



## Objectives of Recognition in the European Higher Education Area

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of the research is to determine objectives of recognition in the EHEA between 1998-2020 and to reveal aspects open to development. Data of the study was obtained through document analysis of communiqués adopted in EHEA Ministerial Conferences. Results of the research: adoption of three cycle system; comparable and readable degrees; the use of EAR Manual; mutual recognition are important. Implementation of LRC helps to facilitate recognition of qualifications in higher education. Recently, a Global Convention for recognition of qualifications in HE was adopted. Use of Diploma Supplement; a close cooperation between quality assurance and recognition networks are encouraged. ENIC-NARIC Networks are necessary for fair and efficient recognition. ECTS boosts external recognition. Quality assurance and accreditation are closely associated with recognition. Recognition in higher education and its tools are substantial in terms of increasing mobility, providing transparency, enhancing employability. Automatic recognition; recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning need to be improved in HE systems through revised national legislations.

**Keywords:** Higher education, bologna process, european higher education area, recognition

## Avrupa Yükseköğretim Alanında Tanıma'ya İlişkin Hedefler Öz

Bu araştırmanın amacı, Avrupa Yükseköğretim Alanı'nda 1998-2020 yıllarında, tanıma ile ilgili hedefleri tespit etmek ve gelişmeye açık yönleri ortaya koymaktır. Avrupa Yükseköğretim Alanı Bakanlar Konferanslarında kabul edilen bildirgelerin analizi, dolayısıyla doküman analizi ile veri elde edilmiştir. Araştırmanın sonuçları şu şekildedir: üç aşamalı derece sistemi ile karşılaştırılabilir ve anlaşılabilir derecelerin kabul edilmesi; Lizbon Tanıma Sözleşmesi'nin uygulanması; Avrupa Tanıma Alanı Kılavuzu kullanılması; karşılıklı tanıma ilkesi önemlidir. Son dönemlerde, yükseköğretimde yeterliliklerin tanınması için küresel bir sözleşme kabul edilmiştir. Diploma Eki kullanılması; kalite güvence ve tanıma ağları arasında yakın işbirliği teşvik edilmektedir. Adil ve verimli tanıma süreçleri için ENIC-NARIC iletişim ağları gereklidir. Avrupa Kredi Transfer ve Biriktirme Sistemi kullanımı öğrencilerin hareketliliğini artırmada önemli bir etkidir. Kalite güvencesi ve akreditasyon, tanıma ile yakından ilişkilidir. Yükseköğretimde tanıma ve araçları; hareketliliği, istihdamı artırmada, şeffaflığı sağlamada önemli bir role sahiptir. Uluslararasılaşmaya katkıda bulunmaktadır. Otomatik tanıma ile önceki non-formal ve informal öğrenmelerin tanınması konusunda ülkelerin ulusal mevzuatlarını iyileştirmesine ihtiyaç bulunmaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Yükseköğretim, bologna süreci, avrupa yükseköğretim alanı, tanıma

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

On May 25, 1998, a meeting was held in Sorbonne with the participation of Education Ministers from Italy, Germany, France and United Kingdom. The Ministers who are responsible for higher education called on the other European countries to join them. The objective was to enhance external recognition and to facilitate employability as well as student mobility. In order to achieve this objective, a common reference frame was encouraged by the Ministers. The ultimate goal was to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), where common benefits and national identities affect and reinforce each other for the advantage of Europe (Sorbonne Joint Declaration, 1998).

Following Sorbonne, considering that Europe of knowledge is crucial and widely recognized, 29 European Education Ministers signed the Bologna Declaration on June 19, 1999. Ministers acknowledged that establishment of the European Higher Education Area needs persistent support, governance and adjustment to the continuously progressing demands. Therefore, they planned to meet within two years again to evaluate progress achieved and for new steps. In the Bologna Declaration, Ministers report that they have to look at specifically the purpose of growing international competitiveness of European higher education system. Furthermore, some objectives were set to promote European higher education system worldwide and to establish European Higher Education Area. These objectives are to adopt a system of comparable and readable degrees, in addition by way of Diploma Supplement; to adopt a system basically build on two main cycles; to establish a credits system (e.g. ECTS); to promote mobility by preventing obstacles; to encourage European cooperation in quality assurance; and to promote essential European dimensions in higher education. Ministers particularly point out that they will show respect to the variety of cultures, national education systems, languages and to university autonomy by trying to achieve these objectives (Bologna Declaration, 1999).

