

BRIEFING

Automatic recognition of qualifications and competitiveness

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Automatic recognition has a long history in the Bologna Process. It has been 14 years since ministers resolved “to remove outstanding obstacles hindering effective and proper recognition and [...] to work together towards the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees”.

In [Bucharest in 2012](#) they set up a ‘Pathfinder Group’ of countries to explore the ways forward. The EU followed with a [Council Recommendation](#) in 2018.

Intense debate ensued: at European Higher Education Area (EHEA), EU, national levels and in the Council of Europe, as well as in forums dedicated to student mobility, recognition, qualification frameworks and quality assurance.

Yet while automatic recognition is established in principle, its formal implementation has been slow.

In an earlier [briefing](#) (April 2026) my colleagues Michael Gaebel and Helene Peterbauer examined in detail the varied patterns of automatic recognition uptake, with a strong focus on academic qualifications. They made forceful recommendations.

This briefing complements theirs. It looks at the profile of automatic recognition in the EU’s drive for economic competitiveness. As the EU strives for faster labour market integration, automatic recognition sits in its toolkit but awaits effective deployment.

Automatic recognition already plays a role in [Directive 2005/36/EC](#) on the recognition of professional qualifications. Yet not only is there scope for wider application of the Directive in the internal market, but opportunities also exist to strengthen its relationship with the Bologna Process.

The automatic recognition of professional qualifications informs mutual recognition agreements (MRAs) in the EU’s free trade agreements. But FTA texts carry no reference to, or alignment with, the Bologna Process.

These three applications of automatic recognition – in the Bologna Process, in the internal market and in international trade – are not congruent. The seamless policy frame sought by the EU is not well served and competitiveness suffers accordingly.

This briefing reviews the frictions and the opportunities.

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PREAMBLE

To illuminate what follows, let us take the example of a pharmacist trained in Europe:

- ◆ The pharmacist's bachelor qualification degree is automatically accepted as such in all EHEA countries. It is an academic qualification entitling the holder to consideration for admission to the next degree level in a higher education institution in another EHEA country.
- ◆ In the EU labour market, the pharmacist's first degree is automatically recognised in all EU member states as an enabler of professional employment, based on successful completion of a training programme as defined in EU legislation.

The usages of the term 'automatic recognition' are not congruent. Academic and professional qualifications sit in different policy spheres, although a given qualification may inhabit both. Moreover, whereas the Bologna Process covers all academic disciplines, automatic recognition based on harmonised minimum training standards extends only to seven specified professions¹.

The distinction may be clear to professional bodies but can be confusing for students, academics and employers. This matters, because confusion can only hamper the EU's drive for the labour market integration on which competitiveness depends. It matters too, if the confusion extends to Europe's partners in student exchange programmes and in trade agreements that regulate the international mobility of professionals.

To summarise, the qualifications delivered by higher education institutions are academic in the usage of 'automatic recognition' associated with the Bologna Process. They become 'professional' in EU legislation when they confer the possibility of access to professions which are regulated, by either all or some EU member states.

AUTOMATIC RECOGNITION – THE BOLOGNA DEFINITION AND ITS ELABORATION BY THE EU

The Bologna Process Pathfinder Group deliberated and reported to ministers in 2015. They proposed that:

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

Anecdotal evidence suggests that even when widely disseminated the definition was and is persistently misunderstood. This, notwithstanding its precision and its further explication and illustration by the pioneering [Automatic Recognition in the Networks – AR-Net](#) (2018-2020) and [Implementation of Automatic Recognition in the Networks – I-AR](#) (2020-2023) projects.

To be clear, it is the recognition of the validity of the qualification which is automatic. Admission to an academic programme at a given level is a matter for academic decision and therefore not automatic.

This distinction is easy to grasp in countries where recognition takes place at system level and admissions are processed by institutions. Precisely which countries fall into this category is uncertain, as no reliable and up-to-date mapping exists.

