

1 **DECLARATION ON RECOGNITION OF HIGHER EDUCATION** 2 **QUALIFICATIONS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS**

3

4 **Preamble**

5

6 Taking into account the commitments undertaken in the Multi-Annual Plan on Regional
7 Economic Area we aim to deliver on these commitments and to actively contribute to the
8 European Higher Education Area and European Education Area;

9 Acknowledging that in an increasingly globalised context, students and graduates should be
10 able to make the best possible use of all learning opportunities;

11 Recognising the importance of mobility of students and regional cooperation in higher
12 education, for personal development and increased employability of students, and in
13 particular the development of inter-cultural skills; fostering the internationalisation and
14 enhancing quality of higher education; and strengthening of peaceful and democratic
15 societies;

16 Convinced that through joint regional cooperation we will consolidate the efforts to align in
17 full with the principles of the European Higher Education Area outlined in the Bologna
18 process Communiqués and the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning
19 Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Recognition Convention), as well as the
20 Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education
21 and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning
22 periods abroad;

23 We hereby undertake to attain the automatic mutual recognition¹ of higher education
24 qualifications based on the principles set out in this Declaration on Recognition of Higher

¹ Without prejudice to check the authenticity of documents by competent authorities.

25 Education Qualifications in the Western Balkans² while taking into full respect the diversity
26 of higher education systems and of the University autonomy.

27

28 **Access to higher education**

29

30 In principle, a secondary education qualification of the European Qualifications Framework
31 (hereinafter: EQF) Level 4 giving access to higher education should be recognised for the
32 purpose of giving access to higher education, without prejudicing a higher education
33 institutions' or the competent authorities' right to set specific admission criteria for specific
34 programmes or to check authenticity of documents.

35 Furthermore, we commit to grant automatic recognition of general education qualifications
36 and of Matura exams where they are organised for the purpose of giving access to higher
37 education, without prejudicing a higher education institutions' or the competent
38 authorities' right to set specific admission criteria for specific programmes or to check
39 authenticity of documents.

40 **Recognition of short cycle qualifications**

41

42 In principle, the short cycle qualifications, of minimum duration of one or two years or 60 or
43 120 ECTS, awarded in the public, accredited higher education institution should be
44 recognised, where foreseen, in line with the European Qualifications Frameworks and in line
45 with the relevant legislation, without prejudicing a higher education institutions' or the
46 competent authorities' right to check authenticity of documents.

47 For the purpose of employment, the competent authority, should automatically issue a
48 document attesting that the short cycle degree, of minimum duration of one or two years or
49 60 or 120 ECTS, awarded in the public, accredited higher education institution should be
50 recognised based on the assessment of the learning outcomes at an appropriate level of the

² This Declaration is without prejudice to the existing agreements on recognition of higher education qualifications in the Western Balkans and it does not apply to recognition of professional qualifications.

51 European Qualifications Framework as foreseen by the relevant legislation, without
52 prejudice to check the authenticity of documents by competent authorities.

53 For the purpose of continuing academic studies, ECTS acquired during the short cycle
54 degree, of minimum duration of one or two years or 60 or 120 ECTS, awarded in the public,
55 accredited higher education institution should be recognized as respective ECTS of a first
56 cycle degree, where possible and in line with the learning outcomes of the receiving study
57 programme, by the receiving higher education institution, without prejudicing the higher
58 education institutions' right to set specific admission criteria for specific programmes or to
59 check the authenticity of documents.

60

61 **Recognition of first cycle qualifications in higher education**

62

63 In principle, the first cycle degrees, in duration of minimum three to four years or 180 to 240
64 ECTS, awarded in the public, accredited higher education institution should be recognised as
65 an EQF Level 6 degree³, without prejudicing a higher education institutions' or the
66 competent authorities' right to set specific admission criteria for specific programmes or to
67 check authenticity of documents.

68 For the purpose of employment, the competent authority, should automatically issue a
69 document attesting that the first cycle degree, of minimum duration of three to four years
70 or 180 to 240 ECTS, awarded in the public, accredited higher education institution is
71 recognised as an EQF Level 6 degree⁴, without prejudice to check the authenticity of
72 documents by competent authorities.

73 For the purpose of continuing academic studies, the first cycle degree, of minimum duration
74 of three or four years or 180 or 240 ECTS, awarded in the public, accredited higher
75 education institution should give access to second cycle studies, without prejudicing the

³ For qualification in duration of four years or 240 ECTS, the competent authorities may award corresponding levels within the National Qualifications Frameworks in line with the relevant legislation.

⁴ Ibid.

76 higher education institutions' right to set specific admission criteria for specific programmes
77 or to check the authenticity of documents.

78

79 **Recognition of second cycle qualifications in higher** 80 **education**

81

82 In principle, the second cycle degrees, of minimum duration of one to - two years or 60 - to
83 120 ECTS, awarded after completion of the first cycle study programme in the public,
84 accredited higher education institution should be recognised as an EQF Level 7 degree. The
85 appropriate sub-level of the EQF 7 will be determined in accordance with the relevant
86 legislation.