Bologna Process started with the aim of creating a European Higher Education Area. The aim of the member countries was to establish a comparable, competitive and transparent higher education area. Depending on the implementations of the countries, objectives were developed within the framework of requirements. In this context, Bologna Process is not a static system, it is a process which continuously improving (YÖK, 2010).

Two years after Bologna Declaration, European Ministers met in Prague to assess progress achieved and to set priorities and directions about the process for the years ahead. Ministers committed that they will continue cooperation on the basis of objectives starting in Bologna Declaration. On the other hand, Turkey, with Prague Communique and Prague Conference in 2001, became a member of Bologna Process (Prague Communique, 2001). Bologna Process created an area for cooperation and dialogue that reaches far beyond Europe (European Commission/ EACEA/ Eurydice, 2015).

Nowadays, there are 49 member countries of the Bologna Process. San Marino has become the member of the Process with 2020 EHEA Ministerial Conference. Every two or three years Ministerial Conferences are organized to evaluate improvement throughout EHEA and to determine new steps. Ministers decide at these conferences on EHEA's central aspects. At each Conference, a communique outlining decisions taken by Ministers is adopted (EHEA and BP, 2020). With each new declaration and communiques, new objectives such as quality assurance, qualifications frameworks, mobility, internationalization, recognition, etc. regarding higher education were included to the agenda of the Bologna Process member countries. Accordingly, Education Ministers of Bologna Process Member Countries commit to implement these objectives in their national higher education systems. Among these objectives, recognition has an inclusive role and recognition is connected to other objectives.

The issue of recognition is at the core of Bologna Process since its beginning. Recognition is regarded as both a nucleus, operational target by itself and an instrument to provide full implementation of EHEA

(European Commission/ EACEA/ Eurydice, 2012). Recognition is a crucial policy tool to consolidate EHEA (EHEA Working group on recognition, 2012).

The term “Recognition” has several definitions depending on the purpose. Firstly, recognition of a higher education institution is a prerequisite for international recognition, an institution should primarily be recognized at the national level. Secondly, recognition of an institution nationally does not mean that all its programmes and qualifications are automatically recognized nationally. In some of European countries, some higher education programmes provided by recognized institutions may not lead to nationally recognized higher education qualifications. Thirdly, if both higher education institution and programme are nationally recognized, the awarded qualification is recognized nationally as well. Lastly, the explanation for an individual qualification’s recognition abroad is as follows. Ensuring that qualifications acquired in one region of the EHEA are valid for employment and further studies in other region of the Area is important for cooperation and objectives of the Bologna Process. Considering broad European diversity and intention of cross-border mobility for both employment and study motivations, a foreign credential’s formal acknowledgement is not adequate. In addition, credential assessors must evaluate foreign qualification in order to find correct path for employment or further studies in the host country (Rauhvargers, 2004). As can be understood from definitions, recognition of a higher education institution, a study programme, a course and a qualification is crucial both at national and international level. At the same time, the concept of fair recognition is underlined by Bologna Process member countries.

On the other hand, fair recognition of qualifications is a technical aim of Bologna Process. It is a piece of set of basic values underpinning the European Higher Education Area. Recognition practice needs to be fair, predictable and safe so that EHEA can be an inclusive, open, and attractive area for students. It is necessary that qualifications and credits gained will be recognized in home as well as in other countries, for any mobile learner or a potentially mobile learner. That’s why, if exchange and mobility are to underpin the European Higher Education Area, recognition is a principle that has to be made fully effective and operational (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018). Fair academic and professional recognition together with recognition of informal and non-formal learning is at the center of EHEA. It contributes directly to the academic mobility of students and it increases graduates’ probability of professional mobility (Bucharest Communique, 2012). As explained above comprehensively, recognition plays an outstanding role in the European Higher Education Area in terms of promoting mobility, internationalization and transparency. Furthermore, recognition facilitates employability.

