



# **Study on Obstacles to Recognition of Skills and Qualifications**

Executive summary

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This study has reviewed a wide range of empirical evidence from across the European Union in order to clarify the practical obstacles to the recognition of skills and qualifications and their underlying causes, and explore existing and potential solutions at both EU and national level to ensure a fair, efficient and effective recognition of skills and qualifications. The study methodology was designed specifically to capture the perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders – including employers in non-regulated professions, education and training providers outside formal higher education, intermediary organisations and individuals – through a combination of desk research, interviews, surveys, focus groups and input from high-level mobility experts at both EU level and in the 13 countries selected for in-depth review: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden and the UK.

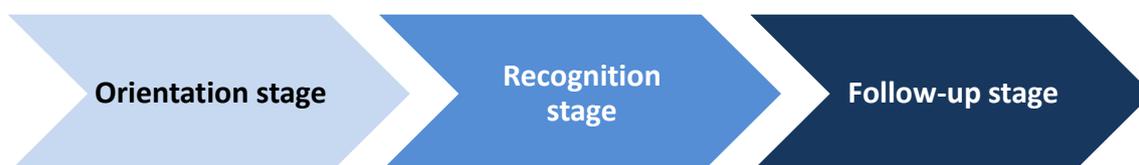
### **Mobility and recognition**

Recognition of skills and qualifications is an important tool to facilitate mobility across a range of dimensions, by nationals, EU mobile citizens and third country migrants alike. For this study, the focus lies on: i) mobility between different levels and types of education; ii) mobility between education and employment (and vice versa); and, iii) mobility within employment, including between economic sectors. Recognition issues in these different forms of mobility concern a range of target groups, some of which are also geographically mobile (EU and third country nationals). The temporary and permanent dimensions of mobility are cross-cutting.

The recognition of skills and qualifications can take place in a variety of ways (i.e. formal and de facto), for a variety of purposes (i.e. academic, professional or intrinsic motivations), and is undertaken by a variety of stakeholders, not being the preserve of public authorities alone. Such recognition is essential to ensure speedy and quality access to the market for new entrants, raise existing skill levels of job seekers, help combat unemployment, allocate skills resources efficiently, strengthen the internal market and boost regional economic and social performance.

An individual seeking mobility embarks on a 'journey to recognition' - including an orientation stage prior to entering the recognition process, the recognition process itself, and a follow-up stage – as illustrated in Figure 1 below:

**Figure 1 - The journey to recognition**



*Source: Own illustration*

A range of EU tools and frameworks, mostly focusing on transparency, exists to facilitate cross-country and within-country recognition of skills and qualifications and hence mobility of learners and workers in the EU.

## **Recognition practices across the EU**

*Drivers* identified at both national and EU level which stimulate debate on recognition at national level include in particular skills mismatches/shortages and migration, a focus which has grown recently due to the refugee crisis. Other drivers at national level include the impetus provided by the introduction of EU policy and tools in relation to transparency and recognition, concerns over an ageing workforce and the need to address the (lack of) permeability between vocational training and higher education.

The nature and extent of *legislation* related to recognition varies substantially across the EU. In general, the legal framework covering recognition is formed by a variety of laws governing the basic set-up in education and training, regulated professions and the recognition of foreign qualifications, along with strategies related to skills, employment, competitiveness and, to a lesser degree, migration. These provisions can form a complex picture of overlapping laws and strategies, combined with national provisions for implementing EU measures, sometimes leading to weak national coordination and recognition procedures which are not easily comprehensible. Within the legal frameworks, NQFs – linked to the EQF - are generally used to improve the transparency and labour market relevance of qualifications, rather than for any formal recognition purpose.

*Key actors* involved in the development and implementation of recognition procedures at national level include: public authorities (e.g. ministries for education and/or immigration, authorities responsible for qualifications or quality in education/training, ENIC-NARIC centres), public employment services (PES), specific bodies for the recognition of skills and qualifications, education and training providers, and representatives of the private sector (e.g. Chambers of Commerce/Crafts, sectoral bodies).

In terms of recognition practices by *type of mobility*, it was clear that formal recognition plays a dominant role in transitions between different levels and types of initial/compulsory education and training. Transitions within forms and levels of academic education tend to be more formally regulated and to benefit more from recognition frameworks (e.g. NQFs), overarching international conventions (e.g. the Lisbon Recognition Convention) and closer, more active international/EU cooperation (e.g. between ENIC-NARICs or via EU-led Peer Learning Activities (PLAs)). However, the recognition picture becomes more complex in respect of mobility between compulsory education and subsequent stages, with clear differences between transitions into higher education and into vocational education and training. Systems to validate non-formal and informal learning can also have an important role to play in accessing education and training after the initial phase.