87 For the purpose of employment, the competent authority, should automatically issue a
88 document attesting that the second cycle degree, of minimum duration of one to two years
89 or 60 to 120 ECTS, awarded after completion of the first cycle study programme in the
90 public, accredited higher education institution is recognised as an EQF Level 7 degree, as
91 foreseen in the relevant legislation, without prejudice to check the authenticity of
92 documents by competent authorities. The appropriate sub-level of the EQF 7 will be
93 determined in accordance with the relevant legislation.

94 For the purpose of continuing academic studies towards the third cycle studies, the second
95 cycle academic degree, of minimum duration of one to two years or 60 to 120 ECTS,
96 awarded in the public, accredited higher education institution should give access to third
97 cycle studies, as foreseen in the relevant legislation, without prejudicing the higher
98 education institutions' right to set specific admission criteria for specific programmes or to
99 check the authenticity of documents.

100

101 **Recognition of integrated first and second cycle degrees**

102

103 In principle, the integrated second cycle degrees, of minimum duration of five to six years or
104 300 to 360 ECTS, respectively, awarded in the public, accredited higher education
105 institutions, should be recognised as an EQF Level 7 degrees without prejudicing a higher
106 education institutions' or the competent authorities' right to set specific admission criteria
107 for specific programmes or to check authenticity of documents.

108 For the purpose of employment, the competent authority, should automatically issue a
109 document attesting that the integrated second cycle degrees, of minimum duration of five
110 to six years or 300 to 360 ECTS, respectively, awarded in the public, accredited higher
111 education institutions, is recognised as an EQF Level 7, in accordance with the relevant
112 legislation, without prejudice to check the authenticity of documents by competent
113 authorities.

114 For the purpose of continuing academic studies, the integrated second cycle degrees, of
115 minimum duration of five to six years or 300 to 360 ECTS, respectively, awarded in the
116 public, accredited higher education institutions, should give access to third cycle studies,
117 without prejudicing the higher education institutions' right to set specific admission criteria
118 for specific programmes or to check the authenticity of documents.

119

120 **Recognition of study periods abroad**

121

122 Periods of study completed abroad within the framework of higher education programme
123 provided by the public, accredited higher education institution shall be recognised with a
124 view of granting transfer of maximum credits relevant to the programme.

125 In cases when periods of study abroad have been completed according to a previous
126 agreement between higher education institutions a full credit transfer shall be granted
127 without a delay in accordance with the established agreement.

128 **Advancing regional cooperation in higher education**

129 In light of this Declaration, we encourage all higher education institutions and competent
130 authorities to respond to requests aimed at checking the authenticity of higher education
131 qualifications within two weeks and free of charge.

132 We take the commitments outlined in this Declaration to be of utmost importance,
133 therefore we mandate the Working Group on Recognition of Academic Qualifications, under
134 auspices of Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and Education Reform Initiative of South
135 East Europe (ERI SEE) to report annually on the implementation of the Declaration on
136 Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the Western Balkans.

137 In view of enhancing recognition procedures to the benefit of all graduates, we further
138 mandate the Working Group on Recognition of Academic Qualifications to initiate expert
139 discussion and prepare expert recommendations on recognition of higher education
140 qualifications issued prior to the implementation of the Bologna system of three cycle
141 studies and the third cycle academic degrees by the next Western Balkan Summit in 2020.

142 In light of developments of qualifications frameworks in the Western Balkans we task the
143 WG to carry out a comparison of the established qualifications frameworks to facilitate
144 further recognition of qualifications in the region

145 Acknowledging the importance of fostering transparency and building trust in each other's
146 higher education systems to achieve automatic mutual recognitions, we commit ourselves
147 to align our quality assurance systems with the most recent Standards and Guidelines for
148 Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). In line with the European
149 Higher Education Area key commitments we aim to ensure that external quality assurance is
150 performed by agencies that comply with the ESG.

151 To facilitate these goals, we will engage in bi-/multi-lateral exchanges with partners that
152 have established and have mature quality assurance systems. We will actively use the peer-
153 learning opportunities, e.g. staff exchanges between Quality Assurance bodies or ministries,
154 offered within the context of the Bologna Process or initiated in the context of joint regional
155 cooperation. We also encourage our Quality Assurance bodies to actively participate in
156 existing European and regional networks or associations, i.e. European Association for

157 Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Central and Eastern European Network of Quality
158 Assurance Agencies in Higher Education. We further mandate the Regional Cooperation
159 Council and Education Reform Initiative of South East Europe to jointly establish an informal
160 Western Balkans Network of Quality Assurance bodies with an aim of supporting the
161 alignment with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the
162 European Higher Education Area, as well as to work jointly on implementation of the ESG
163 with an aim of preparing harmonised operational guidelines and procedures for external
164 quality assurance, i.e. accreditation and reaccreditation of institutions or programmes. We
165 also mandate the Working Group on Recognition of Academic Qualifications to discuss
166 possibilities of cooperation and participation in ongoing initiatives aimed at ranking higher
167 education institutions or to propose a model for ranking higher education institutions in the
168 Western Balkans.