Recognition has effect and is effected by other policy developments such as internationalization, mobility, qualifications framework, etc. It is at the core of consolidation and development of EHEA. Moreover, it is necessary for continuing implementation of Bologna Process. For this reason, recognition is in high priority of European political agenda (Stakeholders’ Conference on Recognition, 2011). There are also some studies at the national level regarding recognition. According to Aydemir (2019), even though there is not a legal obstacle on the implementation of recognition of prior learning (RPL) for Turkish higher education institutions, practices about RPL is not widespread. If essential arrangements such as policy and implementation are made, then, RPL practices is going to improve. Dölek (2017) states that it is necessary to make a new regulation comprehensively on the process of equivalency of foreign qualifications by considering international agreements and implementations in the other countries. Toprak and Erdoğan (2012) states that Europe’s lifelong learning policy and its implementation should be taken into consideration as a benchmark. Aksoy (2013) states that challenge in lifelong learning is to identify different learning paths and to develop appropriate solutions. Because lifelong learning is relatively a new concept, this field is open to study for researchers.

Since recognition is an important field in higher education, it is necessary to make more research on the subject and to improve implementations in all dimensions of recognition. Additionally, higher education institutions need to develop their recognition practices and procedures by considering new and current conditions.

In order to develop recognition processes and implementations in higher education systems within the European Higher Education Area, it is required to follow objectives regarding recognition. In this framework, the aim of the research is to determine objectives on recognition in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) between 1998-2020 and to reveal aspects open to development.

## 2 | METHOD

The aim of the research was to determine objectives on recognition in the EHEA between 1998 and 2020. In addition, the aim was to find aspects open to development in recognition. Therefore, the research is a descriptive study. Document analysis method was used in order to achieve findings.

Creswell (2015) states that qualitative researchers collect data by analyzing documents, observing behaviours and interviewing with participants. Furthermore, document analysis is a systematic procedure of assessing and reviewing documents (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; see also Rapley, 2007). According to Yıldırım and Şimşek (2013), document analysis includes analyzing the written materials that contains information about facts subject to research.

### DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In this context, there are 12 declarations or communiques of Education Ministers between 1998 and 2020 in the European Higher Education Area. These documents are adopted for implementation by Education Ministers of Bologna Process Member Countries and also published after each EHEA Ministerial Conference. In other words, the declarations or communiques consist of Education Ministers' commitments including recognition in higher education. Ministers declare that they are going to improve their recognition practices in their higher education systems. Thus, the declarations or communiques starting from 1998 to 2020 are in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Declarations and Communiques in the European Higher Education Area

Declarations and Communiques	Date Adopted and Place
Sorbonne Joint Declaration	25 May 1998, Sorbonne (Paris)
Bologna Declaration	19 June 1999, Bologna (Italy)
Prague Communiqué	19 May 2001, Prague (Czech Republic)
Berlin Communiqué	19 September 2003, Berlin (Germany)
Bergen Communiqué	19-20 May 2005, Bergen (Norway)
London Communiqué	18 May 2007, London (England)
Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué	28-29 April 2009, Leuven (Belgium)
Budapest-Vienna Declaration	12 March 2010, Budapest (Hungary) and Vienna (Austria)
Bucharest Communiqué	26-27 April 2012, Bucharest (Romania)
Yerevan Communiqué	14-15 May 2015, Yerevan (Armenia)
Paris Communiqué	25 May 2018, Paris (France)
Rome Communiqué	19 November 2020, Italy (Rome)

Each documents in Table 1 were analyzed separately and items on recognition were determined. That is to say, data of the study was obtained through the analysis of declarations or communiques adopted in the EHEA Ministerial Conferences. As a result, objectives regarding recognition in higher education was obtained through analysis of each declarations or communiques.

### 3 | FINDINGS

After analyzing these documents comprehensively, main findings regarding recognition in higher education were obtained. It was clearly understood from findings that with each new declaration and communique, a new objective regarding recognition were included. According to findings, commitments of Education Ministers through declarations or communiques regarding recognition in higher education, in other words objectives about recognition in higher education are specified below.

