

RESOLUTION ⁽¹⁾**by the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly on the mutual recognition of professional qualifications, work experience and university diplomas within the Bologna process**

(2016/C 193/04)

THE EURONEST PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY,

- having regard to the Riga Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit (21 and 22 May 2015), which builds upon the Vilnius and Warsaw declarations made in the preceding years in a similar setting,
- having regard to the European Parliament resolution of 23 October 2013 entitled ‘European Neighbourhood Policy, working towards a stronger partnership — European Parliament’s position on the 2012 progress reports’,
- having regard to the Constituent Act of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly of 3 May 2011,
- having regard to the Yerevan ministerial communiqué arising from the Fourth Bologna Policy Forum and Ministerial Conference of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) held on 14 and 15 May 2015,
- having regard to the resolution of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly of 3 April 2012 entitled ‘Strengthening of civil society in the Eastern Partnership Countries, including the question of cooperation between government and civil society, and the question of the reforms aimed at the empowerment of civil society’,
- having regard to the Sorbonne Joint Declaration on harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system, signed in Paris on 25 May 1998 by the education ministers of France, Germany, Italy and the UK,
- having regard to the Joint Declaration signed in Bologna on 19 June 1999 by the education ministers of 29 European countries (the Bologna Declaration),
- having regard to the Budapest-Vienna Declaration of 12 March 2010 adopted by the education ministers of 47 countries, which officially launched the EHEA,
- having regard to the communiqué issued by the Ministerial Conference and Third Bologna Policy Forum held in Bucharest on 26 and 27 April 2012,
- having regard to the Mobility Strategy 2020 for the EHEA, adopted by the EHEA Ministerial Conference held in Bucharest on 26 and 27 April 2012,
- having regard to Directive 2013/55/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 November 2013 on the recognition of professional qualifications,
- having regard to the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 September 2005 on facilitating the issue by the Member States of uniform short-stay visas for researchers,
- having regard to the report entitled ‘The European Higher Area for Education in 2015 -Bologna Process Implementation Report’,
- having regard to the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF-LLL),
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (‘ET 2020’),

⁽¹⁾ Adopted on 22 March 2016 in Brussels, Belgium.

- having regard to the Council conclusions of 11 May 2010 on the internationalisation of higher education,
 - having regard to the Council recommendations of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving and to promote the learning mobility of young people,
 - having regard to the report entitled ‘The European Higher Education Area in 2012 — Bologna Process Implementation Report’,
 - having regard to the final report of the International Conference on Funding of Higher Education held in Yerevan (Armenia) on 8 and 9 September 2011,
 - having regard to the European Parliament resolution of 23 September 2008 on the Bologna Process and student mobility,
 - having regard to the European Parliament report of 31 March 2015 on the follow-up on the implementation of the Bologna Process,
 - having regard to the Association Agreements signed between the European Union and the governments of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine,
 - having regard to the Erasmus+ and Erasmus Mundus scholarship schemes,
 - having regard to the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (CETS No 165, Lisbon, 11 April 1997),
- A. whereas the mutual recognition of higher education diplomas between the EU and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries is still a complex and costly process, despite the advances represented by the Bologna Process and the EHEA;
- B. whereas students from EaP countries find it difficult and sometimes impossible to have their qualifications duly recognised in some EU Member States, while at times students from the EU face similar issues in EaP countries;
- C. whereas the stumbling-blocks to the recognition of diplomas and qualifications can prevent the fostering of academic and professional mobility and cultural ties between both parties, as well as impeding the promotion of academic research and overall advancement in numerous fields of science in Europe;
- D. whereas there are no arrangements for equal treatment in terms of recognition of professional qualifications for the nationals of EaP countries/Bologna process-EHEA members, and this prevents many highly qualified professionals in a range of regulated fields, such as healthcare and social work, education, architecture and construction (e.g. construction engineering) and many others, from enhancing their skills by practising them within the EU, and thus both from bringing valuable knowledge back to their home countries and filling gaps in the highly skilled workforce in EU Member States;
- E. whereas there is a strong need for more research-oriented institutions, including doctoral schools, to be developed in the EaP countries, thus offering more research career options to local students;
- F. whereas approaches to the recognition of qualifications vary both within the EU and between the EU and the EaP countries which are members of the Bologna Process/EHEA;
- G. whereas there is no harmonisation of the process for recognition of foreign qualifications, nor is there any cost-effective mechanism for reactive information in countries participating in the Bologna Process/EHEA;
- H. whereas in more than two thirds of participating countries, final decisions on the recognition of foreign qualifications are the responsibility of the higher education institutions themselves;

