CHAPTER 2: KEY COMMITMENTS: DEGREE STRUCTURES, QUALITY ASSURANCE AND RECOGNITION

The 2020 Rome Communiqué

The 2020 Rome Communiqué, adopted by ministers of higher education of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in the Rome Ministerial Conference in November 2020, re-confirmed the determination to see the three bologna key commitments (degree structures, quality assurance and recognition) fully implemented ([1]). The ministers committed to completing and further developing the National Qualifications Frameworks compatible with Overarching Framework of Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QA-EHEA) and asked the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) to update the criteria for self-certification to include a stronger element of peer review of national reports. The ministers also mandated the network of Qualification Frameworks (QF) correspondents to continue its work.

Furthermore, the governments agreed to strengthen the implementation of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention and apply its principles to qualifications and periods of study outside the EHEA. They committed to reviewing their legislation, regulations, and practice to ensure fair recognition of qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons, and persons in refugee-like situations, in accordance with Article VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. They also agreed to further broadening the use of the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR).

The governments agreed to make the necessary legislative changes to guarantee automatic recognition at system level of academic qualifications delivered in EHEA countries where quality assurance operates in compliance with the European Standards Guidelines (ESG) ([2]) and where a fully operational national qualifications framework has been established.

For the further development of quality assurance systems, the ministers committed: 1) to remove the remaining obstacles, including those related to the cross-border operation of the agencies registered in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) ([3]) and 2) to apply of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

Referring to student-centred learning, the ministers evoked the importance of creating flexible and open learning pathways (including microcredentials). They also recognised a growing demand and supply of smaller and flexible units of learning leading to microcredentials and asked the BFUG to explore how and to what extend such units can be defined, developed, implemented and recognised by the institutions using EHEA tools.

([1]) Rome Ministerial Communiqué, 19 November 2020.

([2]) ESG https://www.eqar.eu/kb/esg/

([3]) EQAR https://www.eqar.eu/

Chapter outline

This chapter reviews progress made against the main commitments made by national governments to achieve the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It starts by examining the development of the degree structure and the state of implementation of three main Bologna tools: the Diploma supplement (DS), the European credit Transfer and Accumulation system (ECTS) and national qualification frameworks (NQF) (2.1).

Section 2.2. gives the latest state of play regarding policy commitments linked to the recognition of qualifications. It also explores the use of the tools for recognition of refugees' qualifications such as the Council of Europe qualification passport for refugees (EQPR) as well as the toolkit for the recognition developed by the ENIC-NARIC centres within an Erasmus + funded project.

Section 2.3. looks at the related topics of quality assurance that have been developed through the Bologna Process. It provides an update of the main qualitative indicators and gives empirical evidence on the stage of development of external Quality Assurance system. Much of the information for this section is provided by the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR).

2.1. Development of the degree structure and state of implementation of three main Bologna tools

The adoption of a higher education system based on a common degree structure is one of the key commitments agreed within the Bologna Process. First agreed through the 1999 Bologna Declaration ([4]) where the framework for two-cycle degree systems was set, the ministers of the signatory countries decided to include the doctoral level as the third cycle in the Bologna Process in 2003 ([5]). Hence, the Bologna Process has been promoting a three-cycle higher education structure including undergraduate (first-cycle), graduate (second-cycle) and doctoral (third-cycle) programmes, with the possibility of intermediate (short-cycle) qualifications linked to the first cycle. In the 2018 Paris Communiqué, ministers added short-cycle qualifications "as a stand-alone qualification within the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA (QF-EHEA)" specifying that "each country can decide whether and how to integrate short cycle qualifications within its own national framework."

To support the implementation of political commitments aimed at establishing the European Higher Education Area, three main transparency tools were adopted and developed: the Diploma Supplement, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation system and national qualification frameworks aligned to a European framework.

This section first examines the implementation of degree structure commitments and looks at the existence of the programmes that do not conform with the Bologna Process models (integrated/long programmes and other programmes outside the Bologna-degree structure). A new composite indicator summarises the progress that countries have made in the implementation of the common degree structure. It then depicts the countries where higher education institutions provide courses leading to microcredentials. This is the first attempt within the Bologna Process Implementation Report to map how countries are integrating microcredentials within their higher education systems. Finally, the section evaluates the progress made towards the implementation of the main Bologna tools.

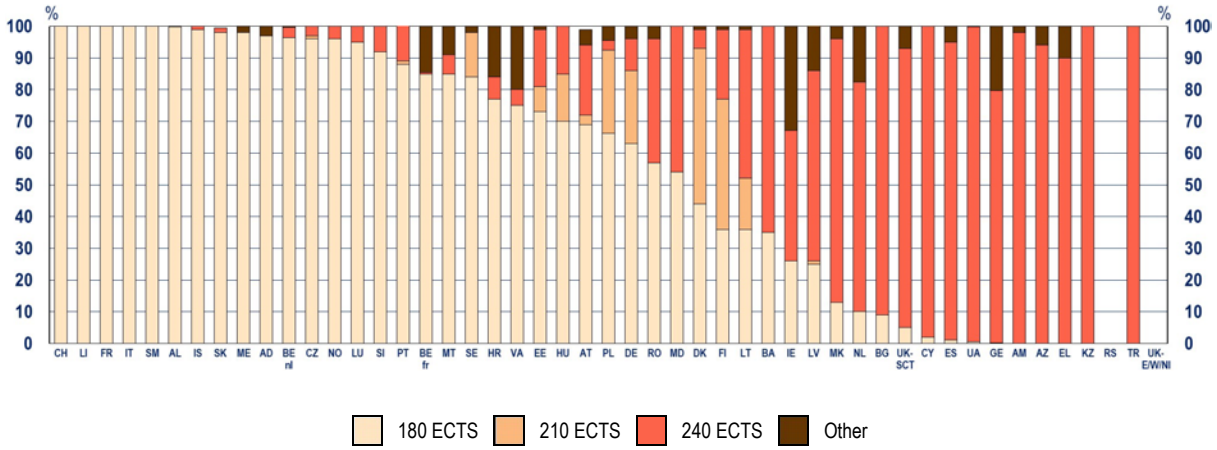
([4]) The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999.

([5]) Realising the European Higher Education Area. Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education, Berlin, 19 September 2003.

2.1.1. Workload of first cycle programmes

Figure 2.1 depicts the workload of first-cycle programmes expressed in ECTS credits. It reveals the coexistence of different credit models of first-cycle programmes and therefore confirms the statement of the 2020 Bologna Process Implementation reports (see European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020, p.46). The 180 ECTS workload remains the most widespread in the first cycle, characterising most programmes in more than half of all EHEA countries. In Albania, France, Italy, Liechtenstein, San Marino and Switzerland, this model applies to all first-cycle programmes, and in a further 9 systems, 90% or more programmes are concerned.

Figure 2.1: Share of first cycle-programmes with a workload of 180, 210, 240 or another number of ECTS credits, 2022/2023



Source: BFUG data collection.

Notes:

Table 2.1 in Annex provides details on the share of first-cycle-programmes displayed in the figure.

The second most widespread model of 240 credits applies to most first-cycle programmes in around one-third of EHEA countries, mainly in south-eastern Europe. While in Kazakhstan and Türkiye, all first-cycle programmes are concerned, in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Spain and Ukraine, 90% or more programmes have a workload of 240 ECTS.

The 210 ECTS first-cycle programme model remains rather rare in Europe. It exists in less than a quarter of all EHEA countries and concerns more than 20% of programmes only in Denmark, Finland, Germany, and Poland. Compared to the previous reporting, the number of first cycle programmes with 210 ECTS workload has slightly increased in Finland. This is due to the increase of the programmes in the field of health care and social services in response to labour-market needs.

Other workload models were reported by around half of the countries. Nevertheless, in most of them, less than 10 % of first-cycle programmes are concerned. In eight countries the proportion is higher: Ireland (33%), Georgia (22%), the Holy See (20%), Latvia (18%), the Netherlands (18%), Croatia (16%), the French Community of Belgium (14.5%) and Greece (10%).

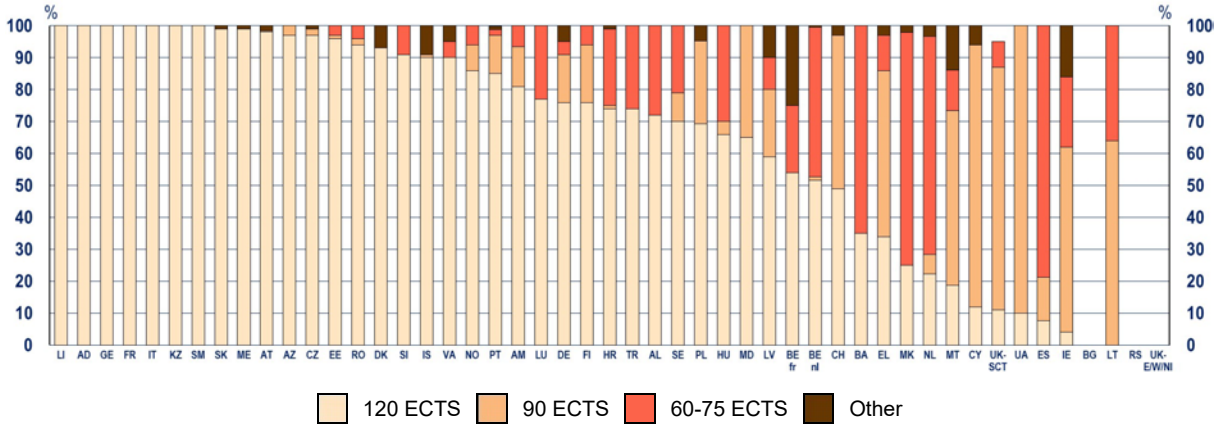
Compared to the 2020 Bologna Progress Implementation report, no substantial reforms or changes in the use of different models of first-cycle programmes can be observed.

2.1.2. Workload of second cycle programmes

Figure 2.2 depicts the workload of second-cycle programmes expressed in ECTS credits.

In the second cycle, the 120 ECTS model is by far the most widespread, being present in virtually all EHEA systems. It is the sole second-cycle model in Andorra, France, Georgia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Liechtenstein and San Marino and it applies to most second-cycle programmes in around three-quarters of all EHEA countries.

Figure 2.2: Share of second-cycle programmes with a workload of 60-75, 90, 120 or another number of ECTS credits, 2022/2023



Source: BFUG data collection.

Notes:

The figure does not take into account integrated/long programmes, i.e. programmes leading directly to a second-cycle degree. For more details on these programmes, see Section 2.1.5

Table 2.2 in Annex provides details on the share of second- cycle-programmes displayed in the figure.

The 60-75 ECTS model and 90 ECTS model are present in around half of all EHEA countries. While the 90 ECTS model is predominant in Cyprus ([6]), Greece, Ireland, Lithuania ([7]), Ukraine and the United Kingdom (Scotland), the 60-75 ECTS model applies to most second cycle programmes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Netherlands, North Macedonia and Spain.

Second-cycle programmes with a workload outside the 60-120 ECTS interval were reported by less than half of the EHEA countries and generally, when such programmes exist, their share in the total does not exceed 10%. Only the French Community of Belgium and Ireland reported a higher proportion of programmes: 25% and 16% respectively. In the French Community of Belgium, 180 ECTS are required for specialised master programmes, a system feature that has not been reformed in line with Bologna commitments.

Compared to the previous reporting (2020 Bologna Progress Implementation report) no substantial changes in the workload of the second-cycle programmes can be observed. The most common workload remains 120 ECTS.

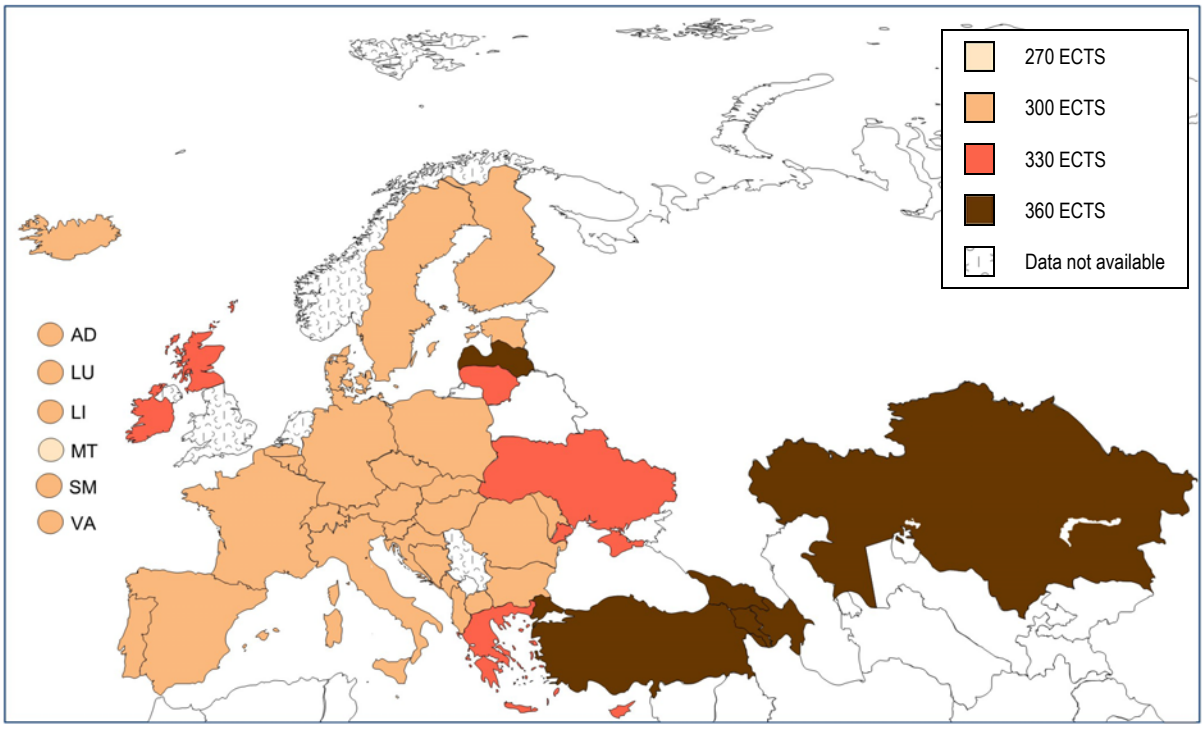
([6]) Question for CY: please carefully check the information. There is a substantial difference compared to the last reporting. It may be a mistake.

([7]) Question for LT: please carefully check the information. There is a substantial difference compared to the last reporting. It may be a mistake.

2.1.3. Combined workload of first- and second-cycle programmes

Building on the data depicted in the two previous figures, Figure 2.3 looks at the most common combined (first and second cycle) workload. Although no Bologna process commitments have been made regarding convergence of the first and second cycle programmes considered together, it may have been an implicit assumption for ministers that efforts to make the first two cycles more convergent would also result in greater similarity in the overall workload of the first and second cycles combined.

Figure 2.3: Most common total workload of first- and second-cycle programmes, 2022/2023



Source: BFUG data collection.

Figure 2.3 shows that in most EHEA countries, the most common total workload of first-and second-cycle programmes is set at 300 ECTS. Indeed, this is linked to the fact that the most common workload of first-cycle programmes is 180 ECTS and second-cycle programmes is 120 ECTS (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2).

In the south-eastern part of the EHEA, the most common workload is higher. It corresponds to 360 ECTS credits in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Latvia and Türkiye, which is mainly explained by a higher workload of first-cycle programmes (see Figure 2.1). In a further six education systems (Cyprus ([8]), Greece, Ireland, Lithuania ([9]), Ukraine and the United Kingdom-Scotland) the most common workload is 330 ECTS credits.

It is important to highlight that in some higher education systems, the most common workload can be followed closely by another widespread workload pattern. For example, in the Belgium-Flemish Community, Switzerland and Denmark ([10]), the 300 ECTS pattern is only slightly more common than other workload arrangements: 240, 270 and 330 ECTS in the three systems respectively.

([8]) Question for Cyprus: please see the question regarding the second-cycle programme workload.
([9]) Question for Lithuania: please see the question regarding the second-cycle programme workload.
([10]) Question for Be_NL, DK, CH: please confirm that these examples taken from 2020 Bologna implementation report are still valid.