#### **ADOPTION OF THREE-CYCLE SYSTEM; RECOGNITION OF DEGREES AND STUDY PERIODS**

According to Sorbonne Joint Declaration, higher education systems' international recognition and appealing potential are directly associated to their readability both internally and externally. It is perceived that recognition of undergraduate and graduate degrees is crucial in international equivalence and comparison. The Declaration emphasizes that Lisbon Recognition Convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications within European Region was accepted in 1997. The purpose of convention is to facilitate higher education qualifications' recognition among countries.

Bologna Declaration states that a system based on first cycle (undergraduate) and second cycle (graduate) should be adopted with a view to constitute European Higher Education Area and to encourage European higher education system globally. Prague Communique reexpressed the adoption of a system build on two main cycles. It is stated that some countries adopts this system whereas the other countries approaches to this structure with great attention. Berlin Communique states that efforts will be strengthen in speed up effective use of two cycles system. With this communique, doctoral level was included as the third cycle. The communique also expresses that in terms of Lisbon Recognition Convention, first cycle degree programmes should give access to second cycle degree programmes. In addition to this, second cycle degree programmes should give access to doctoral studies. The communique explains that efforts will be strengthen in improving recognition system of periods of studies and degrees.

Bergen Communique urges countries to ratify Lisbon Recognition Convention without delay. The Communique states that principles of the convention will be fully implemented and those principals will be incorporated properly to the national legislation. Participating countries are invited to deal with problems in recognition defined by ENIC/NARIC networks. Ministers mentions that they arrange national action plans to enhance the quality of process related with recognition of foreign qualifications. In addition, the communique indicates that recognition of degrees and periods of study is one of key characteristics of EHEA's structure. In London Communique, Ministers reminds that Lisbon Recognition Convention should be ratified as a matter of priority. In the communique, Ministers agreed to concentrate on completing primarily recognition of degrees and study periods together with some other action lines. In Bucharest Communique, among the goals of EHEA for the next years, there are European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual and Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC). Countries are invited to review their domestic legislation to absolutely comply with LRC. The use of EAR Manual need to be promoted so as to improve recognition practices.

In Paris Communique, Ministers express that they will work to implement LRC and its recommendations. Compliance of national legislation with Lisbon Recognition Convention is important to support quality and cooperation within the EHEA. Apart from this, Both in the Paris and Rome Communique, Ministers welcome the efforts on the UNESCO Global Convention for the recognition of

qualifications in higher education. In addition, In Rome Communique, Ministers underline that they will reinforce the LRC's implementation.

Briefly, communiques emphasize the importance of adoption of three cycles system (undergraduate as first cycle; graduate as second cycle; doctoral studies as third cycle), a convention on recognition of higher education qualifications, and EAR Manual.

Convention about Recognition of Qualifications regarding Higher Education in the European Region (namely Lisbon Recognition Convention) was adopted in 1997. The aim of the convention is to facilitate recognition of qualifications allowed in one party in another party. The convention ensures that requests should be evaluated within a reasonable time and in a fair manner. Additionally, ENIC Network is going to facilitate, promote and oversee the implementation of the Convention (Lisbon Recognition Convention, 1997).

European Area of Recognition Manual makes recognition procedures transparent to all stakeholders such as students, credential evaluators, higher education institutions and policy officers directly or indirectly involved in recognition. The Manual aims to contribute to a joint higher education recognition area. All European countries, in the recognition of qualifications, practice a similar methodology on the basis of commonly agreed guidelines and standards. A more transparent and harmonized recognition practice is necessary for quality of student mobility in Europe, thus plays a key role in the EHEA. This is also important for Bologna Process' global dimension because recognition of qualifications is identified as a key field of cooperation (EAR Manual, 2012).

According to the 2015 Bologna Process Implementation Report, first cycle and second cycle are fully implemented in most of the Bologna Process member states. Furthermore, in 33 systems in the EHEA, all first cycle programmes (bachelor degree programmes) give access to the second cycle (master degree programmes (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015).

#### **ADOPTION OF COMPARABLE AND READABLE DEGREES; COOPERATION BETWEEN QUALITY ASSURANCE AND RECOGNITION NETWORKS; MUTUAL RECOGNITION**

Sorbonne Declaration notes that there is a common ground for mutual recognition of higher education degrees for professional purposes via European Union's respective directives. In the Bologna Declaration, there are some objectives about recognition. One of these is to adopt a system, which compose of easily comparable and readable degrees. The diploma supplement is important to achieve this goal. With the adoption of such a system, employability of European citizens and European higher education system's international competitiveness will be promoted.