As regards mobility between education/training and employment (including transitions in and out of lifelong learning), a key aspect is the extent to which occupations are regulated: regulated professions are much more likely to make use of formal recognition procedures than non-regulated professions. There is however more of a continuum between regulated and non-regulated professions than a simple dichotomy when it comes to recognition; the 'gap' between regulated and non-regulated professions is often filled by a variety of voluntary measures (e.g. the Construction Skills Certification Scheme in UK and IE).

Comparatively little information is available regarding mobility between economic sectors. Recognition is predominantly based on individual qualifications and/or

occupations and is not sector-specific; as such, recognition between different economic sectors is automatic provided appropriate qualifications are held. Where people lack appropriate qualifications, they may experience difficulties in trying to persuade employers that the skills they have are transferable between sectors.

EU tools support in particular the transparency of skills and qualifications. However, a range of reviews and evaluations have identified a number of difficulties in their implementation including: slow implementation with weak coherence in Member States, variability and weak coordination across Europe, weak engagement of social partners and civil society, inability/lack of clarity regarding the recording of skills outside formal education, lack of integration of recognition tools and the complexity of some tools. The country research confirmed that certain tools are better established (e.g. EQF, ECTS) than others (e.g. ECVET). Many EU tools are not widely used, especially by employers, mostly due to lack of awareness or because of their complexity.

### **Obstacles to recognition**

In each stage of the journey to recognition it has been possible to identify a number of different types of obstacle, supported by examples from the Member States examined. In total, 34 obstacles to recognition have been identified across the different stages of the journey to recognition, described together with an analysis of the context where each obstacle is found, including underlying causes.

*Obstacles prior to entering recognition processes* include a number of hurdles related to awareness, information and guidance issues, as well as the difficulty stakeholders have in understanding qualifications and, more broadly, education and training systems. There are also important obstacles related to deficiencies in current practices and, related to this, what we have termed 'systemic structural issues', obstacles located in the variety and complexities that exist in education, training and employment systems and the recognition practices that have – and continue to – come into existence within these systems. Finally, there are important obstacles related to how people access recognition systems, including the need for language skills, and the costs involved in seeking and providing recognition services.

*During the recognition process*, systemic structural issues and shortcomings in current practices are important once again, as is the issue of how fairly recognition practices are applied. Stakeholders can face obstacles related to resources and their capability to understand foreign qualifications, whilst individuals may face the problem that they lack proof of previous education/employment.

Obstacles likely to be encountered during the *final phase of the recognition journey* are fewer in number than in the previous phases. Nonetheless obstacles such as the lack of recognition of qualifications from certain institutions and the complexity of recognition procedures that involve only partial recognition can be significant at the individual level. More generally, countries lack systems to gather evidence about the effectiveness of recognition which is a hindrance to improvement.

Many of the obstacles to recognition identified concern several types of mobility and several target groups. Although a quantitative analysis of the prevalence of obstacles was not possible, it was observed that more obstacles – and obstacles which are more complex to address - tend to be encountered for certain forms of mobility (e.g. between academic and vocational forms of learning, seeking recognition of

informal/non-formal learning to re-enter education after leaving compulsory education) and for certain target groups (e.g. third country nationals with qualifications or skills obtained in third countries, the low-skilled/early school leavers, refugees with no documentary proof of skills and qualifications).

### **Solutions for overcoming obstacles to recognition**

In order to overcome the obstacles to recognition, the research at country level identified a number of existing solutions, as well as proposals for potential future solutions. In total, 24 different types of solution are presented in the study, addressing the typology of obstacles presented above, supported by a number of in-depth illustrative examples and shorter examples, with a discussion on the context and feasibility of each.

Key solutions which can help to overcome obstacles *prior to entering a recognition process* include for example providing 'one-stop shops' for advice, information and guidance, developing existing information portals and databases of recognition practices, promoting and streamlining existing tools, awareness-raising and networking for employers, reducing costs for recognition, and establishing an entitlement to recognition.

*During the recognition process*, solutions include provision of training for staff involved in recognition processes, improving resources for intermediaries, an improvement in collaboration and co-operation between relevant institutions involved in recognition processes within countries and the development of a framework, system and process for the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences for all. The principal solution which can be implemented in the *follow-up stage after partial or complete recognition* is the implementation of a follow-up monitoring system which would allow a more rigorous assessment of the effectiveness of procedures and build an evidence base for the benefits of recognition.

The solutions identified cover almost all obstacles identified in the study, and many offer ways to overcome several obstacles at once; for example, the 'one-stop shops' for information and guidance address 9 obstacles, and the promotion of existing tools and improvement of existing EU portals can help to overcome 6 obstacles each. Similarly, several solutions have sometimes been identified for specific obstacles: 7 solutions for example contribute to tackling the obstacle of 'understanding foreign qualifications', 6 solutions can help overcome the 'increasing variety, complexity and diversity of recognition practices themselves' and 5 solutions address the 'limited and unclear opportunities for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning'. Solutions were only not identified through the research for two obstacles: the 'lack of recognition of qualifications issued by certain education/training institutions' and the 'complex (partial-) recognition notifications'.