In addition, it is not always possible to derive the most common workload simply by mechanically combining the most common data displayed on Figures 2.1 and 2.2. This applies, in particular, to binary higher education systems, i.e. systems with two main types of higher education institution. For example, in Finland, the first-cycle workload generally corresponds to 180 or 210 ECTS, and most graduates do not apply for second cycle studies. Those who decide to enter a second-cycle programme may enter a 90 or 60 ECTS programme offered by a university of applied sciences, or a 120 ECTS programme offered at a university. The Netherlands – another binary higher education system – reports a comparable situation ([11]).

2.1.4. Short-cycle programmes

After many years of discussion about the place of short-cycle higher education programmes in the EHEA, the governments eventually agreed in the 2018 Paris Communiqué ([12]) to integrate the short cycle programmes into the overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). Nevertheless, countries in the EHEA are still far from reaching a common understanding of short-cycle higher education that is comparable to the situation of the other three cycles.

In this report, short-cycle programmes are understood as higher education programmes of less than 180 ECTS (or lasting less than 3 years), leading to a qualification that is recognised at a lower level than a qualification at the end of the first cycle. Higher education systems are responsible for deciding whether credits obtained from short-cycle programmes may be recognised within first-cycle higher education programmes. Short-cycle qualifications are recognised as level 5 in the overarching framework of qualifications for the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area / Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) ([13]) and also at level 5 in the ISCED classification ([14]).

Figure 2.4 shows the presence of short-cycle programmes considered as part of the national higher education system – in line with the Paris Communiqué decision.

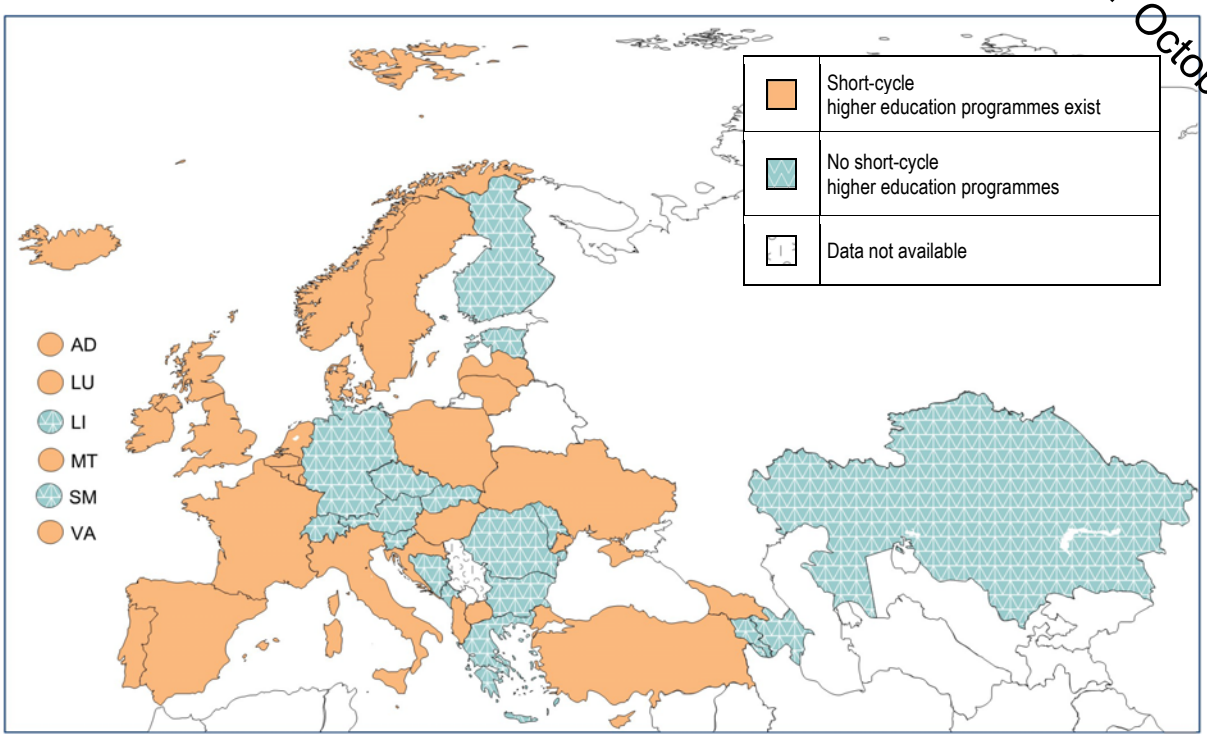
([11]) Question to Finland and the Netherlands: please confirm that the info is correct (examples taken from 2020 Bologna implementation report).

([12]) Paris Ministerial Communiqué, 25 May 2018.

([13]) https://www.ehea.info/page-qualification-frameworks

([14]) ISCED 2011: https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf

Figure 2.4: Presence of short-cycle programmes considered as part of higher education, 2022/2023



Source: BFUG data collection.

Notes:

The presence of short-cycle programmes considered as part of higher education refers to situations where national qualifications frameworks and/or top-level steering documents recognise the short cycle (or short-cycle qualifications) as part of the higher education system.

More than half of all EHEA countries report the existence of short-cycle programmes that are considered as part of the national higher education system. In other EHEA systems, the short-cycle is either not offered, or short-cycle programmes (ISCED 5) are not recognised within the higher education system. When not recognised as 'higher education', short-cycle programmes are usually categorised as being part of a vocational education system. Indeed, many countries that do not report the existence of short-cycle higher education programmes have students enrolled in ISCED 5 programmes. In some of these countries, the programmes involve only a small number of students. In other instances (e.g., Austria, Azerbaijan and Slovenia) the student numbers are substantial (see Chapter 1, Figure 1.1).

Since the previous mapping (see European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020, p. 49), one more country has reported changes in this area. In Lithuania, after the adoption of a legal framework which introduces this type of provision, the first short-cycle study programmes were evaluated and accredited in 2022.

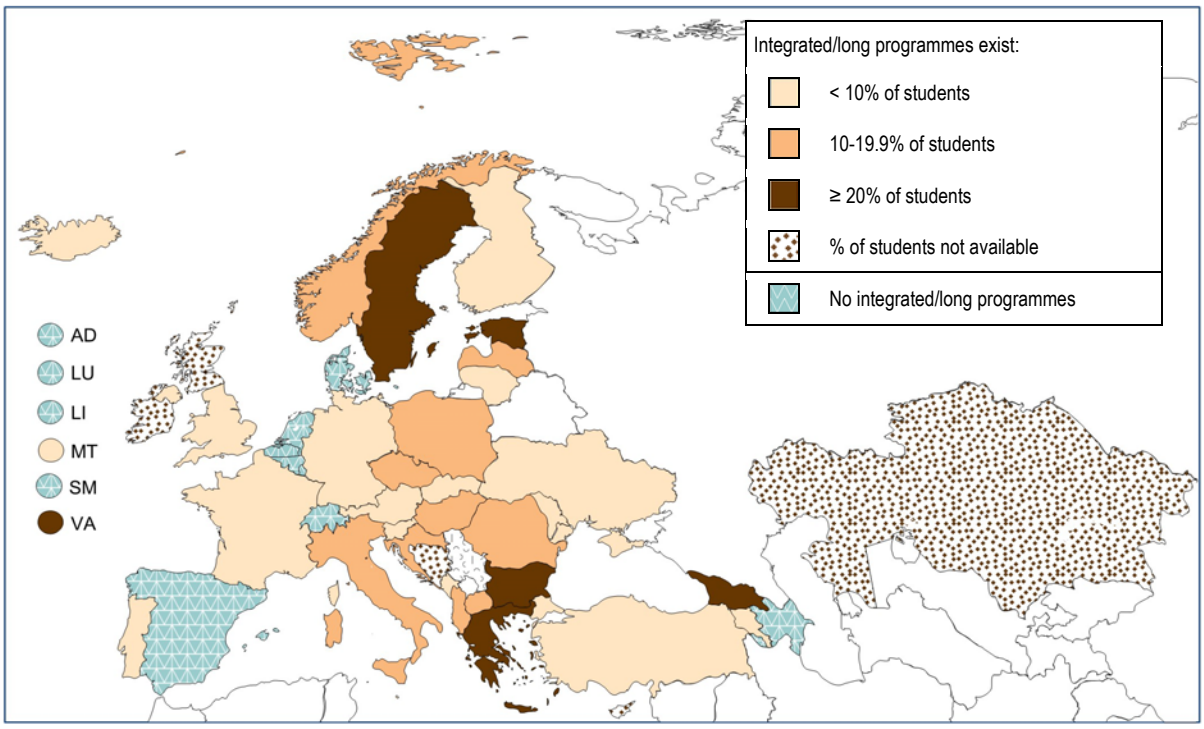
Georgia and North Macedonia reported that although their legal framework provides for short-cycle programmes to exist, there are no short-cycle programmes in practice.

Overall, the short cycle remains a complex field covering a range of programmes that differ at national level in terms of content, orientation and purpose, and where a common European vision is yet to be fully realised.

2.1.5. Integrated/long programmes leading to a second cycle degree

As shown in the previous sections, a three-cycle higher education structure with the possibility of intermediate (short-cycle) has been implemented across all the EHEA countries. However, the programmes and degrees that comply with the Bologna-degree structure often co-exist with other higher education programmes that are structured differently. This section looks at programmes comprising both the first and the second cycle and leading to a second-cycle qualification that are commonly referred to as integrated (long) programmes.

Figure 2.5: Presence of integrated/long programmes leading to a second-cycle degree and the percentage of students in these programmes, 2022/2023



Source: BFUG data collection.

Note:

Integrated/long programmes refer to programmes including both the first and the second cycle and leading to a second-cycle qualification.

Figure 2.5 shows that integrated (long) programmes exist in around two-thirds of EHEA systems. However, they involve different proportions of students. In 16 systems, only up to 10% of all first- and second-cycle students are enrolled in such programmes. In 10 systems, the proportion is situated between 10% and 19.9%. Armenia, Bulgaria, Estonia, Greece, the Holy See and Sweden report the highest proportion of students in integrated programmes with 20% and above.

Compared to the 2020 Bologna Process Implementation report, in Armenia, Germany, Italy and Portugal, the number of students enrolled in integrated (long) programmes has decreased. In all of them, except Italy, less than 10% of students are now involved in the integrated (long) programmes. While Germany has recently decreased the number of integrated (long) programmes, Portugal has limited the number of fields of study that can be organised as integrated programmes. In Armenia, the decrease is mainly due to the reorganisation of some integrated (long) programmes into the Bologna-degree structure.

On the other hand, Albania, Bulgaria, Estonia and Georgia reported a higher number of students enrolled in integrated (long) programmes. In Albania and Georgia, this is mainly due to an increase in

the number of integrated (long) programmes that are offered. Moreover, in Georgia, two more study areas - veterinary medicine and teacher training have been restructured into integrated long programmes.

As was reported in the previous 2020 Bologna Process Implementation report (see European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020), the most common fields for integrated programmes are medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine, architecture, pharmacy, teacher training, engineering, law and theology. Several of these specialisations overlap with studies related to regulated professions. These are occupations with specific legal requirements and standards that are enforced by a government or, in the case of European Union countries, Directive 2005/36/EC, in order to ensure public safety, protect consumers, and maintain professional standards.

Indeed, the presence of long or integrated/long programmes is most commonly justified by the Directive on regulated professions 2005/36/EC ([15]) that defines qualification requirements for specific professions (medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine, pharmacy and architecture), including the duration of training. While the Directive stipulates the total length of a qualification that gives access to the European labour market, it does not focus on the organisation of studies, and hence the decision to organise programmes in one or two cycles remains with Member States.

Top-level authorities also explain the existence of certain integrated programmes on the grounds that there is student demand, as well as cultural traditions (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018, p. 111).

2.1.6. Programmes outside the Bologna-degree structure

This section discusses higher education programmes other than integrated(long) programmes which do not fully fall under the main Bologna-degree scheme. When considering the entry requirements and qualifications awarded upon completion, these programmes can be clustered into three categories:

1. Intermediate programmes between first- and second-cycle studies, i.e. programmes requiring a first-cycle degree for entry, but not leading to a second-cycle qualification.

2. Intermediate programmes within the second cycle, i.e. programmes requiring a first-cycle degree for entry, leading to a second-cycle qualification, which, however, generally ([16]) do not open access to the third cycle.

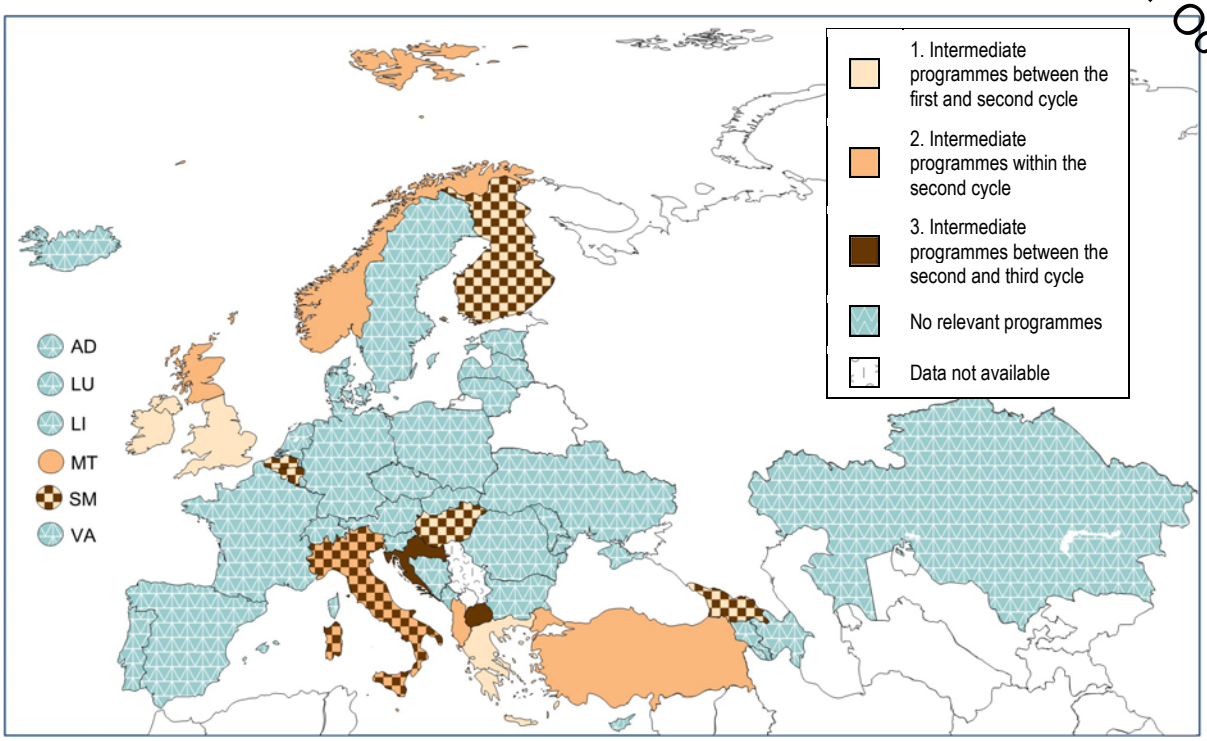
3. Intermediate programmes between second- and third-cycle studies, i.e. programmes requiring a second-cycle degree for entry, but not leading to a third-cycle qualification.

As Figure 2.6 shows, programmes relevant for the scope of this analysis exist in around one third of the EHEA countries.

([15]) Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications. OJ L 255, 30.9.2005.

([16]) In some countries, based on the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning (RPL), there might be possibilities for graduates of these programmes to integrate third-cycle studies. However, the programmes in question are not conceived to prepare for doctoral studies. Thus, possibilities for the RPL are not considered here.

Figure 2.6: Programmes outside the Bologna-degree structure (other than integrated/long programmes), 2022/2023



Source: BFUG data collection.