Prague Communique mentions that because European tools contributes to facilitating of professional and academic recognition of courses, degrees and etc., higher education institutions was motivated to benefit completely from existing national legislation and tools at European level. Therefore, individuals can productively use their competencies, skills and qualifications within the European Higher Education Area. Besides, with Prague Communique, the concept of fair recognition was emphasized. Organizations and ENIC-NARIC Networks were invited to promote fair and efficient recognition of qualifications at institutional, national and international level. The Communique also notes that a closer cooperation between quality assurance and recognition networks is promoted. Quality assurance systems have a crucial role in securing high quality standards and in making easier comparability of qualifications within Europe.

According to the Berlin Communique, Bologna Process member countries should ratify Lisbon Recognition Convention and so ENIC-NARIC Networks as well as national authorities should practice the convention. Another objective in the communique is about Diploma Supplement (DS). When students graduate, as of 2005, they should receive Diploma Supplement both automatically and free of charge. It should be issued in a commonly spoken European language. Because Diploma Supplement improves higher

education degree systems' transparency and flexibility; it promotes employability and facilitates academic recognition, institutions and employers were invited to use Diploma Supplement. Bergen Communiqué emphasizes the significance of collaboration between nationally recognized agencies to increase mutual recognition of accreditation or quality assurance decisions.

London Communiqué emphasizes the importance of fair recognition. It is stated that EHEA's fundamental components are recognition of periods of study, higher education qualifications and prior learning as well as non-formal and informal learning, at national and international level. The Communiqué also states that there is improvement related to mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions. Furthermore, continued international cooperation among quality assurance agencies are promoted. The communiqué expresses that a register of European Higher Education Quality Assurance Agencies was established. The register is going to increase trust in higher education in the EHEA and beyond and also it is going to facilitate mutual recognition of quality assurance and accreditation decisions.

Budapest-Vienna Declaration remarks that students should benefit from mobility smoothly and they need fair recognition of their qualifications. Paris Communiqué states that quality assurance is a key to enhance mobility and fair recognition of study periods and qualifications within the EHEA. In this Communiqué, Ministers, approved the revised Diploma Supplement. Briefly, communiqué emphasizes the importance of comparable and readable degrees, ENIC-NARIC Networks, Diploma Supplement and mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.

Diploma Supplement is an important document for the EHEA. It is also a significant tool for graduates to make sure that their degrees are recognized by employers, public authorities and HEIs in a foreign country as well as in their home countries. Since inception of Bologna Process in 1999, Diploma Supplement was adopted in national legislations of member countries. It was committed to issuing Diploma Supplement to all graduates free of charge, in a widely spoken language, and automatically by 2005 (Diploma Supplement Template, 2019). According to the 2015 Bologna Process Implementation Report, all countries within the EHEA issue DS in a widely spoken European language (mostly English as non-national language) (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015).

ENIC (European Network of National Information Centers) Network was established in 1994 whereas NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centers) Network was established in 1984. The network contributes to creation of EHEA by facilitating recognition of qualifications and curricula (ENIC-NARIC, 2020). According to the 2015 Bologna Process Implementation Report, in 20 countries within the EHEA, higher education institutions make decisions autonomously, but they use the knowledge and experience of national ENIC/NARIC Centre at the same time (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015).

Frederiks and Heusser (2005) states that mutual recognition of accreditation decisions is formal acknowledgement of accreditation decisions in one country by competent authorities in another country. One of the striking reasons to making effort for mutual accreditation decisions is to promote international mobility of students as well as staff, which is underlying motive of Bologna Process. In order to facilitate mobility, it is essential that both bachelor degree (first cycle) and master degree (second cycle) are recognized in all Bologna member countries. Furthermore, accreditation plays an important role in this process since the recognition of degrees is mostly associated with accreditation of these degrees.