- I. whereas there are still concerns regarding fairness, transparency, standards and accountability in relation to numerous higher education institutions in many of the EaP countries;
- J. whereas corruption, red tape, conservatism, uncertainty and outdated mentalities can still be encountered within higher education institutions in the Eastern Partnership countries and occasionally also in the EU, and this needs to be addressed and countered;
- K. whereas the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (ENIC/NARIC) network is the leading network that offers exchange of information on recognition and develops tools for recognition of procedures, policies and practices with the potential to inform the public and partners and help member countries and key political bodies understand the recognition process, while also enhancing the alignment of national legislation and procedures with EU practices;
- L. whereas universities are spaces that foster the development of new ideas and rely on freedom of speech and thought for the pursuit of academic development; whereas this can enter into conflict with politically motivated pressures, thus often exposing students to harassment and even human rights abuses;
- M. whereas Erasmus + programmes are crucial tools for modernising both EU and EaP higher education institutions, stimulating international cooperation with EU institutions, and contributing to higher education reform and greater student mobility;

General principles

1. Affirms that mutually recognised quality higher education for students in both the EU and the EaP countries, as well as mutual recognition of professional qualification for key regulated professions and full acknowledgement of work experience acquired on both sides, can be key to increasing and improving cross-cultural socioeconomic ties and fostering peace, development, prosperity and stability;
2. Welcomes the signing of Association Agreements with three countries of the EaP, and looks forward to this development having a positive impact on the mutual recognition of diplomas, qualifications, skills and work experience; considers it a key priority to devise meaningful and lasting means of cooperation with the other EaP countries, ensuring the continuing of cooperation on this and other issues; notes at the same time that the Association Agreements provide enhanced communication and cooperation tools at government and parliamentary level, and could serve as the basis for further cooperation, including by establishing National Recognition Information Centres, implementing a joint EU-EaP European Professional Card (EPC), and developing cost-effective information and alert mechanisms by means of the Internal Market Information System (IMI) between the EU and its Eastern partners;
3. Stresses that the Bologna Process is by no means a one-way system, but that, rather, it has the objective of fostering the development of higher education and academic mobility between the EU and the EaP countries, and that participants on both sides require improved access to higher education institutions, recognition of diplomas, scholarship programmes and full acceptance in different higher education systems provided all necessary academic criteria are met;
4. Underlines that the current situation, in which persistent systemic issues make it difficult for many students and young professionals from the Eastern partners to have their diplomas or professional qualifications automatically recognised in the EU, creates a significant barrier to the free movement of professionals and the development of good relations between the two sides;
5. Notes that the socioeconomic development of the EaP countries can be greatly enhanced by the availability of graduates, professionals and entrepreneurs who have acquired new experiences in foreign environments, which, in turn, allows the emergence of new ideas and processes and contributes to the spread of values and know-how, strengthens local universities, attracts the trust of foreign investors and helps prevent stagnation;
6. Believes there is a strong need to reverse the 'brain-drain' trend of talented youth from the EaP region to leave for the West, thus depriving their countries of much-needed expertise for improvements in their societies and sustainable development;