Notes:

Within the Bologna Process, ministers committed themselves to implementing the three-cycle degree system, where first-cycle degrees (awarded after completion of higher education programmes lasting a minimum of three years) should give access, in the sense of the Lisbon Recognition Convention ([17]), to second-cycle programmes. Second-cycle degrees should give access to doctoral studies (the third cycle). Within the three-cycle degree system, ministers recognised the possibility of intermediate qualifications (the short cycle) linked to the first cycle, and through the Paris Communiqué added the short cycle as a stand-alone qualification within the overall qualifications framework of the EHEA (QF-EHEA).

When referring to programmes outside the Bologna-degree structure, the figure refers to programmes that do not fully comply with the above ministerial engagements. Integrated/long programmes, which can also be seen as programmes outside the Bologna-degree structure, are excluded from the scope of the figure (they are covered by Figure 2.5).

Denmark ([18])

Programmes falling under the first category usually include various short specialisations after first-cycle studies. For example, in French and Flemish Communities of Belgium, there are specialised bachelors (or 'bachelor after bachelor') of 60 ECTS building on the first cycle. Similarly, Finland offers professional specialisation programmes of at least 30 ECTS which are designed to equip first-cycle degree holders with competences required by the labour market. Ireland offers intermediate programmes, which are qualifications building on a bachelor's degree, to increase access to medicine and, in particular, radiography studies. Further programmes falling under this category exist in Georgia, Greece, Hungary, San Marino and the United Kingdom-England.

The second category is programmes that lead to a second-cycle qualification, but do not open access to the third cycle. These programmes exist in Albania, Iceland, Italy, Norway, Türkiye and the United Kingdom-Scotland. They are usually professional or labour market oriented masters' programmes that do not open access to the third cycle. In Italy, first level master's programmes (*Master universitario di primo livello*) comprise 60 ECTS and aim at providing students with advanced knowledge in specific fields or further professional training relevant for the labour market. Albania offers professional master's programmes (60-120 ECTS) giving graduates the opportunity to enter the public or private

([17]) Council of Europe Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, ETS No. 165.

([18]) Message for Denmark: Please note that we removed Denmark from the category ‚others' as we consider that the programmes you mentioned in the questionnaire are not part of higher education and therefore out of scope.

labour market, but not giving access to third-cycle programmes, while Türkiye reports similar programmes called 'non-thesis master'. In the United Kingdom-Scotland, postgraduate certificates (30 ECTS) require a first-cycle degree for entry and target those already in a career.

Programmes in the third category are comparable to those reported under the first one, the only difference being that they concern specialisations building on second-cycle studies. In the Flemish Community of Belgium and Finland, for instance, there are not only specialised bachelors (see above), but also specialised master's (or 'master after master') that are intended to develop the skills oriented towards the needs of the labour market. To provide masters' graduates with advanced knowledge for better occupational opportunities, Italy offers second level masters' programmes *(Master universitaria di secondo livello)*, while Croatia has created around 342 'university specialist programmes' with 60-120 ECTS workload. Further examples of intermediate programmes building on second-cycle studies can be found in Georgia, Hungary and North Macedonia.

Higher education programmes in the first and third categories have many similarities with programmes leading to microcredentials (see 2.1.8). All these programmes usually aim at developing specific skills, knowledge or expertise in a particular area and therefore may be considered as part of a continuing professional development and lifelong learning system.

Regardless of the category to which they belong, these programmes all raise the question of their compatibility with the Bologna Process. On the one hand, they appear as a 'deviation' from the agreed qualification structure. On the other hand, they claim to respond to specific needs, concerning professional development and lifelong learning. While it is debatable whether or not such provision could be incorporated within the agreed overall degree structure framework, as long as they continue to exist, it is important to ensure and optimise cross-country readability.

The correct use of Bologna tools – such as the allocation of ECTS credits and clear positioning in national qualifications frameworks - may help provide solutions to tackle the issue. Cross-country dialogue is also essential.

2.1.7. Progress in the implementation of the commitments related to the degrees structure

To remove barriers and ease mobility and cooperation in higher education, as well as to ensure international recognition of degrees, one of the key commitments agreed between the ministers withing the Bologna process was the implementation of the common degree structure.

Figure 2.7 is a composite indicator that assesses where countries are now situated in the development of such a common degree structure. It is based on two main aspects: 1) programmes' compliance with the agreed workload for the first and the second cycles; and 2) limitation of number of programmes outside the Bologna degree structure. The indicator is based on the four indicators presented above, and considers the following criteria as the norms for agreed degree structures:

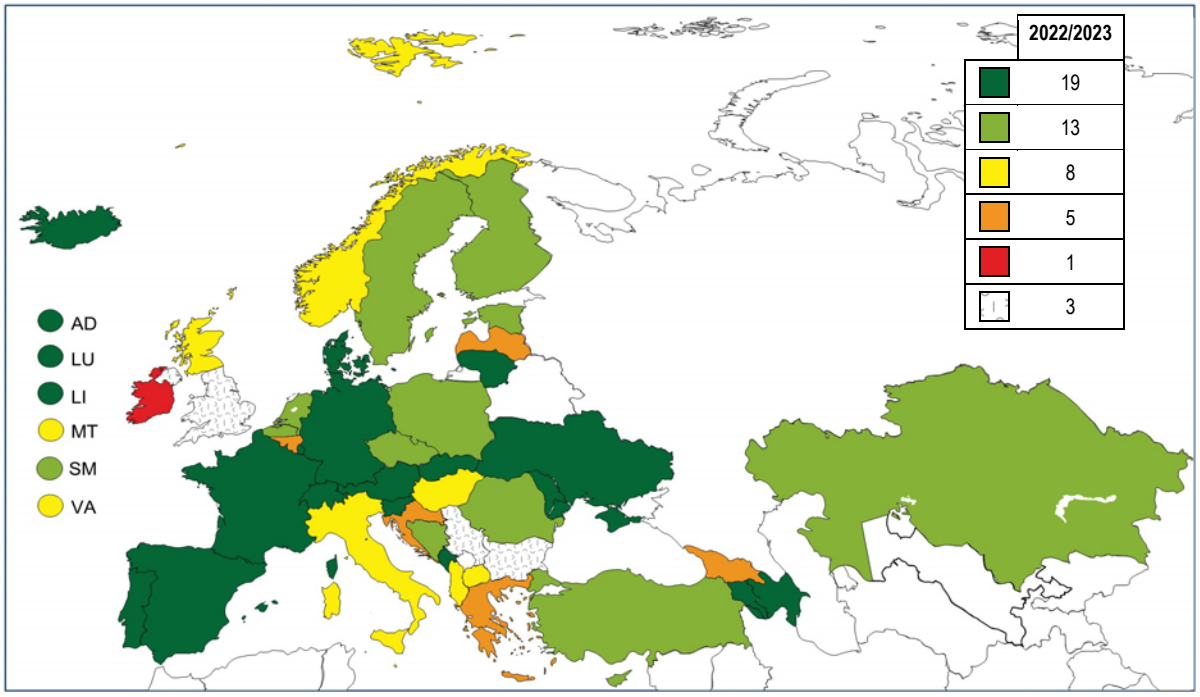
1. Share of first-cycle programmes with a workload of at least 180 ECTS credits.
2. Share of second-cycle programmes with a workload between 60 and 120 ECTS credits.
3. Fewer than 10% of students enrolled in integrated/long programmes leading to a second-cycle degree.
4. No other programmes (except integrated/long programmes) outside of the Bologna degree structure.

The first two criteria conform to commitments made in the early years of the Bologna process. The requirement for first-cycle programmes of at least 180 ECTS is taken in the Bologna Declaration, while the credit range for second-cycle programmes was set at a 2002 official Bologna seminar held in Helsinki. For the third criterion, the spirit of the Bologna Process commitments was that a small number of integrated/long programmes, particularly those leading to qualifications for regulated professions, could co-exist with the three-cycle degree structure. However, this spirit was not

translated into concrete decisions fixing limits on the number of programmes, or the number of students studying in programmes, that would be considered compatible. The choice of 10% was taken after discussion in the BFUG. The fourth criterion also aligns with the spirit of the Bologna process which aimed to converge all programmes, with the exception of those integrated programmes previously mentioned, into the three-cycle degree structure.

Countries where more than 90% of higher education programmes comply with the workload agreed for the first and the second cycles, where the share of students enrolled in integrated (long) programmes is less than 10%, and where there are no other programmes outside the Bologna degree structure are found in the dark green category. The other categories reflect a diminishing number of commitments being fulfilled.

Figure 2.7: Scorecard indicator n°1: Implementation of agreed Bologna degree structures, 2022/2023



Source: BFUG data collection.

Scorecard categories

	All the following elements are fulfilled: ○ >90% of programmes comply with agreed ECTS workload for the first cycle (at least 180 ECTS) ○ >90% of programmes comply with agreed ECTS workload for the second cycle (between 60 -120 ECTS) ○ <10% of students are enrolled in integrated/long programmes ○ There are no programmes outside the Bologna degree structure, other than integrated programmes
	3 out of 4 commitments are fulfilled
	2 out of 4 commitments are fulfilled
	1 out of 4 commitments are fulfilled
	None of the commitments are fulfilled
	Data not available

Note :

Bulgaria and the United Kingdom (England) are reported in the category 'data not available', as the data for some elements that compose the scorecard indicator is missing.

As Figure 2.7 shows, almost half of the education systems with available data fully comply with the four criteria and are in dark green category.

About one third of the systems comply with 3 out of the 4 criteria and are close to being fully aligned with commitments taken with regard to convergent degree structures. They are in the light green category. Eight education systems fulfilled two criteria and are in the yellow category. It is important to say that the majority of these countries fulfil the first two criteria and have questions to address with regard to the number of students in integrated programmes and with the existence of programmes that do not conform to the three-cycle structure. Only five systems are in the orange category, and one in the red.

The findings for this indicator reflect the fact that revamping degree structures in line with the credit ranges set through the Bologna process has been very successfully accomplished. However, while many systems have taken a thorough approach to transforming all programmes, in some countries the heritage of previous structures remains. While this may be a relatively minor issue in terms of the numbers of programmes and students concerned, it is still worthy of reflection within the countries concerned as to whether further reforms to ensure full alignment with Bologna degree structure commitments might be beneficial.

2.1.8. Microcredentials

In the last decade, short and focused learning modules that differ from formal education programmes and that are now often referred as to microcredentials have gained popularity among learners and education providers. Until recently there was an absence of common definition, although the characteristics of such credentials could be recognised: they tend to be short, flexible, skill-focused and usually labour market oriented. Microcredentials are typically designed to develop specific skills or knowledge in a particular subject area and may be targeted at professionals seeking to enhance their expertise, individuals looking to upskill or reskill, or anyone interested in gaining knowledge in a specific domain.

At the EU level, reflection on the place of microcredentials in the higher education landscape resulted in the Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, adopted on 16 June 2022. ([19]). This Recommendation defines microcredentials as “the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined standards. Courses leading to micro-credentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs. Microcredentials are owned by the learner, can be shared and are portable. They may be standalone or combined into larger credentials. They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity”.

The European approach to microcredentials suggests that one of the key elements for trust in microcredentials is transparency. To ensure transparency, microcredentials should be measurable, comparable and understandable with clear information on learning outcomes, workload, content, level, and the learning offer. The European approach also suggests that microcredentials may be included in national qualifications frameworks/systems, where relevant and in line with national priorities and decisions. National qualifications frameworks/ systems are referenced to the European qualifications framework and, for higher education qualifications, self-certified to the qualifications framework of the European Higher Education Area, which can further support the transparency, and trust in microcredentials (European Commission, 2021).

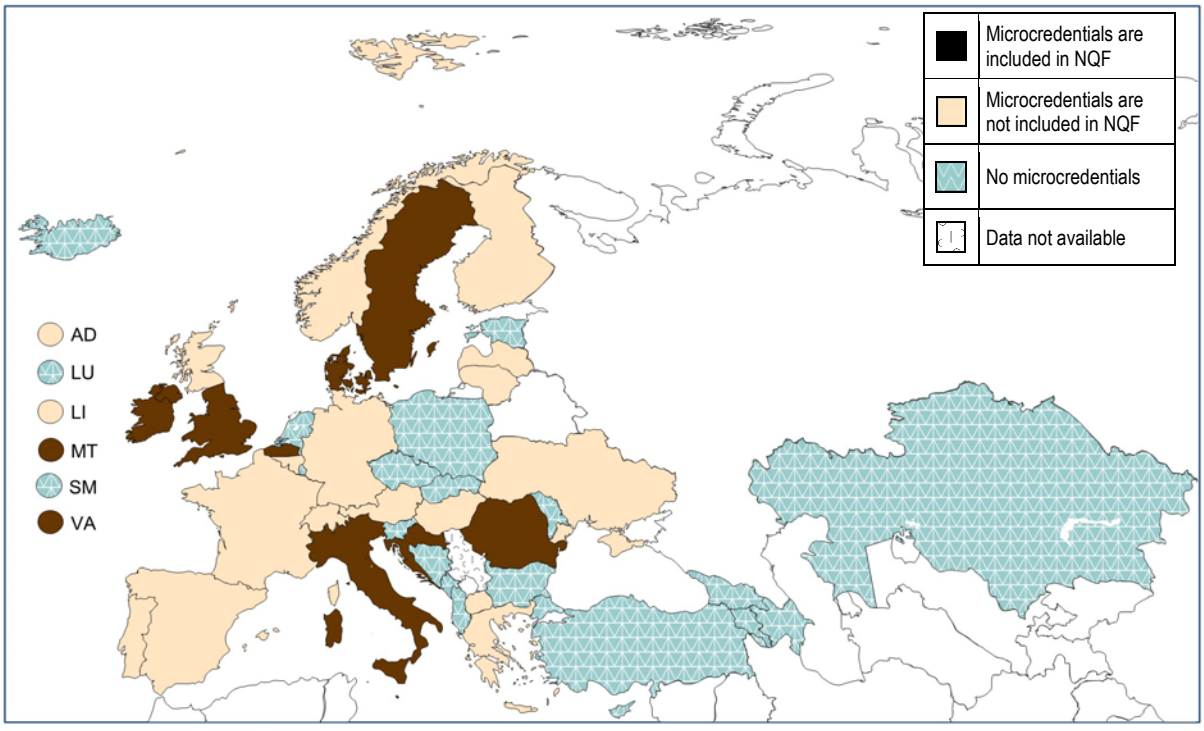
([19]) A European approach to micro-credentials | European Education Area (europa.eu)

In the context of the Bologna process, the concept of microcredentials has been discussed, and questions have been raised about their integration in the higher education landscape, their transparency, and relationship to quality assurance and qualification systems. The potential benefits of microcredentials such as making education more reactive to labour market needs and individual interests, supporting lifelong learning and learning among under-represented groups, as well as its flexibility, have all been acknowledged.

The Rome Ministerial Communiqué also acknowledges the potential benefits of microcredentials for student-centred learning and considers them as an element of flexible and open learning pathways. It asks the BFUG to explore "how and to what extent these smaller, flexible units, including those leading to microcredentials, can be defined, developed, implemented and recognised by the institutions using EHEA tools "([20]).

To follow up to the Rome Communiqué request, this section first aims to map the education systems where higher education institutions offer learning modules leading to microcredentials. It also seeks to demonstrate whether such learning programmes are included in NQFs and expressed in the ECTS credits.

Figure 2.8: Inclusion of microcredentials in national qualifications frameworks, 2022/2023



Source: BFUG data collection.

As Figure 2.8 shows, in more than half of the education systems, mainly in the western part of Europe, there are learning modules within higher education considered as, or comparable to, microcredentials. Ten education systems (Belgium-Flemish Community, Croatia, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Romania, Sweden, the Holy See and the United Kingdom-England), have taken the important step of including microcredentials in their NQF. Moreover, in almost all of them, except for Italy and the United Kingdom (England), learning modules leading to microcredentials are expressed in ECTS. These systems are therefore the most advanced in ensuring transparency and readability of microcredentials.

([20]) Rome Ministerial Communiqué, Annex III, 19 November 2020, p. 4.

Although microcredentials are not yet integrated in their NQFs, Austria, Greece and Spain use ECTS to measure workload and thus facilitate the portability of these qualifications.