## USING CREDITS

According to Sorbonne Joint Declaration, the use of credits like ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) is going to facilitate the process for those who want to study in a different country and to acquire a degree. The aim is to create apparent higher education systems for all and to improve external recognition. Bologna Declaration remarks that establishment of a credits system (e.g. ECTS) is an appropriate tool to promote students' mobility extensively. In addition, credits could be obtained in non-higher education circumstances, including lifelong learning, if they are recognized by related universities.

In Prague Communiqué, the necessity of ECTS was underlined. The communiqué states that these arrangements as well as mutually recognized quality assurance systems will improve competitiveness, attractiveness and compatibility of European higher education and also will make easier access of students to the European labour market. If use of this credit system and Diploma Supplement is generalized, the progress will foster in this direction. With Berlin Communiqué, substantial role of ECTS was emphasized. ECTS facilitates student mobility and curriculum development internationally. In addition, the communiqué states that ECTS is progressively becoming a generalized basis for credit systems at the national level. A goal for further progress was encouraged in the communiqué that ECTS is not only a transfer system but also it is an accumulation system. In other words, ECTS is also used for credit accumulation. London Communiqué states that efforts should be made regarding appropriate implementation of ECTS build on student workload and learning outcomes. With the Yerevan Communiqué, revised ECTS Users' Guide was adopted as an official document of EHEA. Briefly, communiqués emphasizes the importance of ECTS and ECTS Users' Guide.

ECTS is a tool of the EHEA for making courses and studies more transparent. Thus, it helps to improve quality of higher education. ECTS Users' Guide includes guidelines to implement ECTS. In the guide, there are also links to useful supporting documents (ECTS Users' Guide, 2015). According to the 2015 Bologna Process Implementation Report, the vast majority of Bologna Process member countries use ECTS for all higher education programmes (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015).

#### **RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING**

According to Berlin Communiqué, in realizing lifelong learning, higher education plays an important role. Therefore, necessary measures are taken to align national policies. HEIs and all related stakeholders are encouraged to improve prospects for lifelong learning in the level of higher education including recognition of prior learning. It is stated in the communiqué that such an action need to be an integral piece of higher education activity. With the Bergen Communiqué, Ministers express that they are going to work with HEIs and related other stakeholders in order to improve recognition of prior learning. London Communiqué states that recognition of prior learning for credits and access well developed in only a few EHEA countries. That's why, the communiqué stresses to improve RPL.

In Leuven Louvain la Neuve Communiqué, among priorities for the next decade, there is lifelong learning. Accomplished policies in the lifelong learning is going to involve fundamental procedures and principles for recognition of prior learning based on learning outcomes irrespective of if skills, competences and knowledge were obtained through formal, informal or non-formal learning paths. In Yerevan Communiqué, one of the commitments of Ministers is to eliminate barriers for recognition of prior learning. This will provide access to higher education programmes and facilitate award of qualifications based on prior learning. In addition, HEIs will be encouraged to enhance their capacity to recognize prior learning. Briefly, communiqués emphasizes the importance of recognition of prior learning. Recognition of Prior Learning plays a crucial role in succeeding lifelong learning.

A formation of system for recognition of each forms of prior learning is one of the main themes in both higher education sector and all other education and training sectors. There is a need to increase recognition of knowledge and skills acquired through informal and non-formal learning. The objective for recognition of prior learning from the learner's point of view is to gain admission to a higher education programme or to continue in higher education studies (European Commission/ EACEA/ Eurydice, 2012). According to 2020 Bologna Process Implementation Report, only six higher education systems (Denmark, France, Finland, Belgium-Flemish Community, Romania and the Netherlands) in the EHEA achieve recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020).

## **AUTOMATIC RECOGNITION**

According to Bucharest Communiqué, ways for achieving comparable degrees' automatic academic recognition will be explored. In Yerevan Communiqué, automatic recognition of qualifications are stated among the priorities of Bologna Process member countries. If this is achieved, students and graduates move in a comfortable way internationally. In the Communiqué, automatic recognition is among the commitments of the Ministers. Ministers commit that they will ensure automatic recognition of qualifications from other EHEA countries at the same level as relevant national qualifications.