¹ Medical doctors, dental practitioners, general care nurses, midwives, veterinary surgeons, pharmacists and architects.

Confusion can arise in higher education institutions which both recognise and admit – in all probability, simultaneously. Ideally, trained staff working in admissions and international relations offices should appreciate the dual nature of their task. They should also communicate it effectively to applicants, either via online information or personally.

Which approach is better, the separation of recognition and admission or their integration? The debate is unresolved. The relevant factors are context-dependent and include:

- ◆ the national perception of the scope of academic autonomy;
- ◆ the degree of devolution of administrative tasks from ministry to institution and, within the institution, from centre to faculty;
- ◆ the mandate of the national information centres (ENIC-NARICs) or other relevant system-level structures.

A standard practice would certainly encourage the implementation of automatic recognition. Until this happens, what remains paramount is the need for those staff who administer it, at whatever level, to be accurately informed and competent.

Whether separate or integrated, automatic recognition can be implemented only when certain conditions are met. Since the academic qualification in question will have originated in one country and be scrutinised in another, both countries must generally:

- ◆ be signatories to the [Lisbon Recognition Convention](#);
- ◆ have a three-cycle qualification framework referenced to the [European Qualifications Framework \(EQF\)](#) and/or the [Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area \(QF-EHEA\)](#);
- ◆ have a national quality assurance system compliant with the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area \(ESG\)](#).

The deliberations in the Bologna Process were reinforced and expanded by an EU [Council Recommendation](#) in 2018. The Recommendation urged the promotion of “automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad”.

The Recommendation addressed to EU member states applied to all countries within the EHEA, since it widened the scope of automatic recognition to cover the recognition of credits (under specified conditions) and of the qualifications which in each country confer the right to access higher education. It also set automatic recognition within the family of recognition instruments already in place – qualification frameworks, learning outcomes, quality assurance and credit transfer.

References to labour market needs were a minor element in the Council Recommendation. This is surprising, given the emphasis placed on the topic in other EU policy statements. Previous economic crises were met with efforts to promote growth, including by the development of a highly skilled labour force. In 2026, this is once again the case, for reasons which have become distressingly familiar: war in Ukraine and in the Middle East, geostrategic tensions and the evaporation of the EU's economic security, the hardening of member states' immigration policies, the seeming intractability of EU budget negotiations, demographic ageing, climate change and the advent of artificial intelligence (AI).

In this dire set of circumstances, how does the EU propose to carry automatic recognition forward?

THE SINGLE MARKET AND THE INTEGRATION IMPERATIVE

In the current context, the EU deems labour market integration to be paramount. It sees automatic recognition as integral to this project, in both academic and professional policy domains. But the forces that run counter to integration are numerous:

- ◆ the political salience of migration policy;
- ◆ the economics of brain gain and brain drain;
- ◆ protectionism in the professions;
- ◆ language barriers;
- ◆ the co-existence of legal competences (supra-national, national, regional) which may overlap and conflict;
- ◆ the multifarious push and pull factors shaping the choices made by graduates.

All of these countervailing forces can disrupt the operation of automatic recognition, whether or not national authorities are formally bound by treaty, convention or programme (e.g. Erasmus+) regulations. Trust and political will are the key bonding agents.

In difficult times automatic recognition may prove to be fragile, but it is easy to grasp that without it, the potential of key EU growth factors is limited. The free movement of international research and business personnel in the context of hardening attitudes to migration; the viability of cross-border traineeships; infrastructural capacity in the shape of digitalisation of qualifications; the EU-wide taxonomy of competences and specialisms (ESCO); and a lexicon of employability shared across all internal borders by employers, recruitment agents, trainers and students. All these remain immature while recognition practices are fragmented and/or inefficiently delivered.