Despite these positive examples, the analysed data show there currently no common approach to including microcredentials in legislative frameworks. In 18 education systems ([21]), the legal frameworks clearly provide for the possibility for higher education institutions to develop flexible modules leading to microcredentials. In almost all of them, this possibility is stated in the national legislation or steering documents (on education sector in general or in specific ones for higher education). In Andorra and Ireland, microcredentials are referred to in the NQFs.

Neither is there a common way of describing microcredentials. For example, Germany, Latvia and Spain refer to the courses and modules leading to microcredentials, while Swiss higher education legislation states that 'further trainings that are not structured as certificate, diploma or Master of advanced studies' are associated with microcredentials. Several EHEA countries frame microcredentials as a part of lifelong learning and continuing professional development. For example, the Greek legislation on higher education and recognition makes provisions for the award of micro-credentials by lifelong learning centres located in the Greek higher education institutions. In the French Community of Belgium and Lithuania, higher education institutions also provide learning modules leading to microcredentials as a part of lifelong learning although the legislation does not refer to them as such. Similarly in Croatia, microcredentials have not been introduced into the regulations on higher education under this name, but they are a part of lifelong learning. Such courses are provided by higher education institutions and described in the Register of the Croatian Qualifications Framework. In Italy the legislation has provisions for advanced training courses (*Diplomi di perfezionamento*) and for upskilling and reskilling schemas of schoolteachers. Both types of programmes fit with what is understood as microcredentials and are referred in the NQF and lead to the certifications. In France, some online modules offered on the FUN MOOC platform fit with the definition of microcredentials. Such modules are not referenced either in legislation or in the qualification frameworks. However higher education institutions are able to recognise them.

In other education systems, the higher education legal framework does not provide for the development of learning modules leading to microcredentials but neither does it prevent them. This is the case in the Flemish Community of Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Liechtenstein, Norway and the United Kingdom (England and Scotland) where higher education institutions are free to design and provide learning modules and courses that can be defined as microcredentials.

Finally, in 20 EHEA education systems, short courses leading to microcredentials are not yet a common feature. In some of them, however, the concept of microcredentials and the possible establishment of an appropriate legal framework have been discussed at policy level (Armenia, Estonia, Luxembourg, Moldova and the Netherlands). Poland and Slovenia have even taken a step forward in developing microcredentials. Since 2022, Polish education authorities have been focusing on the possibilities to link microcredentials across the entire education system and qualifications framework, while higher education institutions already provide training modules that can be considered as microcredentials ([22]). In Slovenia, since 2022, higher education institutions have been piloting the introduction of microcredentials under the existing provisions of the Higher Education Act.

([21]) Andorra, Austria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, the Holy See, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Malta, North Macedonia, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Ukraine

([22]) Note for Poland: we can include PI in the category 'microcredentials exist' as this category is broader compared to this in the questionnaire. Please confirm if we should add PI to 'yes' category.

2.1.9. Monitoring the implementation of the ECTS system

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is one the main instruments that was adopted and further developed through the establishment of the European Higher Education Area. ECTS has become the cornerstone of the implementation of curriculum reforms, focusing on workload and learning outcomes. The crucial importance of reinforcing the Bologna tools and especially ECTS, to indicate achieved learning outcomes and their associated workload has been again underlined in the Rome Communiqué, 2020 ([23]).

The correct understanding and consistent implementation of ECTS is the key challenge to ensure that ECTS delivers maximal benefits. The reference point for correct implementation is the 2015 edition of the ECTS Users Guide, adopted throughout the EHEA in the Yerevan Ministerial Conference.

The scorecard indicator presented in Figure 2.9 has been developed to reflect national measures to ensure correct implementation of the system in higher education institutions. It focuses on the role of external quality assurance agencies in monitoring ECTS. External quality assurance is the best available mechanism to provide information on the level of ECTS implementation in higher education institutions, while respecting institutional autonomy. In higher education systems where external quality assurance is required to monitor ECTS implementation, national authorities and stakeholders will have access to sufficiently reliable data on the state of play of ECTS implementation, challenges and good practice.

The indicator applies equally to the different types of quality assurance systems in European higher education – whether they focus on institutional or programme-level quality assurance or combine the two. Institutional quality assurance processes tend to assess the extent to which higher education institutions' internal quality assurance system monitor key policy areas, while programme-level evaluation tends to check more directly defined quality aspects of individual higher education programmes and their delivery within higher education institutions.

In systems with an institutional focus, it is expected that agencies would check that institutions' internal quality assurance mechanisms take full account of the 2015 ECTS Users' Guide. External quality assurance would thus not monitor ECTS implementation directly, but would check that the institution's internal quality assurance framework is sufficiently robust to ensure coherent implementation. However, in systems based on programme evaluation, external quality assurance would have a more direct role in monitoring the use of ECTS.

The key issues which this indicator picks out from the ECTS Users' Guide for consideration in external quality assurance are:

ECTS credits are allocated on the basis of learning outcomes & student workload;

ECTS credit allocation is regularly monitored and followed up by appropriate revision if necessary;

ECTS is used as a credit system for the accumulation of credits acquired within higher education institutions;

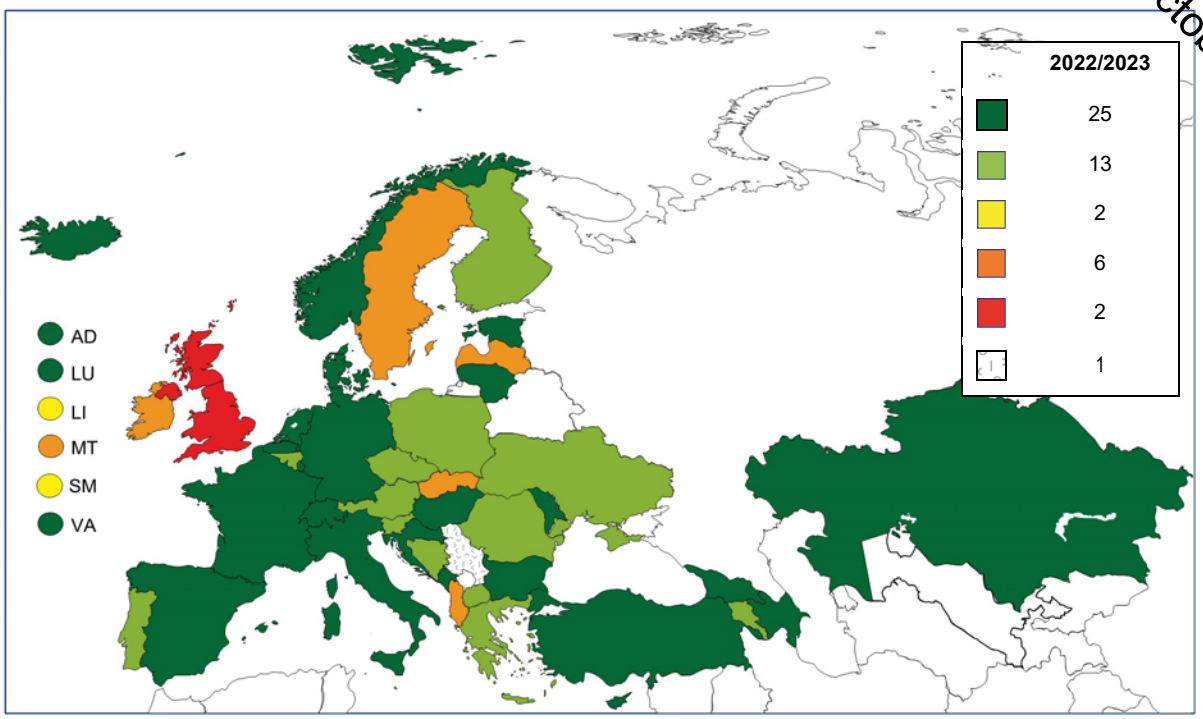
ECTS is used as a credit system for the transfer of credits for student learning outcomes acquired in another institution in the country;

ECTS is used as a credit system for the transfer of credits for periods of study abroad;

The higher education institution has an appropriate appeals procedure to deal with problems of credit recognition.

([23]) Rome Ministerial Communiqué, Annex III, 19 November 2020, p. 3.

Figure 2.9: Scorecard indicator n°2: Monitoring the implementation of the ECTS system by external quality assurance, 2022/2023



Source: BFUG data collection.

Scorecard categories

	The ECTS Users' Guide 2015 principles are required to be used by external quality assurance as a basis to assess the implementation of ECTS in all higher education institutions. All the following issues are monitored specifically: ○ ECTS credits are allocated on the basis of learning outcomes & student workload; ○ ECTS credit allocation is regularly monitored and followed up by appropriate revision if necessary; ○ ECTS is used as a credit system for the accumulation of credits acquired within higher education institutions; ○ ECTS is used as a credit system for the transfer of credits for student learning outcomes acquired in another institution in the country; ○ ECTS is used as a credit system for the transfer of credits for periods of study abroad; ○ The higher education institution has an appropriate appeals procedure to deal with problems of credit recognition.
	The ECTS Users' Guide 2015 principles are required to be used by external quality assurance as a basis to assess the implementation of ECTS in all higher education institutions. Four or five of the above issues are monitored specifically.
	The ECTS Users' Guide 2015 principles are required to be used by external quality assurance agencies as a basis to assess the implementation of ECTS in all higher education institutions. One to three of the above issues are monitored specifically.
	The ECTS Users' Guide 2015 principles are NOT required to be used by external quality assurance as a basis to assess the implementation of ECTS, BUT they are generally used in practice.
	The ECTS Users' Guide 2015 principles are NOT required to be used by external quality assurance as a basis to assess the implementation of ECTS, AND they are generally NOT used in practice.
	Data not available

On the evidence provided for this indicator, external quality assurance processes seem to pay a great deal of attention to the correct use of ECTS in respect of the Users' Guide. 25 education systems out of 49 (dark green) require external quality assurance agencies to monitor all key aspects of the

implementation of ECTS during their regular evaluation processes. In a further 13 systems (light green), there are requirements for a number of these key issues to be considered. In Liechtenstein and San Marino, one to three of the above issues are required to be monitored.

In six systems, the ECTS Users' Guide principles are not required to be used by external quality assurance, but they are generally used in practice (orange category). Finally, there are two systems where there is no requirement to consider the 2015 ECTS Users Guide.

Compared to the data from the 2020 Bologna Implementation report (see European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020), little progress can be observed. In Czechia, since 2021 external quality assurance agencies have been required to monitor two additional principles of the ECTS Users' Guide 2015, namely the use of ECTS as a credit system for the transfer of credits for student learning outcomes within and outside of country. Hungary also reported that quality assurance agencies are required to monitor all key aspects of the implementation of ECTS.

It is of some concern that this indicator appears to be "inert", as the correct and optimal use of ECTS is a condition for smooth cooperation between higher education institutions and systems.

2.1.10. Diploma Supplement (DS)

The Diploma Supplement is a document attached to a higher education diploma, providing a detailed description of study components and learning outcomes achieved by its holder. The aim is to help higher education institutions, employers, recognition centres as well as other stakeholders to easily understand graduates' skills and competences. The Diploma Supplement is an integral part of several initiatives in the field of higher education internationalisation and recognition of qualifications. The first of them – the 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention ([17]) – calls upon signatory countries to promote the Diploma Supplement or any equivalent document through national information centres or otherwise. The Diploma Supplement is also one of the five Europass transparency tools promoted by the European Commission ([24]).

The Bologna Process made the first reference to the Diploma Supplement already in 1999, when higher education ministers agreed to adopt a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement ([25]). In 2003, the ministers agreed that every student graduating as from 2005 should receive the Diploma Supplement automatically and free of charge, and that the document should be issued in a widely spoken European language ([26]).

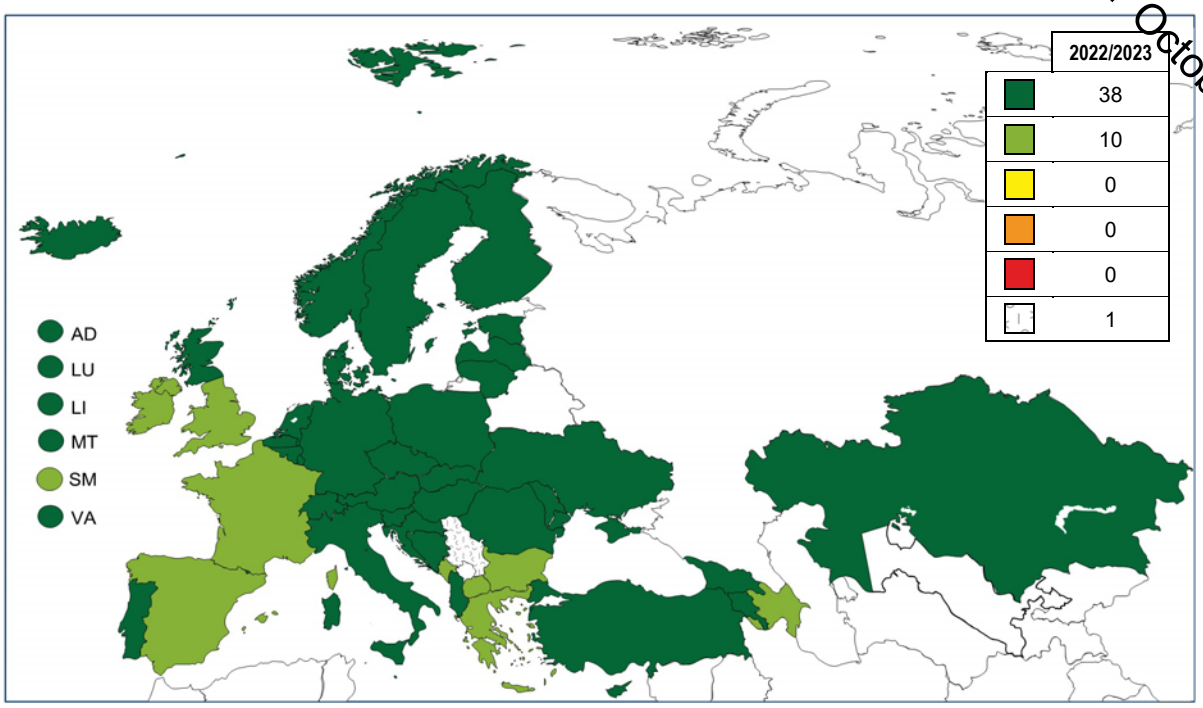
These four main ministerial engagements are brought together in Scorecard indicator n°3 on the implementation of the Diploma Supplement in relation to first and second cycle (see Figure 2.10).

([24]) Decision No 2241/2004/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 December 2004 on a single Community framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences (Europass).

([25]) The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999.

([26]) Realising the European Higher Education Area. Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education, Berlin, 19 September 2003.

Figure 2.10: Scorecard indicator n°3: Stage of implementation of the Diploma Supplement, 2022/2023



Source: BFUG data collection.

Scorecard categories

	Diploma Supplement in the EU/CoE/UNESCO Diploma Supplement format is issued to first- and second-cycle graduates: ○ to every graduate; ○ automatically; ○ in a widely spoken European language; ○ free of charge.
	Three of the above criteria are met.
	Two of the above criteria are met.
	Only one criterion is met.
	None of the above criteria is met.
	Data not available

The indicator shows that all EHEA countries have introduced the Diploma Supplement and that most of them now comply with all ministerial engagements, i.e. the Diploma Supplement is issued to all first- and second-cycle graduates, automatically, in a widely spoken European language and free of change (dark green). Ten education systems do not comply with one of these aspects (light green).

In almost all EHEA countries all first- and second-cycle graduates receive the Diploma Supplement. In the United Kingdom-England, some institutions issue the Diploma Supplement, others deliver the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) – which is based upon and virtually reflects the Diploma Supplement, whilst remaining distinctly British –, while some others provide graduates only with a transcript. In France, the 2014 regulatory framework requires higher education institutions to deliver the Diploma Supplement to all first- and second-cycle graduates, but practice is not yet fully aligned with this obligation. In Ireland, higher education institutions should issue the Diploma Supplement, but there are some atypical programmes (e.g. integrated programmes) for which the Diploma Supplement is not issued ([27]).

([27]) Question for Ireland, France and the United Kingdom-England: please confirm that this contextual information is still correct.