Paris Communiqué states that Ministers will work to ensure automatic recognition so as to further improve mobility and recognition within the EHEA. Rome Communiqué underlines that Ministers will make sure automatic recognition of periods of study and academic qualifications within the EHEA. Thus, students, graduates and staff are able to move to teach, study and do research without restriction. Briefly, if automatic recognition is achieved within EHEA, mobility of students and graduates will be in a more comfortable manner.

The definition of Automatic Recognition Pathfinder Group is as follows: "Automatic recognition of a degree leads to 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)". It is also stated that automatic recognition is an essential precondition for extensive academic mobility (EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition, 2014). Automatic recognition does not suggest automatic admission to any specific programme. It means that holders of a qualification giving access to a study programme at the next level have the right to be noticed for entry (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018). 2020 Bologna Process Implementation Report shows that most of the countries in the European Higher Education Area have to improve their practices on automatic recognition. According to this report, only 10 countries (Turkey, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Malta, Norway, Poland and Sweden) practices automatic recognition in their systems.

Consequently, according to the findings of the research, main themes related to recognition in the declarations and communiqués are use of credits, a convention to recognize higher education qualifications, mutual recognition, ENIC-NARIC networks, fair recognition, recognition tools, ECTS, Diploma Supplement, transparency, recognition of prior learning, recognition of periods of studies and degrees, automatic recognition, and European Area of Recognition Manual. By taking into account these themes, objectives of recognition were offered. Accordingly, objectives on recognition in declarations and communiqués between 1998-2020 are adoption of undergraduate and graduate degrees; recognition of degrees and study periods; adoption of comparable and readable degrees; cooperation between quality assurance and recognition networks; mutual recognition; using credits; recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning and automatic recognition.

When these objectives are evaluated, recognition tools such as Diploma Supplement and ECTS are also encouraged in the documents in order to improve recognition procedures in higher education systems. Recognition is important because it facilitates mobility, enhances transparency and contributes to internationalization. For this reason, From Sorbonne Joint Declaration to Rome Communiqué, for 22 years, Bologna Process Member States identified new targets regarding recognition in higher education. They committed to implement these objectives in their national higher education systems through declarations and communiqués. It was obviously understood from findings that with each new declaration or communiqués, the scope of the target about recognition in higher education was extended. These objectives are briefly as follows: Adoption of three-cycle system is on the agenda of countries in the EHEA. In addition, it is emphasized that implementation of Lisbon Recognition Convention by countries helps to facilitate recognition of qualifications in higher education. Recently, a Global Convention for recognition of higher education qualifications was adopted on November 2019. The use of European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual is also encouraged. Another objective is to adopt comparable and readable degrees. Use of Diploma Supplement is promoted. The necessity of ENIC-NARIC Networks is underlined

for fair and efficient recognition. Furthermore, a close cooperation between quality assurance and recognition networks is encouraged. Mutual recognition in some fields is also on the agenda of the EHEA. Use of credits is also the other objective. Using credits like ECTS boosts external recognition and ECTS promotes mobility of students. The other objective is to develop recognition of prior learning (RPL). RPL is also closely connected to lifelong learning. Another objective is to enable automatic recognition of qualifications. According to 2018 Bologna Process Implementation Report, there are differences in implementation levels of recognition between countries. There are also aspects open to development in recognition such as automatic recognition, recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018).

A crucial issue is that objectives in recognition should not be evaluated separately, because they are all connected to each other. On the other hand, countries in the EHEA need to improve some of recognition procedures in their higher education systems.

## 4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Since the beginning of the Bologna Process, objectives regarding recognition were set through declarations and communiques in order to improve mobility, exchange, transparency, employability, etc. Because recognition is at the center of the EHEA, countries are making efforts to achieve objectives regarding recognition in their higher education systems. Communiques and declarations are significant documents in order to absorb targets in the EHEA. From Sorbonne Joint Declaration (1998) to Rome Communiqué (2020), for 20 years, there are essential goals for both recognition and also in the other fields of higher education to consolidate EHEA. Bologna Process member countries are responsible to fulfill those objectives.

