



**Վ. ԲՐՅՈՒՍՈՎԻ ԱՆՎԱՆ ՊԵՏԱԿԱՆ
ՀԱՄԱԼՍԱՐԱՆ
ГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫЙ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ
ИМЕНИ В. БРЮСОВА
BRUSOV STATE UNIVERSITY**

**ԲԱՆԲԵՐ
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ВЕСТНИК ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОГО УНИВЕРСИТЕТА ИМЕНИ
В. БРЮСОВА
BULLETIN OF BRUSOV STATE UNIVERSITY**

**ՄԱՆԿԱՎԱՐԺՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ ԵՎ ՀԱՍԱՐԱԿԱԿԱՆ
ԳԻՏՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐ**

ПЕДАГОГИКА И СОЦИАЛЬНЫЕ НАУКИ

PEDAGOGY AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

2 (61)

**Վ. ԲՐՅՈՒՍՈՎԻ ԱՆՎԱՆ ՊԵՏԱԿԱՆ ՀԱՄԱԼՍԱՐԱՆԻ
«ԼԻՆԳՎԱ» ՀՐԱՏԱՐԱԿՉՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ**

ԵՐԵՎԱՆ - 2022

ՀՏԴ 378 (479.25)

DOI: 10.51307/182931072015233260-22.61-25

RECOGNITION OF FOREIGN QUALIFICATIONS PERFORMED BY HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS OF ARMENIA: CHALLENGES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to foster the recognition of foreign qualifications and credit mobility performed by the higher education institutions of Armenia to contribute to the decrease of the challenges faced by the students and enhance the internationalization of the higher education institutions.

The conclusions and recommendations drawn based on the results of the study aim at improving the process of institutional recognition in the Republic of Armenia (RA) and making it in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

Keywords: *European Higher Education Area (EHEA), recognition, higher education institution, internationalization, Lisbon Recognition Convention*

Introduction. With the establishment of the European Higher Education Area in 2010 as the continuation of the Bologna Process, the Minister of Higher Education of the EHEA agreed to fully implement the policy reforms in the member countries and enhance, among other commitments, the mutual recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad completed at other universities to facilitate student and staff mobility.

Thus, in Yerevan Communiqué 2015 the Ministers stated that “Thanks to the Bologna reforms, progress has been made in enabling students and graduates to move within the EHEA with recognition of their qualifications and periods of study...”, meanwhile with the commitment “...to review national legislations with a view to fully complying with the Lisbon Recognition Convention”. Moreover, in Paris Communiqué 2018 with the recognition of the

progress made in the implementation of the agreed commitments, the Ministers highlighted that “In order to further develop mobility and recognition across the EHEA, we will work to ensure that comparable higher education qualifications obtained in one EHEA country are automatically recognised on the same basis in the others, for the purpose of accessing further studies and the labour market”.

The promotion of the international mobility and overcoming obstacles regarding its implementation specifically taking into account the global crises and refugee flows are highlighted by the European Student Union’s paper on “Bologna Process Commitments: a way forward” (ESU 2022) as well as the call to the academic community to work together and invest in international mobility to achieve global unity.

Joining the Bologna reforms in 2005 enabled the Armenian higher education institutions to implement the EHEA reforms and foster inter-institutional cooperation and actively participate in international credit mobility programs especially in recent years, with a specific focus on Erasmus+ international credits mobility programs. With the increase of student and staff mobility, the challenges in the process of the recognition of qualifications and short-term studies as well as credit mobility periods have also increased thus creating a need for the review and updating of the existing policies and procedures in the Armenian higher education institutions.

As the prerequisite of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, in 2005 the Armenian National Information Center for Academic Recognition and Mobility (ArmENIC) was established with the mission to ensure fair and transparent evaluation and recognition of foreign qualifications based on the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and national legislation. With a focus on fostering the internationalization of the Armenian higher education institutions, the Center provides reliable information and advice for the recognition procedures.