In almost all countries Diploma Supplement is issued automatically. However, in Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Greece, North Macedonia and Spain, it is delivered upon request. To reduce the administrative burden, in Norway the Diploma Supplement template has been successfully digitalised, and is now integrated in the software used by all public higher education institutions for the registration of student results.

The Diploma Supplement is generally issued free of change. Montenegro is the only country where graduates are routinely expected to pay a fee. However, when the Diploma Supplement is issued free of charge, fees may still apply in some countries to services going beyond the standard provision. For example, in Slovenia, the Diploma Supplement is issued for free in Slovenian language and in one of the official EU languages, but for a fee in a second official EU language or a non-EU language. In Slovakia, it is issued in the official language and English free of charge, whereas a foreign-language version other than English is issued for a fee. In Ireland, Diploma Supplements requiring an additional administrative workload may be linked to fees, while in Hungary, the duplicate is always issued for a fee.

In all EHEA systems, except for San Marino, the Diploma Supplement is issued in a widely spoken European language ([28]). In most cases, it is issued directly in the country language and in English. In some countries, however, the version in a widely spoken language is issued only upon request (Estonia, North Macedonia, Poland and Slovakia) ([29]).

2.1.11. National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF)

National qualifications frameworks promote the readability and comparability of qualifications – both within and across countries. They are used for describing and clearly expressing the differences between qualifications in all cycles and levels of education. Qualifications frameworks are able to link many of the structural elements promoted and developed by the Bologna Process – three-cycle degree structures, ECTS credits, learning outcomes and quality assurance. This plays an important role in increasing the transparency of qualifications systems.

The implementation of QF-EHEA compatible national qualifications frameworks was agreed as one of the Bologna Process key commitments in the Paris Communiqué ([30]). In the 2020 Rome Communiqué ([31]), ministers reconfirmed their determinations to complete and further develop the National Qualifications Frameworks compatible with the Overarching Framework of Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA).

Scorecard indicator n°4 (see Figure 2.11) summarises the state of play of the development and implementation of national qualifications framework for higher education. It is based upon eleven steps to develop and implement a national qualification framework to be compatible with the QF-EHEA.

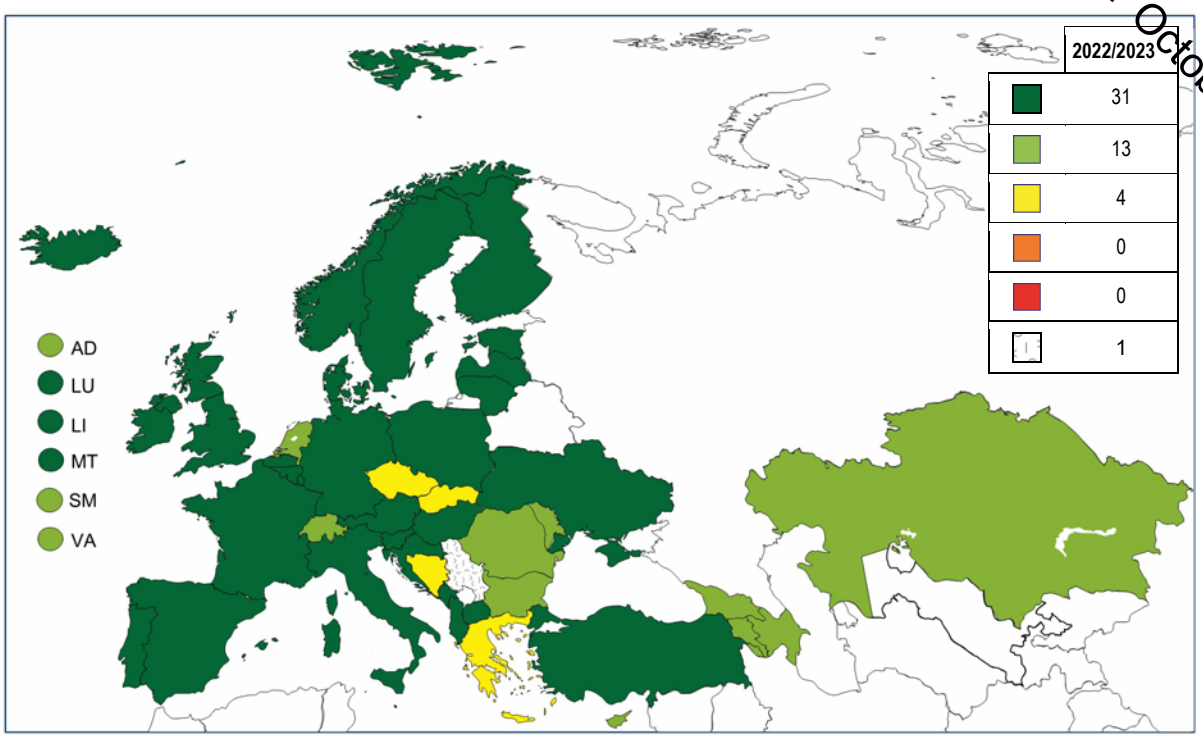
([28]) The 2003 Berlin Communiqué does not provide a definition of the concept of 'a widely spoken European language'. However, according to the Eurobarometer survey (European Commission, 2012), when the mother tongue is considered, German is the most widely spoken language, with 16% of Europeans saying it is their first language, followed by Italian and English (13% each), French (12%), then Spanish and Polish (8% each). Regarding foreign languages, the five most widely spoken foreign languages are English (38%), French (12%), German (11%), Spanish (7%) and Russian (5%). These languages can therefore be seen as 'widely spoken European languages'.

([29]) Question for Estonia, North Macedonia, Poland and Slovakia: please confirm that this info published in 2020 Bologna report is still valid.

([30]) Paris Ministerial Communiqué, 25 May 2018.

([31]) Rome Ministerial Communiqué, 19 November 2020.

Figure 2.11: Scorecard indicator n°4: Implementation of national qualifications frameworks, 2022/2023



Source: BFUG data collection.

The colours in the figure indicate that the country has completed all steps related to a specific colour and all preceding steps. The red colour is an exception, countries having completed step 1 or step 2 also obtain this colour.

Scorecard categories

	Steps 10-11: ○ 11. The final NQF and the self-certification report can be consulted on a public website. ○ 10. The NQF has self-certified its compatibility with the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area.
	Steps 7-9: ○ 9. Qualifications have been included in the NQF. ○ 8. Study programmes have been re-designed on the basis of the learning outcomes included in the NQF. ○ 7. Implementation of the NQF has started with agreement on the roles and responsibilities of higher education institutions, quality assurance agency(ies) and other bodies.
	Steps 5-6: ○ 6. The NQF has been adopted in legislation or in other high level policy fora. ○ 5. Consultation/national discussion has taken place and the design of the NQF has been agreed by stakeholders.
	Step 4: The level structure, level descriptors (learning outcomes), and credit ranges have been agreed.
	Steps 1-3: ○ 3. The process of developing the NQF has been set up, with stakeholders identified and committee(s) established. ○ 2. The purpose(s) of the NQF have been agreed and outlined. ○ 1. Decision to start developing the NQF has been taken by the national body responsible for higher education and/or the minister.
	Data not available

Figure 2.11 shows that most countries have fulfilled their commitment to establish and use a national qualifications framework. The 31 systems in dark green have established their national qualifications frameworks for higher education and self-certified them to the QF-EHEA. In addition, in these countries, the final NQF and the self-certification report can be consulted on a public website and is used by national authorities for at least one of the agreed purposes. Albania, Romania and Ukraine have now moved into this category having completed this process. In Ukraine, the NQF recently certified its compatibility with the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area. In 2021, the board of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine approved the self-certification report that was further made available on a public website ([32]).

In the 13 systems in the light green category, the NQF is in place. However, there are still processes to finalise in relation to self-certification. Andorra and Azerbaijan have both made recent progress and moved into this category. Both reported establishing the NQF in legislation and undertaking the work of re-designing study programmes and including their qualifications in the NQF. To achieve the policy goals that national authorities together with stakeholders set for the national qualifications framework, NQFs need to be better integrated into public policy also in these countries.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czechia and Slovakia are still at the mid-way stage of the indicator and now need to step up action to ensure that the work so far undertaken is meaningful. Greece has made recent improvements adopting the NQF in higher education legislation and thus join the yellow category.

Despite progress made toward the implementation of QF-EHEA compatible national qualifications frameworks, there is a need for countries that have not yet fulfilled this key commitment to priorities action in the near future.

2.2. Recognition

Introduction will be added later.

The 2020 Rome Communiqué

Chapter outline

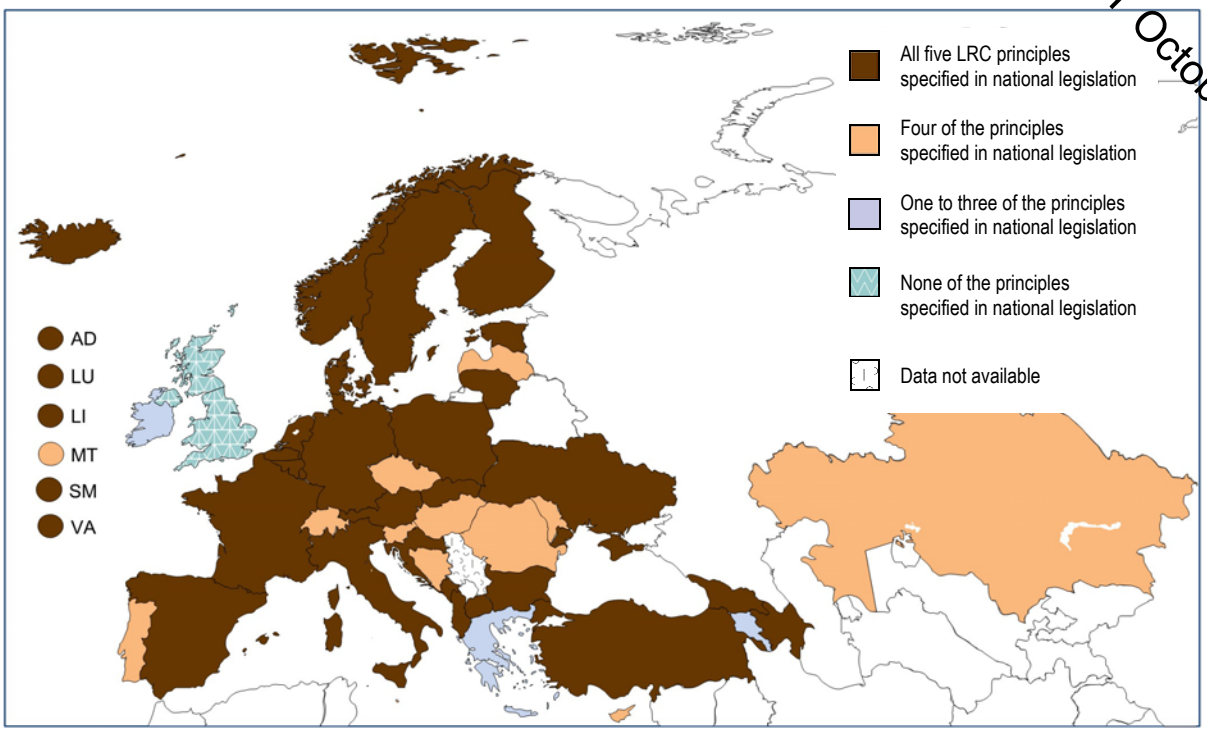
2.2.1. Principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) in national Legislation

Figure 2.12 shows the extent to which the main principles of the LRC are specified in national legislation. The principles highlighted in the indicator are:

1) applicants have right to fair assessment; 2) there is recognition if no substantial differences can be proven; 3) legislation or guidelines encourage comparing of learning outcomes rather than programme contents; 4) in cases of negative decisions the competent recognition authority demonstrates the existence of substantial difference; 5) applicant's right to appeal of the recognition decision. Implementation of these principles was identified by the Pathfinder Group as an important step towards automatic recognition.

([32]) https://mon.gov.ua/ua/tag/natsionalna-ramka-kvalifikatsiy

Figure 2.12: Principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in national legislation, 2022/2023



Source: BFUG data collection.

Although the ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention has long been completed by all EHEA countries except Greece, several countries have not embedded all principles into national legislation.

Progress has been made since the publication of the 2020 Bologna Implementation report (see European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). The Figure 2.12 shows that the number of education systems where all of these main principles are specified in national legislation has risen to 31. Seven additional countries (Albania, Andorra, Austria, Croatia, Poland, Sweden and Ukraine) have now embedded all principles in national legislations. Poland and Sweden have recently added the 5th principle, namely the right of applicants to appeal of the recognition decision, to legislation, while in Austria the University Act, amended in 2022 ([33]), promotes the comparison of learning outcomes rather than programme contents for recognition purposes.

The number of systems where four of the principles are embedded in legislation is now 12. A further three systems specify one to three principles. The United Kingdom (England and Scotland) does not legislate in this area as institutions within the United Kingdom have full autonomy over their admissions, and for principles to be specified in national legislation would be considered a violation of autonomy. Nevertheless, the UK's governments and its higher education institutions claim to be strongly committed to open, fair and transparent admissions processes.

2.2.2. Implementation of Article VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC)

In recent years, large numbers of individuals of all ages have been fleeing conflict zones and relocating in other countries. Most recently, the number of refugees in Europe has dramatically increased with the arrival of around 4 million non-EU citizens who fled Ukraine because of the Russian invasion in 2022 ([34]) (see 6.3, Chapter 6).

([33]) https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=20002128

([34]) According to Eurostat data , on 31 May 2023 : https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?oldid=605154

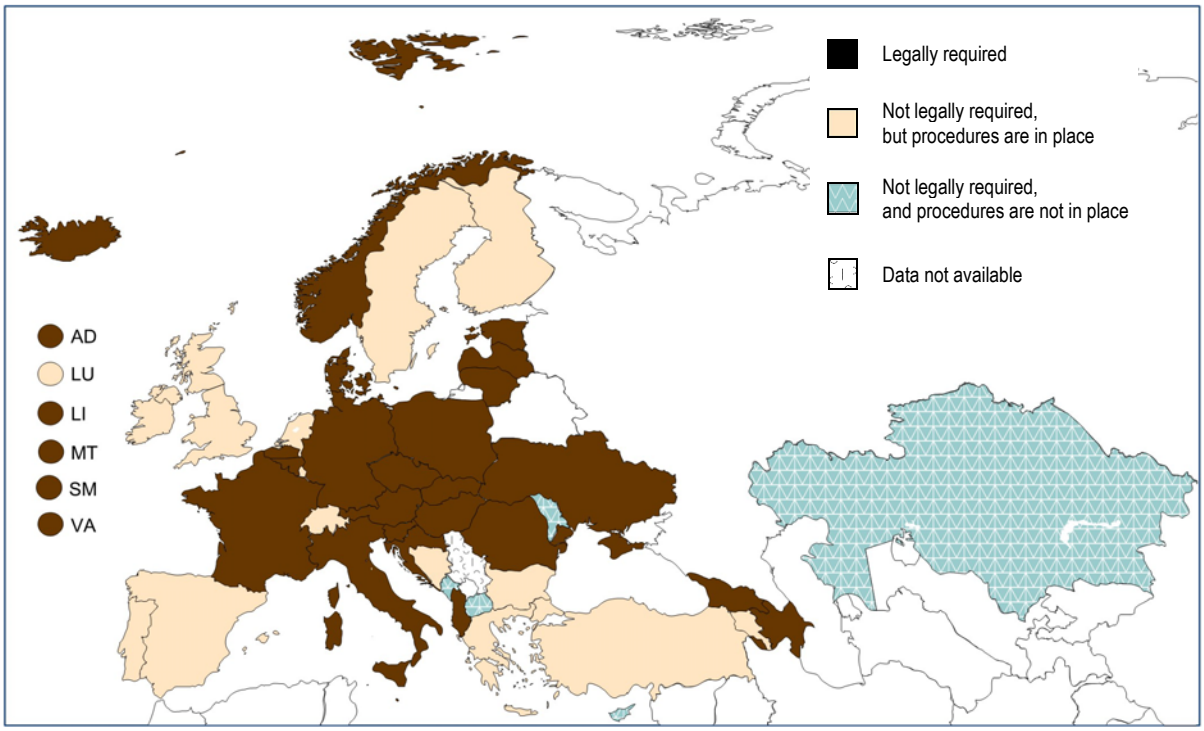
Forced to interrupt studies or professional activity, many people bring with them competences and skills acquired in their country of origin that can be further developed in the host country through further studies, sometimes in higher education.