Several of the solutions identified are already being wholly or partially implemented in specific localities, by specific organisations, for specific target groups or within specific Member States, but have the potential for transferability to other Member States, other target groups and/or other types of organisations. Other proposed solutions have emerged from dialogue with key stakeholders, including individuals affected by recognition issues, as being options to consider for future action. The feasibility of different solutions is considered in each case, and varies widely in terms of ease of implementation, need for stakeholder buy-in and cost. Our study recommendations, set out below, seek to set out the key priorities which emerge from the study in terms

of intervention areas in order to tackle some of the main obstacles to recognition, across all types of mobility and for the different types of stakeholder.

### **Recommendations**

In order to effectively tackle some of the obstacles to the fair, efficient and effective recognition of skills and qualifications, the study has identified a number of recommendations for policymakers at EU and national/regional level as well as for practitioners implementing policies on the ground, which have been refined and validated by our panel of high-level experts in recognition. These recommendations are summarised below.

- EU policymakers should carry out more widespread awareness-raising on existing EU tools in order to explain their role and encourage their use in support of recognition practices.
- EU policymakers should encourage and support national and regional stakeholders to apply and use the EQF (European Qualifications Framework), including through targeted awareness-raising activities. Although this tool has always been intended as a tool for transparency rather than for formal recognition purposes, it can play a valuable role in particular in de facto recognition.
- EU policymakers should ensure active monitoring of the setting-up of arrangements and implementation at Member State level of the recommendations on validation of informal and non-formal learning. Successful examples of implementation on the ground should be promoted and disseminated widely.
- EU policymakers should simplify and seek greater synergies between tools for both recognition and transparency in order to promote their usefulness and communicability to national and regional stakeholders, e.g. closer alignment between ECTS and ECVET. They should also explore the possibility of using the experience of existing successful mechanisms, such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention, to create tools and mechanisms in other fields (e.g. VET).
- EU policymakers should create a single EU web portal to centralise information on recognition policies, practices and decisions across the EU and in EEA countries. The portal would primarily be a resource for intermediaries, however would also be a valuable source of information for individuals potentially seeking mobility and for employers and education/training bodies.
- National policymakers should create a web platform in each Member State, linked into the EU web portal (see above), providing precise information for individuals on the requirements and processes for recognition for different professions/sectors or education/training purposes, building – where relevant – on existing resources (e.g. ENIC-NARIC websites).
- All relevant actors (both policymakers and practitioners), at all levels, should ensure much greater provision of information, advice and guidance (IAG). This would support both individuals and organisational end-users (employers and education/training organisations), as well as even intermediaries, in successfully negotiating recognition procedures from the very start of the journey (i.e. seeking information on the potential need for recognition) right

through to successful completion (i.e. gaining recognition and using it for the intended purpose).

- All relevant actors (both policymakers and practitioners), at all levels, should explore and identify effective mechanisms for raising awareness on the need for (or not) and benefits of recognition, in particular for employers, individuals and Member States.
- Different stakeholders in the field of recognition, across different Member States and different types of organisations (e.g. employers and education/training organisations) need to be able to speak to each in a common language in order for recognition to work effectively. Networks – whether virtual or involving face-to-face meetings - can be an effective means of promoting both intra- or inter-organisational communication. A single glossary on 'recognition' may also support communication, with appropriate translations/explanations of terms in different languages.
- All relevant actors (both policymakers and practitioners), at all levels, need to ensure that specific, enhanced support is provided for vulnerable groups seeking recognition of skills and/or qualifications, e.g. refugees, migrants with limited resources, people with a low level of education, people experiencing poverty and the long-term unemployed.

Finally, it is important to be mindful of the fact that, when providing support and tools at EU level, each Member State is at a different stage of a continuing development process in relation to recognition. As such, different solutions may be more appropriate, within a common overall framework and overarching goals, for different Member States at any given time. A range of solutions and support should therefore be available to cater for the differing levels of development in relation to recognition practices and policies. Peer to peer learning can also be an effective tool in helping Member States on a less advanced level in the development process to learn from those who have progressed further.

This study has been an initial fact-finding and exploratory exercise with a very broad scope in terms of purposes of recognition, target groups (a range of individuals and organisations) and types of mobility. In order to further elucidate the obstacles and solutions, further and more targeted research would be of benefit for example on: identifying the obstacles and solutions for specific target groups or types of mobility; approaches to support the most vulnerable groups, including refugees; further simplification/harmonisation and further development of EU tools; and, scoping the potential content and feasibility of future web-based portals on recognition practices.

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