For revealing the compliance of the national legislation and institutional regulations with the Lisbon Recognition Convention as well as being a member of the ENIC-NARIC Networks, ArmENIC conducted a study in 2008 and concluded that the developments in the field of recognition are quite slow, which greatly impairs the internationalization and mobility of higher education in the Republic of Armenia. Moreover, the study revealed that the higher education institutions did not have institutional recognition procedures, and this function was

performed by the Ministry of Education and Science of Armenia. Thus, the need for better recognition regulations was obvious.

The current study was conducted more than a decade after the previous one to foster the recognition of foreign credentials and credit mobility carried out by the Armenian higher education institutions in order to reduce the problems experienced by students and increase the internationalization. Moreover, the recommendations and conclusions of the study aim to improve the RA's institutional recognition procedures by making them in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

Methodology. For the purpose of the study, a questionnaire has been developed and sent electronically to 47 higher education institutions of the RA. The responses have been received from only 19 higher education institutions. However, it should be noted that all the major higher education institutions in Armenia performing student mobility programs and admitting international applicants have responded to the questionnaire. Some of the higher education institutions have not answered all the questions. The analysis is based on the responses.

The questionnaire has been focused on the following main sections:

- The process of the recognition of foreign qualifications in the higher education institutions and the main obstacles and concerns;
- International credit mobility, credit transfer and recognition;
- Lisbon Recognition Convention, automatic recognition and digital qualifications;
- The inclusion of information on the recognition of foreign qualifications in the admission requirements.

The process of the recognition of foreign qualifications in the higher education institutions: main obstacles and concerns. From the analysis of the responses provided by the higher education institutions, it is obvious that different subdivisions are responsible for recognition in the Armenian higher education institutions, which is in line with international experience. Recognition of education gained as a result of credit mobility is usually performed by the faculties and departments of the higher education institutions. However, in case of foreign qualifications, the situation has remained unchanged, and the decisions of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports serve as a basis for the higher education institutions.

Regarding the cooperation with ArmENIC in terms of fair and transparent recognition, the majority of the higher education institutions have responded that it is only in certain cases that they apply to ArmENIC for additional information, and sometimes they direct the applicant to ArmENIC. However, admission deadlines can become a serious issue in such cases. ArmENIC has good experience with some higher education institutions when the applicants are informed that depending on the response provided by ArmENIC, the higher education institutions will make their final decision.

On the other hand, according to the N-700-N Decision of the RA Government of April 28, 2011, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports conducts an examination and verification of the documents of foreigners for admission to higher education institutions in the RA. In this regard, there are some concerns. The international experience shows that admission to higher education institutions and recognition of foreign qualifications to continue education are the responsibility of the higher education institutions, based on the fundamental principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Undoubtedly, the higher education institutions should be in direct contact with the applicant and have the right to make the final decision on the foreign qualification based on the advice provided by the National Information Center. Such cooperation between higher education institutions and the National Information Center provides a basis for making reliable and trustworthy decisions on the recognition of foreign qualifications. Moreover, knowledge about the differences between national education systems is important in the field of recognition. Assessment and recognition of a foreign qualification belonging to another national system imply its comparison with a similar national qualification, for which it is necessary to take into account the educational diversity and complexity. That is why the legislation of most European countries stipulates the mandatory requirement of a "comparability certificate" issued by the National Information Center.

Thus, the N-700-N Decision of the RA Government of April 28, 2011, contradicts the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention as well as the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Armenian higher education institutions admit applicants "automatically" based on the decisions of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports. However, when it turns

out that the higher education institution has conducted the admission process based on a wrong decision, it is not clear who is responsible for that.

Given that fair and transparent recognition is a prerequisite for mobility, higher education institutions need to develop procedures for recognizing foreign qualifications that are in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and national law. A guide for higher education institutions can be the European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions (EAR, Third edition 2020) for universities.

As for the basis for the decision-making, it should be noted that each qualification is characterized by five elements: level, load, quality, direction and learning outcomes. When assessing a qualification, it is necessary to take into account all five elements of it, combining a foreign qualification with similar national qualification. If there are no significant differences between the two qualifications, the qualification is recognized for continuing education. Often things are not so obvious and there is a need for more in-depth study to understand the true value of the foreign qualification.