With requests from refugees, institutions responsible for the recognition of foreign qualifications may face particular challenges in the evaluation and recognition process. These are often associated with the lack of established recognition procedures and policy for undocumented qualifications, as well as a lack of information on legal obligations. In such cases, article VII of the LRC serves as a framework for developing good practice. It states that:

“Each Party shall take all feasible and reasonable steps within the framework of its education system and in conformity with its constitutional, legal, and regulatory provisions to develop procedures designed to assess fairly and expeditiously whether refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation fulfil the relevant requirements for access to higher education, to further higher education programmes or to employment activities, even in cases in which the qualifications obtained in one of the Parties cannot be proven through documentary evidence” ([35]).

Figure 2.13 shows the state of current implementation of Article VII of the LRC.

Figure 2.13: Implementation of Article VII of the LRC at national level, 2022/2023



Source: BFUG data collection.

The analysed data reveal that despite the widespread ratification of the LRC, only slightly more than a half of the education systems (28 out of 49) have requirements in national legislation for specific recognition procedures to be in place for refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation. More positively, clear legislation and procedures for refugees and displaced persons with qualifications exist in the countries that are an important entry point to Europe from the conflict zones in Africa (Italy and Malta) and from Ukraine (Czechia, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Romania).

([35]) LRC, Art. VII (p.9) https://rm.coe.int/168007f2c7

Seven countries (Albania, Andorra, Austria, Azerbaijan, Croatia, Latvia, and Portugal) have recently introduced a legal requirement for procedures to be followed. This can be considered as very significant progress since the 2020 Bologna Implementation report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020).

15 other systems claim that procedures are in place even if there is no legal requirement for them.

5 systems (Cyprus, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Montenegro and North Macedonia) have no requirement for specific recognition procedures to be in place for refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation. This represents a serious contradiction with the international legal commitment undertaken by countries that have both signed and ratified the LRC.

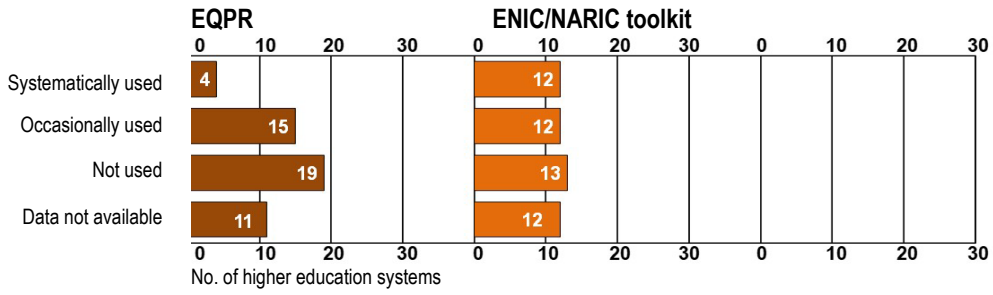
2.2.3. Use of tools for recognition of qualifications of refugees

There are two main European tools developed to facilitate recognition of qualifications held by refugees even in cases of missing documentation or where the qualifications are scarcely documented: the European Qualification Passport for Refugees (EQPR) ([36]) and the ENIC-NARIC toolkit.

The EQPR has been created by the Council of Europe and project partners, and consists of two parts: an assessment section and an explanatory section. The methodology for the evaluation is a combination of an assessment of available documentation and the use of a structured interview with a team of two qualified credential evaluators. Through a standardised format, it explains the qualifications a refugee is likely to have based on the available evidence. Although this document does not constitute a formal recognition act, it summarises and presents available information on the applicant's educational level, work experience and language proficiency. Thus, the document provides credible information that can be relevant in connection with applications for employment, internships, qualification courses and admission to studies. The European Qualifications Passport for Refugees was welcomed by ministers in the 2020 Rome Communiqué ([37]) and its use and future development were promoted.

The second tool for the recognition of refugees' qualifications has been developed by the ENIC-NARIC centres of several countries within an Erasmus+ funded project ([38]), which built upon a previous project lead by Norway's national recognition agency, NOKUT ([39]). The toolkit is a joint effort to assist ENIC-NARIC centres in the development of practical approaches to credential evaluation and recognition of the qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation. The toolkit consists of three parts – principles, tools and approaches.

Figure 2.14: Use of tools for recognition of refugees' qualifications: the Council of Europe Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR) and ENIC/NARIC's toolkit for recognition of refugees' qualifications, 2022/2023



Source: BFUG data collection.

([36]) For more details, see: https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/recognition-of-refugees-qualifications

([37]) Rome Ministerial Communiqué, 19 November 2020.

([38]) For further information, see: https://www.enic-naric.net/recognise-qualifications-held-by-refugees.aspx

([39]) For further information, see : https://www.nokut.no/om-nokut/internasjonalt-samarbeid/qualifications-passport-for-refugees/

Figure 2.14 shows that despite the potential advantages of using the tools for recognition of refugees' qualifications, their use is not widespread in the EHEA countries. According to the data provided, around half of the education systems with available data use (occasionally or systematically) the EQPR, while only one-third of the systems make use of the ENIC/NARIC toolkit.

Albania, Italy and the United Kingdom (England) are the three counties that systematically use both tools in dealing with applications from refugees. Seven education systems (Armenia, Belgium-Flemish Community, Croatia, Germany, Slovenia, Türkiye and Ukraine) use both tools, but occasionally rather than systematically. Some education systems report using a national tool equivalent to the EQPR. For example, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands and Sweden are issuing a national format of the qualification passport to record the available information on the applicant's educational level, qualifications, work experience and language proficiency. This document is commonly called 'background paper', while Bulgaria labelled it 'information card for acquired educational degree'.

In around a quarter of the systems there is no data collection on the use of the above-mentioned tools.

2.2.4. System-level automatic recognition of degrees for academic purposes

The Lisbon Recognition Convention, addressed in section 2.2.1., has provided a clear legal framework under which recognition policy operates at national and institutional level. However, in 2010, the EHEA ministers of higher education recognised that procedures for the academic recognition of qualifications continued to be often lengthy and burdensome. For this reason, in 2012 in Bucharest, the Ministers of higher education across the EHEA committed themselves to the long-term objective of 'automatic recognition' of comparable academic degrees.

While there has been much discussion and confusion about the notion of automatic recognition, several texts have specified a clear understanding of the concept. The first reference text was the report produced by the Pathfinder Group on automatic recognition, which states: '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 a programme of further study in the next level in any other EHEA-country (access)' (EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition, 2015).

This definition makes it clear that automatic recognition does not imply automatic admission to any specific programme, but rather that holders of a qualification giving access to a programme of study at the next level have the right to be considered for entry. The Pathfinder Group reached the conclusion that automatic recognition is a necessary pre-condition for large-scale academic mobility, and proposed a number of recommendations to improve the situation. Meanwhile, in the Yerevan Communiqué ([40]) in May 2015, ministers made the commitment 'to ensure that qualifications from other EHEA countries are automatically recognised at the same level as relevant domestic qualifications'. In the 2020 Rome Communiqué ([41]), ministers confirmed their determination to make the necessary legislative changes to guarantee automatic recognition at systems level for qualifications delivered in EHEA countries where quality assurance operates in compliance with the European Standards Guidelines (ESG) and where a fully operational national qualifications framework has been established.

Although this commitment to automatic recognition is clearly stated, there remain some grey areas about its meaning. The Pathfinder Group recommended that a qualification based on the EHEA three-cycle structure from one EHEA country should be recognised at the same level anywhere else in the EHEA. So, the first aspect is that it concerns automatic recognition of the qualification level. The

([40]) Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers responsible for Higher Education, Yerevan, 14-15 May 2015, p. 3

([41]) Rome Ministerial Communiqué, 19 November 2020

principle under examination is whether students who hold qualifications from other EHEA countries have the level of their qualification recognised in the same way as holders of qualifications issued within the home country. As the Pathfinder Group specified, the objective is that a bachelor is a bachelor across the EHEA.

Within the European Union, the Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 took a further step in promoting the automatic mutual recognition of qualifications as well as the recognition of learning outcomes during study periods abroad ([42]), thus strengthening the 2012 commitment and increasing the speed of implementation. Indeed, the Recommendation envisages achieving the automatic recognition of qualifications by 2025 throughout the EU, providing further impetus to all participating countries in the Bologna process to follow suit.

Scorecard indicator n°5 monitors progress towards the automatic recognition of qualifications. A distinction is made between the higher education systems based on whether they have implemented system-level automatic recognition of qualifications, and if they have, whether such automatic recognition covers all EHEA countries.

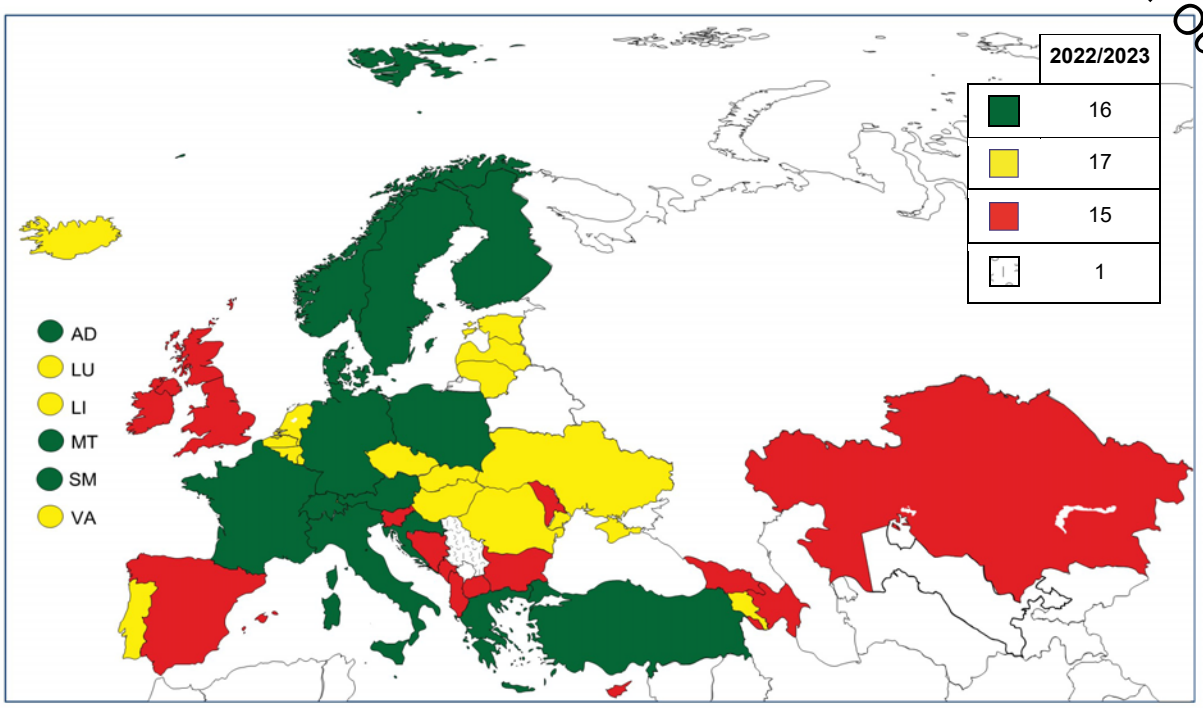
Thus, for the dark green category, all higher education qualifications issued in other EHEA countries are recognised on an equal level with qualifications in the home country without any additional procedures in higher education institutions. This could be achieved in several different ways. For example, there could be a legally binding document outlining degree qualifications from other EHEA countries which are recognised. Alternatively, there could be multilateral agreements in place which cover all countries in the EHEA. Automatic recognition may also be achieved in reality through non legally binding bilateral and multilateral agreements to recognise qualifications, or through following procedures that are coherent with de facto automatic recognition – for example checking only that a qualification is legitimate, and not examining details of course or programme contents.

In the yellow category are all higher education systems where automatic recognition at system level takes place with a subset of European countries.

The red category groups education systems that do not apply the concept of automatic recognition, so that separate recognition procedures are in place for all education qualifications issued in all other countries.

([42]) Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, OJ C444/01 10.12.2018.

Figure 2.15: Scorecard indicator n°5: System level (automatic) recognition for academic purposes, 2022/2023



Source: BFUG data collection.

Scorecard categories

	Automatic recognition is in place, meaning that all higher education qualifications issued in other EHEA countries are recognised at system level on an equal level with comparable ([43]) academic qualifications in the home country and give the right to be considered for entry to a programme of further study at the next level.
	Automatic recognition at system level takes place with a subset of European countries. For qualifications from other countries, some but not all of the conditions apply to recognition practice.
	There is no automatic recognition.
	Data not available

Croatia ([44])

Figure 2.15 reveals that the European Higher Education Area is still far from achieving widespread automatic recognition. The distribution of education systems along the main categories is as follows.

There are 16 systems that practise automatic recognition for all EHEA countries, and that are shown in dark green. The number of systems in this category has slightly increased since the 2020 edition of the Bologna Process Implementation Report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). Andorra, Austria and Greece have seen recent developments, and as a consequence have joined the dark green category.

While not yet having full system-level recognition for all EHEA countries, a further 17 systems report that automatic recognition applies to some EHEA countries. This is usually based on regional, bilateral or multilateral agreements on the mutual automatic recognition of qualifications. As a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, Armenia has recently signed a mutual recognition agreement regarding recognition of higher education qualifications both for academic and professional purposes with other members of the Union. As this agreement includes automatic recognition of qualifications from Kazakhstan, Armenia is now in the yellow category.

([43]) The term 'comparable' implies that foreign qualifications are treated in the same way as national degrees (e.g. a first-cycle degree from an EHEA country vs. a national first-cycle degree) for the purpose of further study at the next level without additional recognition procedures.

([44]) Information for Croatia: Based on the explanation you provided in the questionnaire, we consider that automatic recognition' as defined for this report exists in your country. Therefore, we changed the category.

In 15 systems, there is no system-level automatic recognition as additional recognition procedures apply for recognition of higher education qualifications issued in all other EHEA countries.

There is a relationship between degree structures, and in particular the workload of first-cycle programmes, and automatic recognition of qualification for academic purposes. The education systems where most of the first-cycle programmes comprise 180 ECTS (see Figure 2.1) usually apply automatic recognition of qualification for academic purposes. Conversely, and with very few exceptions, education systems where the workload of most first-cycle programmes is higher (240 ECTS) additional recognition procedures for academic qualifications and degrees are in place. While this pattern can be observed from the data gathered, more research would be required to understand this apparent relationship. Is there a reason why countries with a high workload in first-cycle programmes appear to be more reluctant to implement a system of automatic recognition of qualification and degrees for further academic studies?

2.3. Quality Assurance

This section addresses developments in the implementation of quality assurance related commitments since the Rome Communique, emphasising the significance of such commitments in building trust and transparency within the EHEA.

Section 2.3.1 discusses the stage of development of the external quality assurance systems and in relation to that the share of higher education institutions reviewed by an EQAR-registered quality assurance agency.

The following sections cover the level of student and international participation in quality assurance. Finally, the chapter explores the level of openness of systems for higher education institutions to choose any suitable EQAR registered agency for their external quality assurance (in line with national requirements) as well as the possibility of employing the European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

Information for the analysis was gathered directly from EHEA member countries as part of the BFUG data collection exercise, but part of the responses were also provided by countries through the QA FIT survey[45] and from EQAR's Knowledge Base. Further information was extracted from the Database for External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) in particular covering the share of higher education institutions reviewed against the ESG as well as the external quality assurance of joint programmes. For the data related to the level of student and international participation in quality assurance, information was verified with the information provided by ENQA, by national regulations and legal frameworks as well as external review reports of quality assurance agencies.