Full adoption of automatic recognition has implications well beyond the mechanics of student mobility. It is a key step towards the EU's economic security and strategic autonomy. The vision is not new, but has been re-energised by the Letta and Draghi reports², respectively commissioned to indicate how the EU's Single Market and competitiveness might be boosted. A flurry of proposals emerged, of variable geometry, according to which of the Commission's Directorates-General authored them.

The proposed measures concern all qualifications relevant to the EU labour market. Those that fall within the scope of EU legislation are identified as such, but the strategic importance of automatic recognition is implicit in all the instruments envisaged:

- ◆ Most contentious is the proposed European Competitiveness Fund (ECF)³. How large will it be? Will it cannibalise or complement other budget lines? The debate is a shifting one. The [Competitiveness Coordination Tool](#), which many expected would sculpt the ECF and dissipate the doubts, is no more than a bundle of targeted initiatives in a range of critical industrial and research sectors. EUA continues to make pointed interventions, [most recently](#) in June. The [Council's draft negotiating position on the ECF regulation](#) (June 2026), if agreed as expected in December, will give legislative backing to the reiterated demands for skills development and recognition, albeit without any mention of automaticity.
- ◆ The [Union of Skills](#) (March 2025) was a headline statement of intent. In EU parlance, it is a 'horizontal enabler' supporting the [Competitiveness Compass](#) published two months earlier. Together, they are primed to deliver innovation, decarbonisation, and economic security, thus reclaiming Europe's status and leverage. They prioritise reskilling and upskilling in strategic

² See EUA's October 2024 [briefing](#).

³ See EUA's October 2024 [briefing](#).

sectors – defence, automotive, the circular economy, wind, energy grids, food and digital – but sadly not health.

- ◆ Reaction to the Union of Skills from the European level lobby groups was mixed. Accepting the importance of the STEM disciplines, the European Students' Union (ESU) repeated its call for the inclusion of the creative arts, i.e. STEAM (science, technology, engineering, *arts* and mathematics). [EUA](#) urged greater strategic coherence, a stronger focus on lifelong learning and a dedicated Skills Fund.
- ◆ The Union of Skills is to be backed by a [Skills Portability Initiative](#) (SPI)⁴. Both feature in the [One Europe One Market Roadmap](#), an initiative agreed by the Council, Commission and Parliament in April. The roadmap envisages the simplification of existing legislation, infrastructural reform and new trade deals. Council President Costa asserted in his [address](#) to Parliament that “leaders want to see swift progress to improve the mutual recognition of professional qualifications, to ensure the mobility of workers in Europe”. A legislative proposal is expected in the autumn⁵.
- ◆ Council's Recommendation on [human capital](#) was adopted in March 2026. It underscores the importance of the healthcare sector, central to higher education institutions' delivery of professional qualifications. It also implies a revaluation of lifelong learning policy. Its focus on STEM is narrow, ignoring creative industries. It recommends gender balance in higher education, individual learning accounts, micro-credentials, and employer commitment secured by the inclusion of training obligations in public procurement procedures.
- ◆ Then there is the 28th regime. Similar proposals have surfaced in the past. In the most recent, promised by the [Competitiveness Compass](#)⁶ and dubbed [EU Inc](#), the Commission argues that internal barriers to trade can be circumvented by a liberalised legal regime to which companies are free to conform, bypassing national regulatory constraints. A stated aim is “to remove obstacles to mobility of workers linked to qualifications and skills, including through digitalisation”.

PROGRESS TOWARDS A REGIME OF COMPETITIVENESS WITH AN AUTOMATIC RECOGNITION DIMENSION

Given the proliferation of policy prompts, is the Union of Skills – enabled by free movement of talent with the help of automatic recognition in higher education, among other factors – realistically within reach? As long as the landscape remains clouded by budget uncertainties it is difficult to say. The indicators fall into two categories: Commission reports and think-tank surveys.