7. Underlines the need for all parties involved in the Eastern Partnership to ensure, in both legislation and practice, full access to higher education for all, with no discrimination on grounds of gender, religion, ethnicity or political views; notes that universities are universally recognised as places of learning and free speech and that fostering academic excellence is best served by protecting students from all forms of persecution or harassment;
8. Considers that the Commission should, as a matter of priority, work with the relevant academic, administrative and governmental authorities and student organisations or representatives in order to highlight the concerns of students and professionals from the EaP countries so as to identify specific issues affecting the region and find solutions;
9. Stresses that EaP governments need to intensify their efforts to introduce appropriate systems of quality control and assurance, working alongside universities and national authorities responsible for specific regulated professions, in order to offer their nationals suitable opportunities to enrich their studies and experience, also in the EU;
10. Notes with concern that there are still persistent gender imbalances in some fields of training in the EaP countries, and considers that equal access to all levels for both genders, and in particular to tertiary education, needs to be actively promoted and stimulated by targeted scholarships enhancing positive discrimination;
11. Stresses that now that visa liberalisation has been achieved for all EaP countries other than Belarus, more students from the region are now interested in furthering their studies in the EU; urges the EU institutions, therefore, to reinforce negotiations with Belarus on visa liberalisation with a view to fostering student mobility between the EU and all the EaP countries without exception;
12. Stresses that the independence of universities and their complete separation from state and politics are primary and vital conditions for a performing and EU-compatible education system; stresses that financing universities on a fair basis is a necessary step in this direction and should have nothing to do with the state or politics, but, rather, should be linked to performance, number of students and academic results;
13. Calls on universities in the EaP countries to adapt their educational offer to the needs of the labour market;
14. Encourages universities in both the EU and the EaP countries to actively seek mutual collaboration, exchange experience, and set up permanent dialogue mechanisms in order to better generate change in the latter;
15. Acknowledges the important role of the ENIC/NARIC network in the various aspects of academic recognition and recognition for regulated and unregulated professions, and considers it necessary to enhance the further development of this network, including developing the functioning and role of national centres in the EaP countries;

University diplomas in the framework of the Bologna Process

16. Welcomes the fact that all the EaP countries are members of the EHEA and that, despite various differences in implementation of the Bologna Process principles, they are all striving to reach the same standards in higher education as are present in the rest of the EU (the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA-ESG)), and that automatic and immediate recognition for all higher learning diplomas should be the main goal across the whole area;
17. Welcomes the decision of the 2015 Ministerial Conference on the accession of Belarus to the EHEA, seeing in this development a proof of the inclusiveness of the Bologna process; encourages Belarus to make its higher education system and practice compatible with those of other EHEA countries;
18. Considers that the tools of the Bologna Process, in particular the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), are currently being correctly implemented by the EaP countries in terms of their respective National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and National Credit Transferable System (NCTSs), harmonised with Bologna tools, and that, while there is still room for improvement, the criteria to be recognised by the EU counterpart authorities within the European Area of Recognition (EAR) for the automatic recognition of university diplomas should lead to an accelerated and increased rate of diploma recognition of students from EaP countries;