International prerequisites for improving recognition throughout the EHEA was created on a large scale. The next step is to make the big attempt and bring it all “down to institutional actuality” or to fail (Rauhvargers, 2004). In communiques and declarations, importance and necessity of recognition is clearly expressed. Furthermore, there are objectives for countries in order to achieve better recognition. For instance, London Communiqué emphasized that institutional and national approaches to the recognition must be more coherent. In other words, coherent use of tools as well as recognition practices is necessary to improve the process. Leuven Louvain la Neuve Communiqué states that European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System and Diploma Supplement are promoted by the Bologna Process in order to further enhance transparency and recognition. According to the Communiqué, tools of multidimensional transparency must be related closely to the Bologna Process principles (e.g. specifically recognition) and recognition is going to remain among priorities. According to Bucharest Communiqué, in order to strengthen EHEA, meaningful practice of learning outcomes is required. Understanding, development and realistic use of learning outcomes is important for the success of Diploma Supplement, ECTS, recognition etc. All of these are interdependent. Bologna tools such as ECTS and Diploma Supplement need to be ensured based on learning outcomes.

As it is seen, if recognition processes continue in a productive manner, reflections to the other fields of higher education will be major. Nowadays, there are still differences in the level of implementation among Bologna Process Member Countries. Rauhvargers (2004) states that for the recognition of qualifications in the EHEA, it is necessary that LRC is ratified in all Bologna member states. Two-tier degree structure throughout Europe is beneficial in terms of comparability and transparency.

According to the European Higher Education Institutions Convention, European universities are willing to use available instruments such as ECTS, Diploma Supplement, ENIC-NARIC Network and Lisbon Convention for recognition and mobility in a constructive and flexible way (Convention of European Higher Education Institutions, 2001). Countries in the European Higher Education Area are all aware of the

importance of the subject. They are realizing dimension and tools of recognition such as ECTS, Diploma Supplement, ENIC-NARIC Networks, Lisbon Recognition Convention, European Area of Recognition Manual, etc. in their national higher education systems.

Besides, due to fast growth in internationalization of higher education, it was decided to create a global regulatory framework for recognition of higher education qualifications. The Convention was adopted on November 2019 and it is called "Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education". The convention is going to facilitate academic mobility, widen access to higher education in the world. It will increase the possibility of cross-border education for researchers, teachers, job seekers as well as students. It will contribute that higher education qualifications will be evaluated through non-discriminatory, transparent and fair mechanisms. Accordingly, it will reinforce international cooperation in higher education and it will be beneficial to enhance quality of higher education globally (UNESCO Global Convention, 2020). Apart from these, fair recognition of qualifications, automatic recognition, recognition of prior learning and mutual recognition are crucial issues to consider by countries.

The significance of recognition of skills and knowledge acquired through informal and non-formal learning was emphasized by communiqués of Ministerial Conferences for years. Recognition of prior informal and non-formal learning facilitates alternative access paths to higher education and enables informal and non-formal learning to be credited and recognized during studies (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018). Yerevan Communiqué notes that automatic recognition of qualifications should be a reality by 2020 (Yerevan Communiqué, 2015).

Another outstanding matter in the recognition is that quality assurance, accreditation, quality assurance agencies are very closely associated with recognition. Frederiks and Heusser (2005) states that in several countries of the world, mutual recognition of accreditation or other quality assurance systems is being debated. This process, in Europe, is very much associated with Bologna Process leading to introduction of first cycle (bachelor) and second cycle (master) degree programmes and revitalizing accreditation in many European regions. It is believed that mutual recognition of accreditation decisions is going to contribute to recognition of higher education qualifications and students' mobility in Europe. It is also going to be advantageous for study programmes and institutions operating cross borders. Accreditation decisions are important in terms of facilitating international recognition of degrees. That's why, in the future, it can be anticipated that accreditation will become even more outstanding.

Furthermore, quality assurance and recognition are important in developing transparency and trust in higher education systems throughout the European Higher Education Area (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018). As a conclusion, recognition and its tools are substantial in terms of increasing mobility, providing transparency and enhancing employability. They contribute to internationalization of higher education systems. That's why, countries, higher education institutions and related stakeholders need to consider all dimensions of recognition in their implementations. Furthermore, automatic recognition as well as recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning need to be improved in higher education systems through revised national legislations.

#### **STATEMENT OF PUBLICATION ETHICS**

I declare that the research has no unethical problem and I observe research and publication ethics.

#### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The study has no conflict of interest.

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