The [2026 Annual Single Market and Competitiveness Report](#) suggests the EU is heading in the wrong direction: market integration is ‘worsening year-on-year’, indicated by the falling percentage of EU GDP deriving from internal trade. But this may simply reflect a welcome expansion of trade with third countries.

The [One Europe One Market website](#) lists the measures projected; most remain pending.

The [Institut Montaigne](#) reported in June 2026 that 30% of Draghi's recommendations had been implemented. The [Draghi Observatory](#), which keeps a running tally, is less generous, putting the score at 10%⁷. Certainly, the hard work is still to come, particularly in policy areas in which the EU does not enjoy exclusive competence. This is the case of automatic recognition, where the EHEA

⁴ Since this text was drafted, the Commission has published a [Proposal for a Regulation](#) on skills portability.

⁵ Since this text was drafted, the Commission has published a [Proposal for a Directive](#) on the recognition of professional qualifications.

⁶ See EUA's October 2024 [briefing](#).

⁷ As of 17 July 2026.

remains a key player and individual regions and countries press ahead, as will be seen in the next section.

THE EVOLVING GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

Although the Bologna Process definition of the automatic recognition of academic qualifications is all-embracing, it has not been codified into a rigorous code of practice. Different structures exist within it. They may vary from agreement to agreement, bilateral or multilateral. They may or may not be legally binding. They may or may not encompass all qualifications.

In 2024, 19 EHEA countries reported to have implemented automatic recognition for all EHEA countries, and another 13 for some of them⁸.

The Baltic countries and the Benelux trio explored automatic recognition also in respect of their regional context and in 2021 their separate trilateral agreements (system-wide and legally binding) were consolidated into a [Treaty on the Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications](#). It came into force in 2024. In 2025 its online automatic recognition tool, [AR-GO](#), was launched. The [Digital Tools and Quality Assurance for Automatic Recognition \(DIGI-REQA\)](#) project⁹ is exploring the alignment of the Baltic Treaty and other automatic recognition tools. The Treaty welcomes applications for accession. Poland and Ireland have made submissions.

The matter has been explored through a number of other initiatives and projects such as the [Road to Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Access Qualifications \(ARAQUA\)](#) and ongoing in [ARAQUA II](#) and [Automatic Recognition in the European Education Area 2030 \(AR2030\)](#).

At EU level, the Joint European Degree Label reinforces the Bologna conception of automatic recognition, requiring compliance with the principles and methodologies of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), ESG, European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) and the Diploma Supplement, as well as alignment with the EQF.

EU candidate countries are encouraged to adopt automatic recognition as part of the *acquis communautaire*. All except Kosovo are members of the EHEA, having ratified the Council of Europe's [European Cultural Convention](#). The existing [Agreement on Access to Higher Education and Admission to Study in the Western Balkans](#) can be extended to full automatic recognition in due course.

The recently conceived [Pact for the Mediterranean](#) may follow suit; an action plan is imminent. Both Algeria and Morocco have announced that they will give automatic recognition to French academic qualifications.

A webinar run by [CIMEA](#), the Italian NARIC, in April 2026 gave an overview of adoption. Allan Brun Pedersen, president of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Bureau, reported that 31 EHEA countries had implemented automatic recognition, completely or partially, and typically on a non-legally binding basis. Where automatic recognition was administered nationally, a competent authority existed; the situation was less clear where recognition and admission were in the remit of higher education institutions.

Catherine Dreyer, Head of Higher and Further Education Unit at the Council of Europe, and Agnieszka Jelnicki of the European Commission confirmed that adoption was proceeding at a measured pace. In the EU, 14 member states had established national guidelines, while three had a centralised decision-making agency. Beyond the EU, according to national focus groups, Kazakhstan, San Marino and Ukraine were front-runners.

⁸ [Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024](#), p. 77.

⁹ EUA is a member of the project steering committee.

UNESCO's [Global Convention](#) on recognition (2019) does not address automatic recognition. It boasts 41 state parties, but many more countries and much capacity building – in terms of the globalisation of qualification and quality apparatuses – are required for worldwide automatic recognition to become feasible.