19. Underlines the need to enhance cooperation between educational institutions in the EU and the EaP countries in order to exchange experience, since in the majority of countries the recognition of foreign diplomas for academic purposes is carried out by those institutions;
20. Acknowledges that levels of state expenditure on higher education vary widely among the EaP countries, as is also the case among EU Member States themselves; nonetheless deplores the fact that in many EaP countries and neighbouring EU Member States the percentage of GDP spent on tertiary education is among the lowest in the EHEA, thus making adequate development in the field difficult or impossible;
21. Notes that the Bologna three-cycle structure for higher education (BA, MA and PhD), while not implemented identically all across the whole of the EHEA, is mostly respected in the EaP countries, but with the problem that there is a distinct lack of adequate numbers of doctoral schools or available funding for students in those countries, which is the main reason why most potential candidates seek to pursue doctoral degrees elsewhere;
22. Stresses that as higher education institutions themselves are largely the main responsible bodies for quality control criteria and diploma issuing procedures respecting the principles of Bologna Process and the Lisbon Recognition Convention, there is a strong need for the development of more autonomous and stronger higher education institutions in the EaP countries, and calls on the Commission and the EEAS to examine means of promoting this development together with national authorities;
23. Urges the governments and parliaments of both the EaP countries and the EU Member States to work to better enforce in national legislation the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention regarding both the quality of diplomas issued in the national context and the facilitation of the automatic recognition of foreign qualifications;
24. Points out that the existence of 'diploma mills' and 'accreditation mills' and the lack of comparable, compatible and coherent national systems as regards the implementation of the Bologna-EHEA tools remain the main reasons preventing many bodies in the EU from being able to automatically recognise qualifications awarded in the EaP countries;
25. Calls on governments on both sides to step up their efforts to ensure trust in the higher education system, in particular by ensuring a level playing field for admissions and examinations and access to resources and facilities, as well as equal rights for scholarships and, most importantly, ensuring that diplomas are issued only to students who comply with all the requirements and EQF learning outcomes necessary for the qualification concerned;
26. Strongly calls on the EU bodies, but also on universities, to examine and identify meaningful ways of supporting EaP students by increasing the number and visibility of academic scholarships targeted on students in the EaP countries, using the various tools of the Union but also encouraging national governments, foundations and NGOs to address the needs of students from EaP countries who may in many cases come from underprivileged economic backgrounds and, despite high academic performance, find it financially difficult to study in the EU;
27. Welcomes the active participation of the Eastern partners in Erasmus+ and the fact that their budget absorption capacity is very good; regrets, therefore, that the funding available for the EaP countries under these programmes for 2014-2020 has remained roughly equivalent to that of the previous financial period;
28. Considers it highly important for the objective of fostering more cooperation to bolster the financial resources available to EU scholarship programmes such as Erasmus+, specifically targeting EaP students and creating a specific chapter within EU financing schemes for this region, which is of the utmost strategic and cultural importance for the Union;

Professional qualifications and work experience

29. Considers that the mutual recognition of professional qualifications is necessary for ensuring several critical steps for the development of both sides in the Eastern Partnership project, including improving temporary mobility for the purpose of job specialisation and thus opening up opportunities for nationals of EaP countries to acquire new skills which can be used for improving their professional output back home but also to fill vital gaps in the workforces on both sides;

30. Notes that while professional qualifications are strongly related to the improvement of recognition of diplomas within the Bologna Process, there is no specific document similar to Directive 2013/55/EU regulating the issue within the EU, the European Economic Area and Switzerland which would currently include the EaP countries; encourages, therefore, new initiatives aiming at giving a truly continental dimension to this priority;
 31. Calls on the Commission and the EEAS to examine, together with the EaP governments, the possibility of creating a new framework for the European Neighbourhood in order to extend the European Professional Card (EPC) system to these partners; would hope that this tool would lead to renewed and more dynamic professional mobility in Europe and its neighbourhood and help fill capability gaps in various professions across the board, with mutually beneficial effects for all sides;
 32. Stresses that all cooperation on the mutual recognition of professional qualifications should be aimed at benefiting the ability of professionals from both sides to enhance their skills, practice and mobility without endangering workforce availability in the EaP countries or creating any imbalances within the EU;
 33. Calls for the development of a united approach in carrying out recognition procedures for professional qualifications for all, and encourages the EaP governments to develop and implement reliable and transparent procedures for the recognition of professional qualifications, first of all for the regulated professions;
 34. Considers the mutual recognition of work experience of skilled workers to be a vital component in the development of a dynamic job market in Europe, and that basic criteria should be established that can be shared between Member States and other partners in order to record and quantify meaningful work experience of workers,
 35. Considers that, besides employing criteria related to quality, transparency and integrity, EU Member States and EaP countries should ensure that national authorities dealing with professional qualifications and any associations and employers' federations dealing with work experience recognition do their utmost to avoid all forms of discrimination on any grounds (gender, religion, ethnicity or country of origin, including any of the EaP states);
 36. Instructs its Co-Presidents to forward this resolution to the President of the European Parliament, the Council, the Commission, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission, the EEAS, and the governments and parliaments of the EU Member States and of the countries of the Eastern Partnership.
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