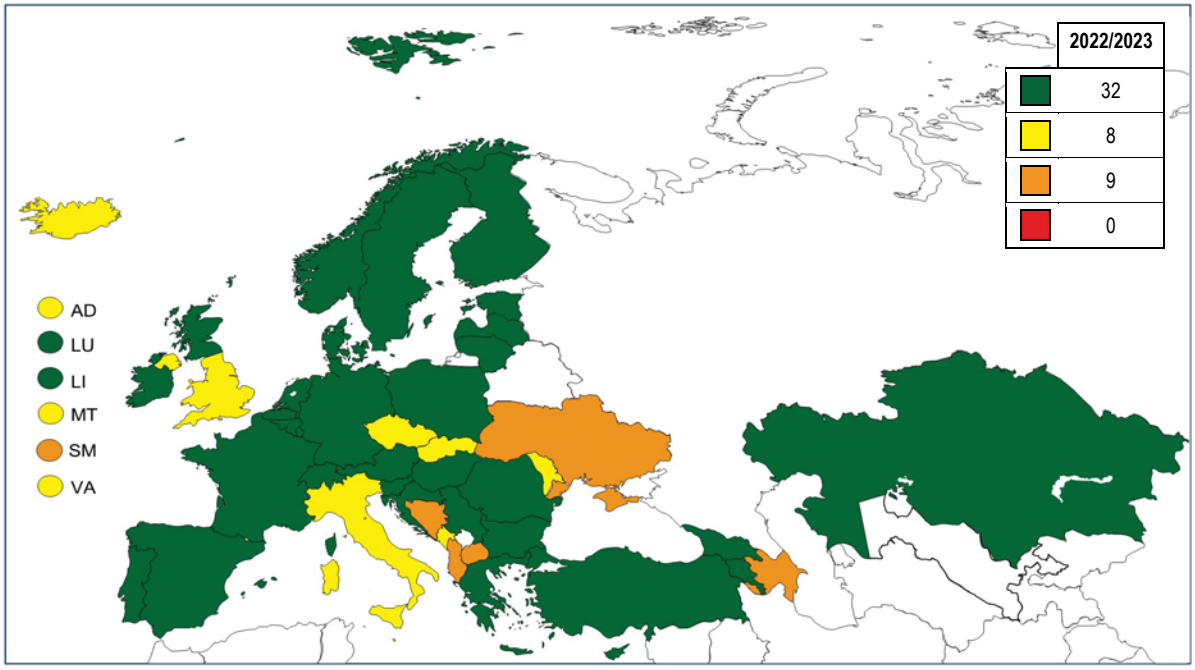
2.3.1. Stage of development of the external Quality Assurance systems

Figure 2.16 measures the progress of quality assurance systems in line with the Bologna commitments. The indicator has been streamlined (by removing the earlier light green category) to clearly link the stage of development in the use of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) to registration in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). Dark green signifies that national systems are working with quality assurance agencies verified to be in line with the ESG, as evidenced by their EQAR registration. Yellow denotes countries where only certain higher education entities or programmes

[45] The QA FIT survey for ministries was a survey carried out by EQAR and addressed to all 47 governmental members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Responses were collected between 7 November 2022 and 24 January 2023. A total of 36 valid responses were received during this time. See more here: https://www.eqar.eu/about/projects/qa-fit/

follow regular ESG-compliant quality assurance processes. Orange represents nations whose quality assurance system has not been externally assessed for ESG compliance, although some steps have been taken to address this concern. Red indicates countries without proven, external quality assurance systems in place.

Figure 2.16: Scorecard indicator n° 6: Stage of development of external quality assurance system, 2022/2023



Source: EQAR.

Scorecard categories

	A fully functioning quality assurance system is in operation nationwide, in which all higher education institutions are subject to regular external quality assurance by an agency that has successfully demonstrated compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG) through registration on EQAR.
	A fully functioning quality assurance system is in operation nationwide, but only some higher education institutions are subject to regular external quality assurance by an agency that has successfully demonstrated compliance with the ESG through registration on EQAR.
	A quality assurance system is in operation nationwide, but has not yet been fully aligned to the ESG
	No quality assurance system is in operation

Currently 32 of the 47 EHEA higher education systems meet fully the requirement for the dark green category (see Figure 2.16). Compared to the previous implementation reports, a noticeable progress can be noted in these maps for Greece and Türkiye, following the registration of their national QA bodies in EQAR.

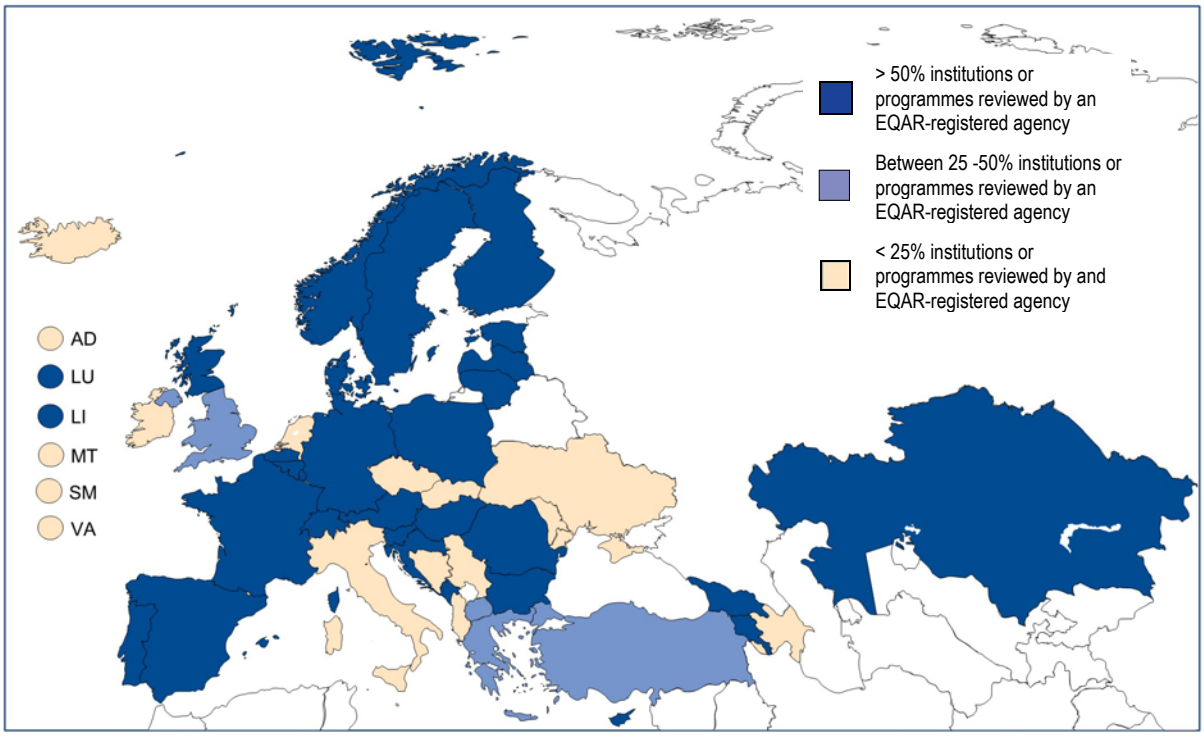
Within 8 other countries, external quality assurance may be occasionally carried out by an EQAR-registered agency, or it may be available only for some higher education institutions as part of the regular external QA against the ESG. Within some of these countries (particularly in Italy, Malta, Moldova, Slovakia) concrete steps have been taken, supporting their national based QA agencies development and their application for EQAR-registration.

In the remaining countries, a quality assurance system is in operation nationwide but further work is required to fully align the higher education system with the ESG. This can be achieved through either the registration in EQAR of a national QA body or by allowing the possibility for higher education institutions within the country to choose an existing registered EQAR-registered QA agency.

For the latter two categories (orange as well as yellow), higher education systems find themselves in the process of defining frameworks and methodologies for quality assurance, in developing and consolidating their standards for accreditation or revising such standards to ensure their fitness for purpose. The BFUG Thematic Peer Group for QA has been supporting the "ESG alignment" of these higher education systems (through peer learning activities and staff mobility exchanges), however not all such countries are represented in this working group and not all countries have been able to make the necessary steps set out in their Action Plan.

The share of higher education institutions that have been reviewed by an EQAR-registered agency (at programme and/or institutional level) is also a good indicator of the extent to which a country has realised the key commitment on having their higher education systems reviewed against the ESG. Data provided by quality assurance agencies uploading their reports into the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR)([46] illustrate the coverage of higher education institutions subject to external in compliance with the ESG (see Fig 2.17)

Figure 2.17: Share of higher education institutions reviewed by an EQAR-registered quality assurance agency, 2022/2023



Source: EQAR.

The over 90.000 quality assurance reports[47] gathered in DEQAR (dated from 2008 to 2023) provide a good coverage for about 25 countries with at least 50% of higher education institutions being reviewed at programme or institutional level by an EQAR-registered agency. The DEQAR data read together with the Scorecard Indicator on stage of development of QA provides a few insights otherwise not evident. In particular it shows those countries where EQAR-registered quality assurance may have already covered a significant part of the higher education system, even though the country may not have an EQAR-registered quality assurance agency regularly carrying out external reviews. This is the

[46] DEQAR allows for a realtime tracking of EHEA members country's alignment with the Key Commitment on QA. The time period to be considered for the validity of external quality assurance is collected from each agency. For agencies that do not have a validity date, a '6 year' average is automatically applied

[47] https://www.eqar.eu/qa-results/search/

case for Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Moldova, Montenegro and the UK (England, Wales and Northern Ireland).

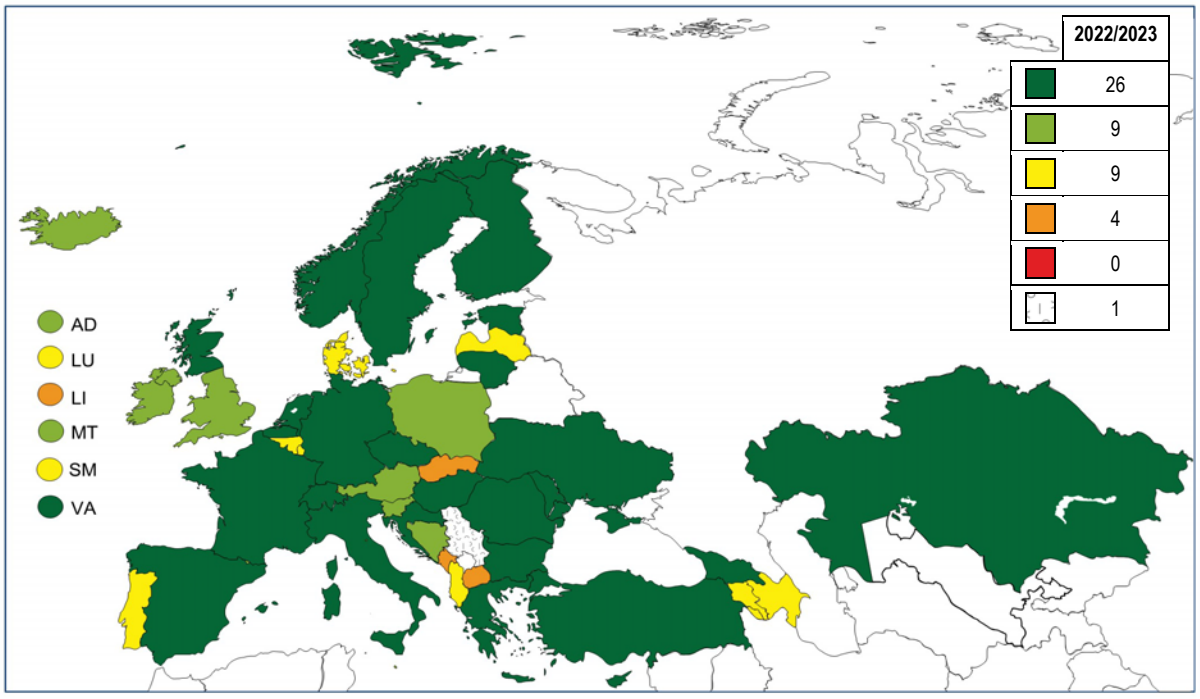
2.3.2. Student participation in external Quality Assurance

Students are not mere recipients of education but active participants in shaping their learning journey. Their participation is underscored in all areas of the Bologna Process including quality assurance.

The scorecard indicator below (see Figure 2.18) provides insight into students' involvement in external quality assurance, based on responses to the BFUG questionnaire. The indicator evaluates student engagement in five key areas of external quality assurance, deeming it satisfactory only if their involvement is achieved in five different areas i.e., participation in governance structures of national QA bodies, in external review teams, in the preparation of self-evaluation reports, in the decision-making process for external reviews and in follow-up procedures. A dark green rating confirms full student participation across all areas, whereas red indicates minimal to no guaranteed involvement. Compared to the results of the 2020 implementation report, countries now indicate an increased achievement in the dark green category, with 26 systems (compared to 20) having achieved a dark green rating while 9 remain in light green. 13 others fall into the yellow or orange categories, indicating the need for more progress towards comprehensive student involvement in quality assurance processes.

Certain countries report that new provisions have been set up in the law to ensure student representatives participate in the governance of their Quality Assurance Agency (Moldova, Greece), as part of external review panels (Moldova, Spain) or in follow-up procedures (Moldova, Croatia). While some countries (Andorra, United Kingdom-Scotland, Finland) do not legally mandate student involvement, many institutions and agencies have taken the initiative to ensure it, in particular in their involvement in the preparation of self-evaluation reports and in follow-up procedures. Others, like San Marino, are in the process of making legislative changes to enhance student engagement in quality assurance.

Figure 2.18: Scorecard indicator n° 7: Level of student participation in external quality assurance, 2022/2023



Source: BFUG Data Collection .

Scorecard categories

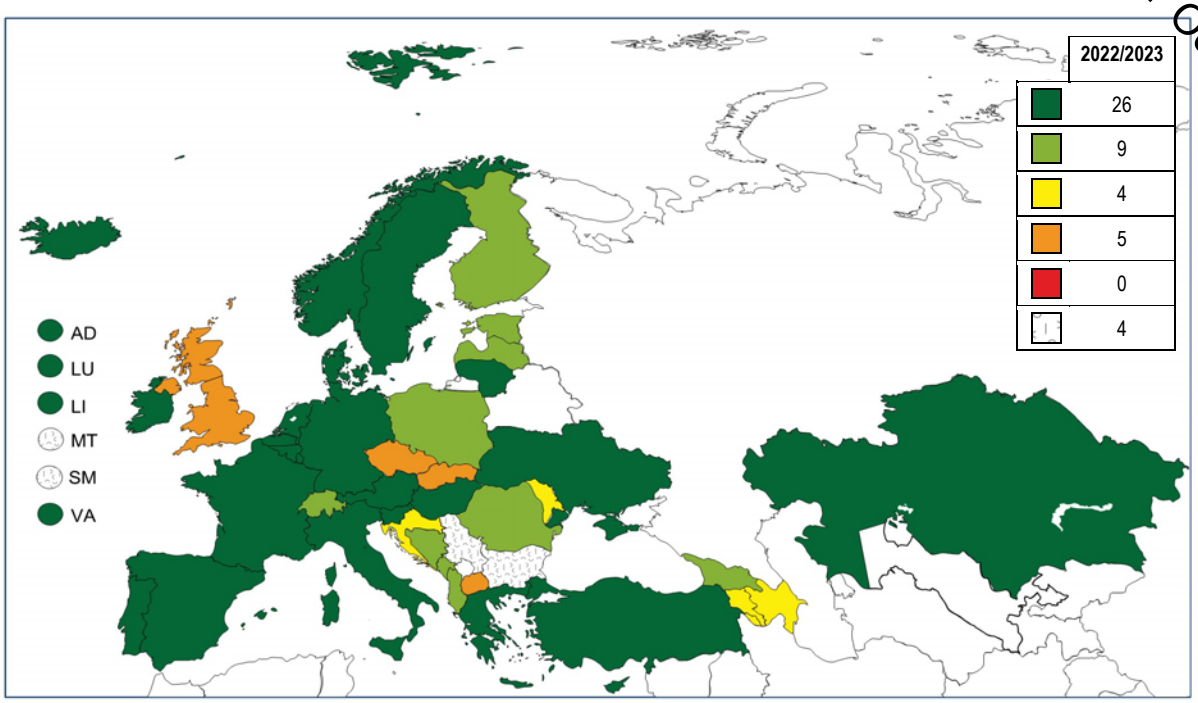
	In all quality assurance reviews, students participate as full members at five levels: ○ in governance structures of national Quality Assurance agencies; ○ in external review teams; ○ in the preparation of self-evaluation reports; ○ in the decision making process for external reviews; ○ in follow-up procedures.
	Students participate at four of the five levels mentioned above.
	Students participate at three of the five levels mentioned above.
	Students participate at two of the five levels mentioned above.
	Students cannot participate or participate at only one level mentioned above.
	Data not available

2.3.3. International participation in national Quality Assurance systems

Internationalisation has significantly influenced developments in quality assurance, evident in collaborations among nations and quality assurance agencies. To optimise the advantages of internationalisation within quality assurance systems, the Bologna commitments have been monitored through a Scorecard indicator (see Fig. 2.19). The indicator measures the level of international participation in external quality assurance based on four categories. One important aspect is the membership or affiliation of quality assurance agencies with the European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies in Europe (ENQA). ENQA stands as the central entity for quality assurance agencies in Europe. It encourages knowledge sharing, best practices, conducts ESG reviews, and spearheads initiatives for innovation and European collaboration in quality assurance. Therefore, affiliating with ENQA is essential for European quality assurance agencies seeking international collaboration. The indicator further refers to the involvement of international experts in the governance structures of national quality assurance entities, their inclusion as members or observers within evaluation teams, as well as their active participation in post-evaluation procedures.