THE FUTURE AGENDA

The EHEA landscape is undergoing rapid change. The revised ECTS Users' Guide will come before Bologna ministers at their summit in Romania/Moldova in May 2027. Its most recent draft sets out the framework for the automatic recognition of credits accumulated in studies and traineeships undertaken in a host institution. The credits must be recognised automatically, if consistent with a pre-prepared learning agreement signed by all parties. This was already the case, but the draft is more insistent than before.

A new consideration is the role that artificial intelligence (AI) might play in advancing the adoption of automatic recognition. AI can authenticate and recognise at speeds out of reach of human administrators. However, extreme caution is required. Back in 2021 the Commission's [proposal of a Regulation on Artificial Intelligence](#) put a high risk label on "AI systems used in education or vocational training, notably for determining access or assigning persons to educational and vocational training institutions [...] or to evaluate persons on tests as part of or as a precondition for their education."¹⁰

Moreover, AI scepticism among the wider population is on the rise. Its use in automatic recognition will likely be dogged by anxiety regarding learner confidentiality, data centres and localisation, AI's propensity for hallucination, as well as by monetisation by big tech. The demand for human oversight backed by comprehensive staff development will intensify – and rightly so.

THE RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

The EU drive for competitiveness demands labour integration in high-skilled professions, including in the healthcare sector, where entry-level qualifications are doubly subject to automatic recognition – academic in the EHEA, and professional in EU legislation. As we have noted, the two regimes overlap and interlock but are not congruent. The Commission's Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW), until recently charged with oversight of the implementation of the Directive, was historically resistant to the Bologna Process: it was reluctant to fully align with ECTS and EQF, preferring to characterise curricula by disciplinary input rather than by competences and learning outcomes.

How well is the Directive working? According to the [2026 Annual Single Market and Competitiveness Report](#), the recognition of professional qualifications shows 'improvement year-on-year', by virtue of a higher percentage of positive recognition rates. It appears also to show that facilitating recognition is not enough of itself to guarantee stronger market integration. The report recommends full digitalisation of procedures.

Change is under way. The relevant Commission unit has been transferred from DG GROW to the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), where it has become Unit B.5 Professional Qualifications and Skills for Competitiveness. Head of Unit Steven Engels indicated in a recent [webinar](#) that the recognition of professional qualifications would feature in Action 2 of the EU's Skills Portability Initiative and the recognition of third country qualifications in Action 3. The prospect of the Directive and the Union of Skills moving in the same orbit is welcome.

¹⁰ See EUA's [briefing of January 2023](#).

The recent (February 2026) [report on the implementation of the Directive](#) and its staff working document show a readiness to grapple with harnessing automatic recognition for competitiveness by accelerating processes, including using AI for document authentication.

The report also acknowledges the progress yet to be made on the curbing and management of infringements. The Commission has stepped up its [interventions](#) in recent months. It warned 23 member states for excessively checking on the qualifications of workers in the construction, transport and business sectors. Fourteen member states were rebuked for failing to recognise the upgraded qualifications of Romanian nurses. Eight member states had failed to implement [Delegated Directive 2024/782](#) which amended the minimum training requirements of general care nurses, dentists and pharmacists.

In December 2024 the Directive's Group of Coordinators agreed to explore 'ways to extend automatic recognition'. The available instrument is the Common Training Framework (CTF), which allows at least nine member states to agree on curricula based on "common sets of knowledge, skills and competences". As the [European Court of Auditors](#) has indicated, this facility (available since 2013) has been lamentably underutilised.

DG EMPL's work on a physiotherapy CTF is ongoing and a delegated act is promised¹¹. Hospital pharmacists have also shown an interest. But the CTF facility needs to attract more professions. That means canvassing for candidates, simplifying procedures, overcoming regulatory barriers and professional resistances. A sub-group of coordinators was set up to advise in March 2024. Mandated for one year, it has been extended to March 2027. If automatic recognition is to be taken seriously, the sub-group should be made permanent.