Regarding the main concerns and obstacles in the process of recognition of foreign qualifications, the higher education institutions noted the lack of agreements on the recognition of diplomas between countries, the lack of information, insufficient level of international cooperation, and lack of necessary resources. The differences that exist between the learning outcomes in different countries and their structural content, as well as the difference between the titles of the credits, the names of the subjects, and the terminological differences were also stressed.

It should be noted that the world of education is diverse, and this diversity is one of the possible impetus for the internationalization of modern higher education. On the other hand, the cornerstone of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and recognition itself is the acceptance of these differences. Differences between education systems, educational programs, elements, learning outcomes, credit and knowledge assessment systems can certainly complicate the transition from one education system to another, but they can never make that transition impossible. Existing differences need to be carefully analyzed.

International credit mobility, credit transfer and recognition. In 2020 the EHEA Ministers restated the importance of physical mobility in the Rome Communiqué by highlighting that “Direct contacts and synergies among our

diverse cultures and higher education systems through mobility of staff and students contribute to the excellence and relevance of higher education in the EHEA, making it attractive and competitive on the global scale”. In the meantime, it was stressed that “Notwithstanding the current difficulties related to the COVID-19 pandemic, we reaffirm our target that at least 20% of those graduating in the EHEA should have experienced a study or training period abroad, and further commit to enabling all learners to acquire international and intercultural competences through internationalisation of the curricula or participation in innovative international environments in their home institutions, and to experience some form of mobility, whether in physical, digitally enhanced (virtual) or blended formats”.

It should be noted that in recent years the Armenian higher education institutions have become more active in participating in various mobility programs. According to the statistics of the National Erasmus+ Office in Armenia, the number of international credit mobility participants from Armenian higher education institutions has grown thus increasing the recognition cases of the short-term study periods of the participants spent abroad in the higher education institutions.

When it comes to the description of the credit transfer and recognition process carried out by the Armenian higher education institutions, current problems and obstacles, as well as the use of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System Guide (ECTS Guide 2015) by higher education institutions it should be taken into account that given the diversity of educational programs, it is unlikely that the credits and learning outcomes of two different programs will be the same, especially if they are acquired in different educational contexts (e.g. vocational education, training). That is why it is important that the recognition process is based on the compatibility of the learning outcomes and not on the equivalency of the course content.

Describing the process of credit transfer and recognition, the Armenian higher education institutions noted that they carry it out according to (I) the procedures on the recognition of credit mobility results approved by their higher education institutions, (II) mobility agreements signed between the student, sending and receiving higher education institutions and (III) inter-institutional agreements and grades, (IV) European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, (V) advisory statement given by ArmENIC. Most higher education institutions use

the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System Guide for the recognition of credit mobility.

As for the problems and obstacles in the process of credit transfer and recognition, the Armenian higher education institutions stressed the difference between credit systems in sending and receiving institutions, lack of knowledge about the assessment systems, comparative scales for calculating grades, structural and substantive differences in learning outcomes, inconsistency of the foreign language courses offered by the host university, the lack of mobility windows as well as insufficient knowledge of a foreign language. The question of significant differences and how to determine if the difference is significant has been highlighted by the higher education institutions as well.

The ECTS Users' Guide 2015 states that "Mobile students have the right to fair treatment and to transparency of their grades when credits are transferred from one institution to another, as access to further studies, grants or other benefits may depend on their level of performance. Transparency of performance levels is equally important for graduates applying for a job in their own or in another country" and also adds that "All credits gained during the period of study abroad or during the virtual mobility – as agreed in the Learning Agreement and confirmed by the Transcript of Records – should be transferred without delay and counted towards the student's degree without any additional work by or assessment of the student".

Thus, the differences in the courses cannot be used as a basis for recognition. It is important to focus on learning outcomes by avoiding direct course comparisons, as differences in learning outcomes between the two programs do not necessarily have to be significant. The content of learning outcomes can be presented in different ways, so when interpreting them, the descriptors of the given level within the national qualifications framework should always be taken into account.

