from finding flexible and yet reliable procedures of assessing the learning outcomes of the less structured forms of learning (this is especially pertinent in the case of informal learning). Even more problematically, academic staff of the institutions seem to have low levels of confidence in such procedures (or their future development) or even think that this is outside of the scope of responsibilities of their higher education institutions. Very much connected to this problem is the second most often perceived barrier which is limited information and a lack of trust

among main stakeholders (58% of the unions or 22 out of 38 see this as a strong barrier). From the combination of these two answers it is clear that the lack of trust is currently by far the biggest obstacle to recognition of prior learning.

Other significant barriers are the lack of resources or the cost of recognition of prior learning (around 40% of the answers), which is also probably related to the underdeveloped standardised methods of assessment, and the lack of governmental interest and legislative limitations (both were signalled out by around 30% of the respondents), both of which can be grouped in national-level barriers to the recognition of prior learning.

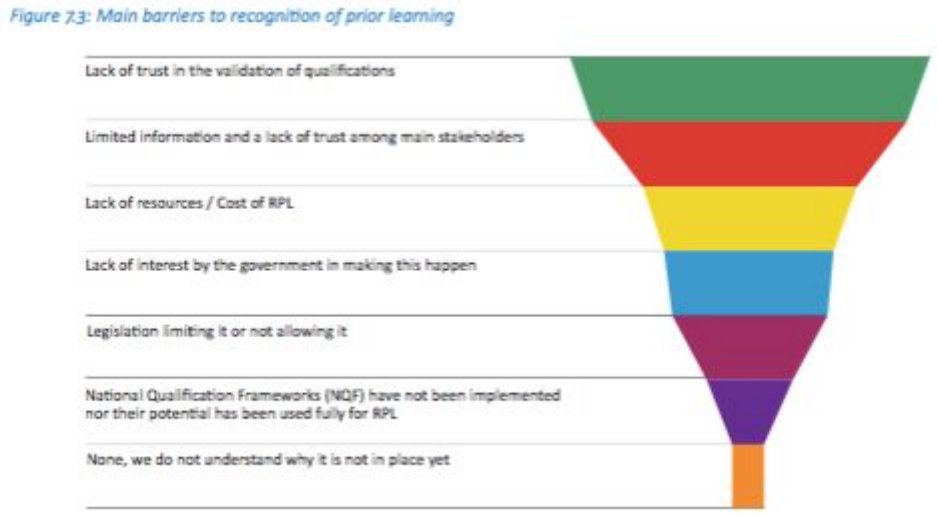

Figure 7.3 - Main barriers to recognition of prior learning

Recognition of mobility periods

As outlined at the beginning of this section, recognition is most easily accessible to students when it is a part of a mobility period. However, taking into account the reach and declarative importance of the biggest of such programs - Erasmus+, as well as very ambitious mobility goals, the state of recognition of credits achieved through a mobility period is still extremely disappointing. Almost 30% of the students' unions who participated in this survey listed students' fear of non-recognition of their credits after mobility as one of the biggest barriers to outgoing mobility. In practice, learning agreements are often being modified during the mobility period itself, often resulting in serious problems for the student when returning to their home institution. Additionally, study programs are too often not flexible enough (unwilling to accept credits gained at other institutions) and therefore even in advance present a barrier for their students to go on a mobility period. If this situation is to be changed and mobility to become a reality for a higher number of students, recognition of credits gained through mobility needs to be urgently improved.

7.3 Conclusions and considerations for the future

As is to be expected, effectiveness and accessibility of recognition procedures varies depending on the kind of recognition. The situation has slightly improved in the last few years in terms of accessibility of recognition of qualifications and credits, especially

regarding transparency of the procedures, which the students' unions also perceive as an improving aspect of automatic recognition. Other than transparency however, in the last three years, students' unions do not perceive a significant change for the better. Even more worryingly, within this kind of recognition further subdivisions are visible. In credit recognition there is a huge difference between credits achieved as a part of the mobility period and those achieved outside of it. Even though the situation with recognizing credits gained through mobility periods is still far from satisfactory, it nonetheless demonstrates that mobility programmes (usually Erasmus+) have had a positive effect on recognition since they provided institutions with a framework and streamlined procedures which are non-existent in other forms of recognition. Characteristics such as transparency and simplicity of procedures are to be taken into account while developing new ways to improve recognition in those areas where it is currently lacking.

This is particularly clear in the case of recognition of prior learning. In the large number of national contexts such recognition is still not available to students and there seems to be no improvement since the previous Ministerial Communique. Lack of trust in validation procedures being seen as the main barrier to development of recognition of prior learning is probably a signal that detailed, reliable and transparent procedures need to be developed and promoted in order to stimulate recognition authorities to improve their recognition of prior learning. Another interesting point for future exploration and development is how recognition of informal and non-formal learning can help achieve flexibilisation of study programs with the goal of individualising learning paths as much as possible.

Finally, when it comes to automatic recognition, which is one of the main goals of the Bologna process, it is a very important finding that the students' unions perceive the fact that not all EHEA countries have consistently implemented all the Bologna tools as the biggest barrier to automatic recognition. With the second biggest barrier being a lack of trust between EHEA countries, it is likely that the second is a consequence of the first. These results are not surprising; uneven and superficial implementation is something that ESU has been warning about for a very long time, as the students' unions clearly see that Bologna reforms have not been carried out at a similar level across countries. Looking to the future, besides Bologna working bodies, European-level quality assurance also has a crucial role in ensuring that degrees in different EHEA countries fulfill the basic criteria of quality, which is impossible without proper implementation of Bologna tools. Only this can truly foster trust between the countries which is a necessity for automatic recognition.

7.4 Recommendations

- Recognition procedures need to be simplified in order to be more accessible to all students. This especially goes for credit recognition outside of mobility programs.
- Implementation of all Bologna tools in a proper, systematic and thorough manner needs to finally be ensured through the Bologna working bodies as well as more reliable and comparable quality assurance processes at national levels.
- National legislation should prescribe awarding the diploma supplement free of charge.

- Diploma supplement should be further developed in order to be used to foster recognition of informal and non-formal learning.
- Recognition of prior learning should be included in national strategies which deal with higher education in order to promote at all levels (national, institutional) an understanding of RPL as complementary to formal education.
- Recognition of prior learning should be developed in close connection to the shift towards student-centred learning and flexibilisation of study programs.
- Expertise on ways of assessing and validating the outcomes of informal and non-formal learning needs to be further developed in all the national contexts and disseminated to the higher education institutions staff.

7.5 References

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