To summarise, there is now space for marrying the academic and professional discourses on automatic recognition. In prospect could be the merging of their respective modes of digitalised recognition, the embedding in recognition instruments of the green skills taxonomy under construction in [ESCO](#), and the enhanced deployment in the Directive of credit accumulation, quality assurance, qualification frameworks and the European Degree. Scepticism is in order, for the prospect is formidable. The reward will be in transparency and clarity. Higher education systems and the competitive economy will be beneficiaries.

TRADE

There is a third mode of automatic recognition. It is to be found in the EU's free trade agreements. Recent FTAs feature mutual recognition agreements (MRAs) drafted in the framework of [the General Agreement on Trade in Services' \(GATS\)](#) Article VII. The pioneer is the [EU-Canada MRA](#) on architects, now in force. Although FTAs with Japan, Korea, Singapore, the Trade and Cooperation Agreement with the UK and the partially applied Mercosur FTA also offer this opportunity, albeit in slightly differing formats, uptake appears stagnant. Marrying regulatory and curricular frameworks is not simple, as the requirement of extra training imposed on Canadian architects attests.

Bringing trade-based MRAs into the scope of UNESCO's Global Convention is a question that has not yet been broached. It is a distant vision, certainly, but not an unreasonable ask. It would require an MRA template which could be annexed to the GATS. The authority of the World Trade Organisation has been weakened by disruption to its consensus-based governance. The moment is favourable for the EU, committed to international labour mobility and the recognition of third country qualifications, to press for automatic recognition to find expression in a global context.

¹¹ Since this text was drafted, the Commission has duly published a [Delegated Directive](#).

CONCLUSION

Beyond the question of how to better and more quickly implement automatic recognition in its Bologna mode¹² there is scope to narrow the gaps between it and EU deployment of automatic recognition in trade deals and in the recognition of professional qualifications. For automatic recognition has the potential to stimulate labour market integration and economic growth. It can normalise fair recognition practices and consolidate transparency, consistency and trust within and between the three fields of current application.

In higher education automatic recognition will be monitored and quality assured, no doubt. It requires:

1. Fair and timely implementation for all applicants, whether wholly in-house or in conjunction with a national agency.
2. Comprehensive training and guidelines for all administrators and agents, and accurate information for students.
3. An exploratory analysis of automatic recognition's operation between unitary and binary systems; barriers exist which compromise it, hampering student and labour mobility.
4. Ex-post analysis of automatic recognition's contribution to labour market integration, for example by reconsideration of graduate tracking procedures.
5. A parallel determination to protect, maintain and extend the recognition of prior learning and its lifelong learning frame.

When fully operational in higher education, it will be easier to align with other modes of automatic recognition.

There is much in EU policy which should not pass without debate: the focus on instrumentalising higher education in the service of a euphoric quest for a seamless and perfectly adjusted labour market; the apparent demotion of the humanities and the creative arts; the blind faith in digitalisation.

Moreover, automatic recognition can face hostility from protectionists in the professions; it might one day be mobilised as an argument by opponents of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). In addition, it can be seen as a driver of unwelcome internal and external migrations and be weaponised by forces set on reducing the integrity of the EU.

Automatic recognition is already, and can become even more so, a significant structural feature of higher education provision and the professional careers that are nurtured within it. Rationalised and embedded in the culture of the labour market, it can indeed fuel competitiveness.

But it should also be harnessed to a wider vision. Along with efforts to publicise, clarify and extend it, we need a strategic reflection on how it might be explicitly deployed in the service of democratic values, diversity and equity. These are the higher aims of higher education and automatic recognition should serve them too.

12 Stressed yet again in June 2026 by the [Council Resolution](#) on the European Education Area.



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