When it comes to credit recognition, in this case, the diversity of the systems must be taken into account. In all cases, credit systems are used to measure a student's learning load in hours, varying in conversion ratio. If the credit system used in a foreign education program differs from the credit system of the host country or individual university, the principles of the foreign credit system should be understood first, such as the minimum number of credits required to complete the program. Only then can the credits of a foreign

education program be compared to the national credit system or converted if necessary. At the same time, it is necessary to check whether the accumulated credits are considered a mandatory part of the given educational program.

Lisbon recognition convention, automatic recognition and digital qualifications. The Lisbon Recognition Convention is a fundamental international treaty in the European region, setting out the basic principles for the recognition of foreign qualifications. Parties to the Convention and national competent authorities undertake to fulfill their obligations to the other Parties to the treaty. The competent authorities include higher education institutions, which make the final decision on academic recognition and are therefore obliged to follow the principles set out in the Convention. On the other hand, taking into account the current developments in the internationalization and mobility of higher education, the need for institutional recognition procedures is especially emphasized, which will stimulate informed decision-making by the higher education institutions.

The analysis of the responses related to the awareness of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and its principles shows that the majority of the higher education institutions (88%) are informed of them. However, the European Recognition Manual for higher education institutions developed by the ENIC-NARIC Networks, which is intended for the higher education institutions and explains step by step how to apply the basic principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, is familiar to only 47% of the higher education institutions. This level of awareness shows that the procedures used in the higher education institutions do not generally conform to the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and are not based on international experience.

According to the definition of the Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition “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 the labour market or a programme of further study in the next level in any other EHEA-country (access)”. However, automatic recognition implies a number of steps that will make it possible for higher education institutions to have more transparent, fast and fair recognition processes.

Most Armenian higher education institutions define automatic recognition as the recognition of the level of education of a foreign qualification, which is in line with the definition used by the international academic community. Some

higher education institutions have inter-institutional automatic recognition agreements.

Regarding the digital qualifications, on the one hand, the rapid developments of the technologies can speed up the recognition process in terms of time spent, consistency, and decision-making, on the other hand, there can be serious challenges for fraud prevention and transparency.

The responses provided by the Armenian higher education institutions participating in the study state that the latter ones have not yet come across such qualifications during their activities.

The inclusion of information on the recognition of foreign qualifications in the admission requirements. The Lisbon Recognition Convention's Article III.4 states that "Each Party shall ensure, in order to facilitate the recognition of qualifications, that adequate and clear information on its education system is provided". Thus, the inclusion of information on the recognition of foreign qualifications in the admission requirements is crucial both for the applicant and a higher education institution. This will allow higher education institutions and applicants not to waste time and submit a complete set of required documents on time. Moreover, the provision of reliable information on the national education system is important as it greatly contributes to mobility and internationalization.

In fact, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports initiates the application call and is responsible for the admission of foreigners in the Republic of Armenia and carries out the eligibility examination of the documents submitted by the applicants. The higher education institutions receive the application packages from the Ministry. However, both the official websites of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports and the higher education institutions do not have the necessary information on the recognition of foreign qualifications.

Conclusion and recommendations. The European Higher Education Area has been and continues to be the mainstay of higher education reforms in Europe for the past two decades. Despite the current challenges, the latest report on the implementation of the Bologna Process shows that the process is, without a doubt, a "success story" of European cooperation. It has changed and continues to shape the face of higher education in Europe. The EHEA structural reforms are the strongest part of the process, and their further proper implementation is crucial.

To promote the study and work-related mobility a fair recognition of the qualifications is necessary. Therefore, the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, as well as the development and self-certification of national qualifications frameworks, and quality assurance following the EHEA Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) 2015, will remain at the heart of the process. Of course, the process will develop further policies to meet the new challenges. One of the best examples is the issue of the recognition of the refugees' qualifications even in cases when the documents on education are incomplete or completely absent. Knowledge of the differences between existing national education systems is important in the area of recognition.

On the other hand, the RA Government 28.04.2011 Decision N-700-N, which regulates the admission of foreigners to higher education institutions in the Republic of Armenia, contradicts the Lisbon Recognition Convention, as well as the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention deals exclusively with the origin of qualifications, and the decision of the Government of the Republic of Armenia is based entirely on the nationality of the individual.

In the modern era, it is especially important to provide reliable information on national education systems, which greatly contributes to mobility and internationalization. Individuals with foreign qualifications may be informed in advance about recognition procedures and their needs.

Hence, based on the main conclusions of the research, the following recommendations have been developed for fostering mobility and internationalization in higher education institutions in Armenia:

- To separate the responsibilities of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports and higher education institutions based on the basic principles of university autonomy and academic freedom;
- To develop institutional procedures for the recognition of foreign qualifications per the main principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention based on the learning outcomes;
- To review the procedures for admission of foreigners to higher education institutions of the RA following the basic principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention;

- To review quality assurance criteria and procedures, including the requirement to assess institutional recognition procedures;
- To include in the university admission requirements the mandatory requirement of the recognition statement.

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ԱՆԻ ՀՈՎՀԱՆՆԻՍՅԱՆ, ԳԱՅԱՆԵ ՀԱՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՅԱՆ - ՀՀ ԲՈՒՀԵՐԻ ԿՈՂՄԻՑ ԻՐԱԿԱՆԱՑՎՈՂ ՕՏԱՐԵՐԿՐՅԱ ՈՐԱԿԱՎՈՐՈՒՄՆԵՐԻ ՃԱՆԱԶՈՒՄԸ. ՄԻՋԱԶԳԱՅԻՆ ՈՒՍԱՆՈՂՆԵՐԻ ՇԱՐԺՈՒՆՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՄԱՐՏԱՀՐԱՎԵՐՆԵՐԸ

Հիմնաբառեր՝ Եվրոպական բարձրագույն կրթության տարածք (ԵԲԿՏ), ճանաչում, բարձրագույն ուսումնական հաստատություն, միջազգայնացում, Լիսաբոնի ճանաչման կոնվենցիա

Ուսումնասիրության նպատակն է օժանդակել ՀՀ բարձրագույն ուսումնական հաստատությունների կողմից իրականացվող օտարերկրյա որակավորումների և կրեդիտային շարժունակության ընթացքում ձեռք բերված արդյունքների ճանաչմանը՝ նպաստելով միջազգային շարժության խոչընդոտների նվազեցմանը, ինչպես նաև բարձրագույն ուսումնական հաստատությունների միջազգայնացմանը:

Ուսումնասիրության արդյունքների հիման վրա արված եզրակացություններն ու առաջարկությունները նպատակաուղղված են բարելավելու Հայաստանի Հանրապետությունում ինստիտուցիոնալ ճանաչման գործընթացը՝ Լիսաբոնի ճանաչման կոնվենցիային համահունչ:

АНИ ОГАНЕСЯН, ГАЯНЭ АРУТЮНЯН - ПРИЗНАНИЕ ИНОСТРАННЫХ КВАЛИФИКАЦИЙ ВУЗАМИ РА: ПРОБЛЕМЫ МОБИЛЬНОСТИ ИНОСТРАННЫХ СТУДЕНТОВ

***Ключевые слова:** Европейское пространство высшего образования (ЕПВО), признание, высшее учебное заведение, интернационализация, Лиссабонская конвенция о признании*

Целью данного исследования является содействие признанию иностранных квалификаций и кредитной мобильности, осуществляемой высшими учебными заведениями Армении, способствуя устранению препятствий с которыми сталкиваются студенты, и продвижению процесса интернационализации высших учебных заведений.

Выводы и рекомендации, сделанные по результатам исследования, направлены на совершенствование процесса институционального признания квалификаций в Республике Армения в соответствие с Лиссабонской конвенцией о признании.