Despite the two years where the pandemic made a strong impact on internationalisation activities in higher education, there has been progress in six higher education systems (Belgium – French Community, Cyprus, Greece, Portugal, Türkiye and Ukraine) in meeting the requirement for international participation in external quality assurance. The pandemic period also brought a notable expansion in the use of innovative digital online tools i.e., in the increase in the implementation of online site-visits or the possibility of remote work in the preparation or engagement of international experts. The responses provided as part of the BFUG data collection exercise also reveal that five countries - Armenia, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, and Slovakia - are performing less well on this indicator than in the previous Bologna exercise.

Figure 2.19: Scorecard indicator n° 8: Level of international participation in external quality assurance, 2022/2023



Source: BFUG Data Collection & ENQA list of members

Scorecard categories

	In all cases the following four aspects are met: ○ agencies are members or affiliates of ENQA; ○ international peers/experts participate in governance of national quality assurance bodies; ○ international peers/experts participate as members/observers in evaluation teams; ○ international peers/experts participate in follow-up procedures.
	Three of the four aspects are met.
	Two of the four aspects are met.
	One of the four aspects is met.
	No international participation
	Data not available

2.3.4. Level of openness to cross border Quality Assurance of EQAR-registered agencies

Signatories of the Ministerial Communiqués of Berlin (2003), Bucharest (2012), Yerevan (2015) and Paris (2018) have recognised and underlined higher education institutions' responsibility for assuring the quality of education and their right to choose a suitable EQAR-registered quality assurance agency (in line with the national framework) for their compulsory external quality assurance. This recognition would empower higher education institutions with the discretion to select any suitable EQAR-registered quality assurance

This would in turn also strengthen the recognition of degrees and qualifications, and concurrently prevent redundancy when the external quality assurance is aligned with a commonly agreed set of standards, the ESG.

EQAR has tracked the progression of countries in adapting their legal frameworks to external quality assurance consistent with the ESG while also monitoring the activity of EQAR-registered agency and the recognition of their external quality assurance evaluations cross-border.

From the latest data collected for this report, two thirds of the EHEA's higher education systems have instituted legislative measures allowing their institutions to undergo accreditation, evaluation, or audits by a foreign EQAR-registered agency. Nonetheless, certain instances reveal that this legislative openness might be overshadowed by supplementary conditions and an array of practical impediments, constraining the full realisation of this option. The current legal framework requirements on cross-border quality assurance reveal a number of limitations on matters such as eligibility requirements, work conditions as well as system level limitations, and specific stipulations for recognition. The eligibility requirement may involve approval from a competent national body and demonstration of additional expertise. Work conditions include using national regulations, frameworks, and language, and adapting standards to meet national requirements. System level limitations might restrict the scope of review to specific institutions or programmes. Ultimately, the recognition of reviews may depend on approval (of the report and/or the decision) from a competent national body or the national quality assurance agency

DEQAR data shows that most cross-border quality assurance procedures (64% of the total cross-border external quality assurance activities) are carried out as voluntary/add-on activities, despite fulfilling the main condition of alignment with the ESG, while mandatory external quality assurance procedures represent 36% of such reviews carried out within EHEA[48].

Countries where cross-border quality assurance procedures are recognised as part of the regular external quality assurance framework also have a higher number of cross-border reviews (namely Kazakhstan, France, Germany, Austria, Moldova, Romania). With the exception of Moldova, all of the above countries have at least one agency registered in EQAR that also carries out reviews across-borders. This clearly shows an openness of the whole higher education system (legal framework, quality assurance agencies and higher education institution) towards cross-border quality assurance. Such an openness can be conducive to cross-border quality assurance, and can be a new way of conceptualising the internationalisation of quality assurance within the EHEA framework.

While national requirements for quality assurance are expected to be followed, some provisions might not always be necessary e.g., by requiring a further approval of the external review report, the decision of the panel for an external quality assurance activity carried out by an EQAR -registered quality assurance agency (that already demonstrated compliance with the ESG). It is on the other hand understandable that QA agencies should also adapt their external quality assurance methodologies to specific national legislation or requested in providing an additional summary report or an accreditation decision in the local language.

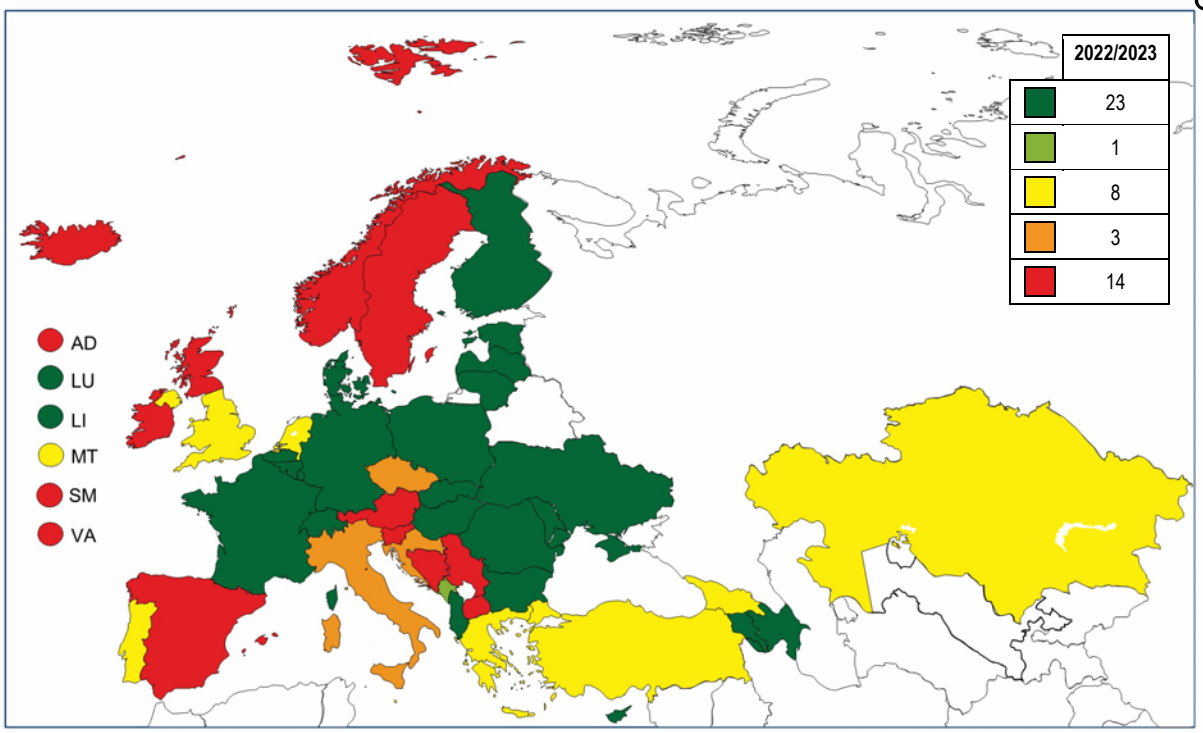
Figure 2.20 (below) shows that in the most favourable scenario (represented by dark green), all higher education institutions and programmes have the liberty to opt for evaluation by an EQAR-registered agency outside their home country for external quality assurance requirements. This scenario is applicable to 23 higher education systems. According to the data collected by EQAR in the QA FIT Survey and maintained as part of its Knowledge Base[49], higher education institutions in Azerbaijan, Greece, France, UK-Wales, Slovakia as well as in some regions in Spain allow (with some conditions) for their institutions to choose a suitable EQAR-registered agency as part of their regular mandatory external quality assurance.

Conversely, in the most restrictive scenario (signified by red), institutions and programmes in 14 systems lack the option to be evaluated by an external quality assurance agency from another country as part of their obligatory external quality assurance process.

[48] Based on DEQAR data as of June 2023. See www.deqar.eu

[49] See more under EQAR's mapping of system openness to cross-border QA https://www.eqar.eu/kb/cross-border-qa/mapping-system-openness-to-cbqa/

Figure 2.20: Scorecard indicator n° 9: Level of openness to cross border quality assurance of EQAR registered agencies, 2022/2023



Source: EQAR.

Scorecard categories

	All institutions and programmes can choose to be evaluated by a suitable quality assurance agency from outside the country to fulfil their obligations for external quality assurance, while complying with national requirements. EQAR registration always serves as a criterion for agencies to be allowed to carry out cross-border evaluation/accreditation/audit.
	All institutions and programmes can choose to be evaluated by a suitable quality assurance agency from outside the country to fulfil their obligations for external quality assurance, while complying with national requirements. EQAR registration does not always serve as a criterion for agencies to be allowed to carry out cross-border evaluation/accreditation/audit.
	In some cases, institutions and/or programmes can choose to be evaluated by a quality assurance agency from outside the country to fulfil their obligations for external quality assurance, while complying with national requirements. EQAR registration always serves as a criterion for agencies to be allowed to carry out cross-border evaluation/accreditation/audit.
	Discussions are on-going or plans have been made to establish a legal framework allowing EQAR-registered agencies to operate in the country
	Institutions and programmes cannot be evaluated by quality assurance agencies from outside the country to fulfil their obligations for external quality assurance, and no plans are being discussed.
	Data not available

2.3.5. The European Approach to the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in the EHEA

The European Approach, adopted by ministers in 2015, seeks to address complexities stemming from the diversity of national standards and differing accreditation processes in European higher education. Issues such as multiple administrative tasks, inconsistent criteria, and varying accreditation schedules can generate uncertainty and divergent outcomes, making the coordination and structuring of joint programmes challenging.

The European Approach is built on two foundational elements: a defined set of standards and a predetermined procedure. These standards -Part 1 of the ESG - have been integrated with acknowledged EHEA tools, especially the EHEA's Qualifications Framework (QF-EHEA) and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). The objective is for the European

Approach to be applied directly, circumventing the need for any additional adaptations or integration of national standards.

This predefined procedure is available for use by any eligible EQAR-registered quality assurance agency, particularly when a consortium partner demands external program accreditation. Currently, 11 out of the 55 registered quality assurance agencies have employed this method. Institutions from countries without a requirement for programme-level external quality assurance may use the European Approach, without any need for changes in the legal framework.

Despite the availability of numerous EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies prepared to implement the European Approach, its full utilisation (in countries requiring programme level external quality assurance) is still hindered by various national regulations. EQAR's Knowledge Base (see fig 2.21 below) shows that, only 20 out of the 49 EHEA systems have fully embraced the European Approach for all higher education institutions. This includes countries where quality assurance is largely conducted at the institutional level (like Armenia, Finland, UK nations, and Switzerland), thus allowing the European Approach's application without legal hindrance.

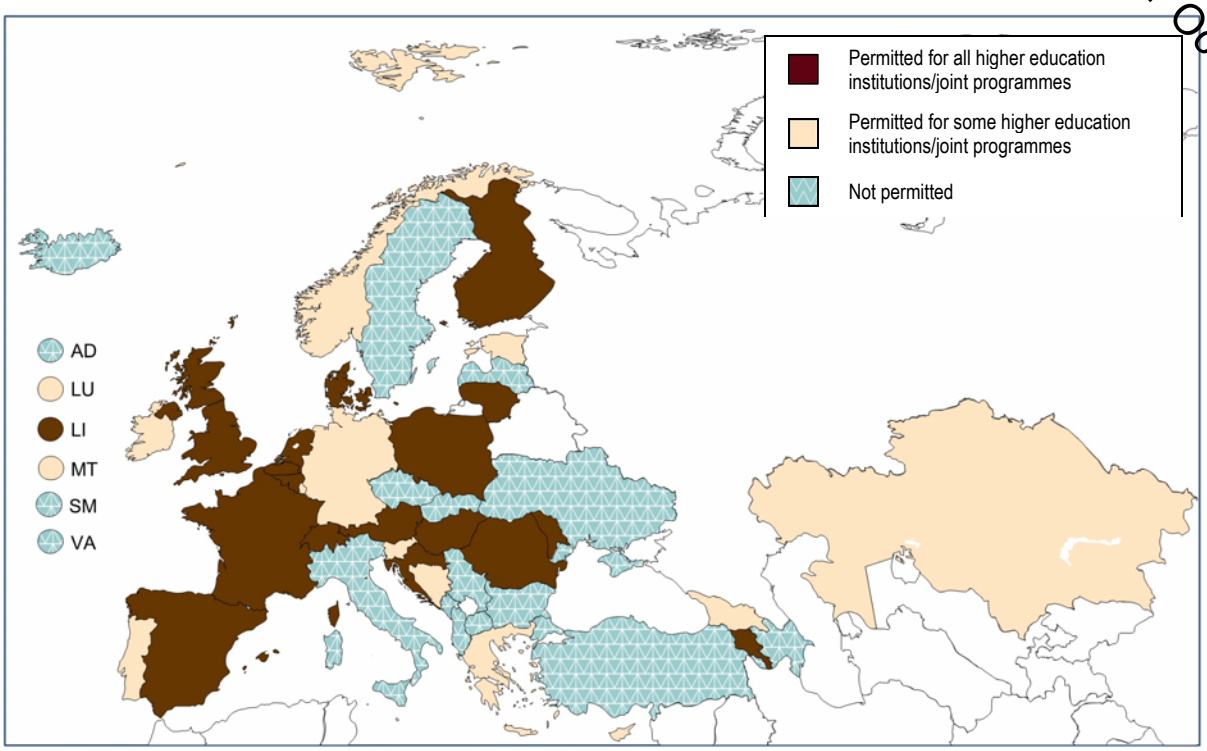
11 more countries allow the European Approach to be employed, albeit only for certain institutions or under specific conditions. For example, in Estonia, the use of the European Approach is possible if the joint programme has previously undergone an assessment by an EQAR registered agency and the other higher education partners have the right to provide instruction in the corresponding study programme group and academic cycle. EKKA, the Estonian national quality assurance body will assess whether the eligibility criteria are met and that no substantial shortcomings have been identified in the assessment report.

In Georgia, the draft agreement of institutions implementing the joint higher educational programme has to be 'pre-approved' by the national quality assurance body NCEQE who will check the content and implementation of the joint programme, including whether the rules for awarding a joint academic degree and enrolment regulations are met.

In Greece, joint programmes offered by Greek higher education institutions participating within a European University Alliance are expected to be reviewed following the European Approach, without any additional national criteria. Institutions that are not members of a European University Alliance are however required to undergo the regular programme accreditation for any joint programmes they may offer.

In the remaining countries, the use of the European Approach cannot be used to replace compulsory national or regional processes.

Figure 2.21: Countries allowing the European Approach for quality assurance of joint programmes, 2022/2023



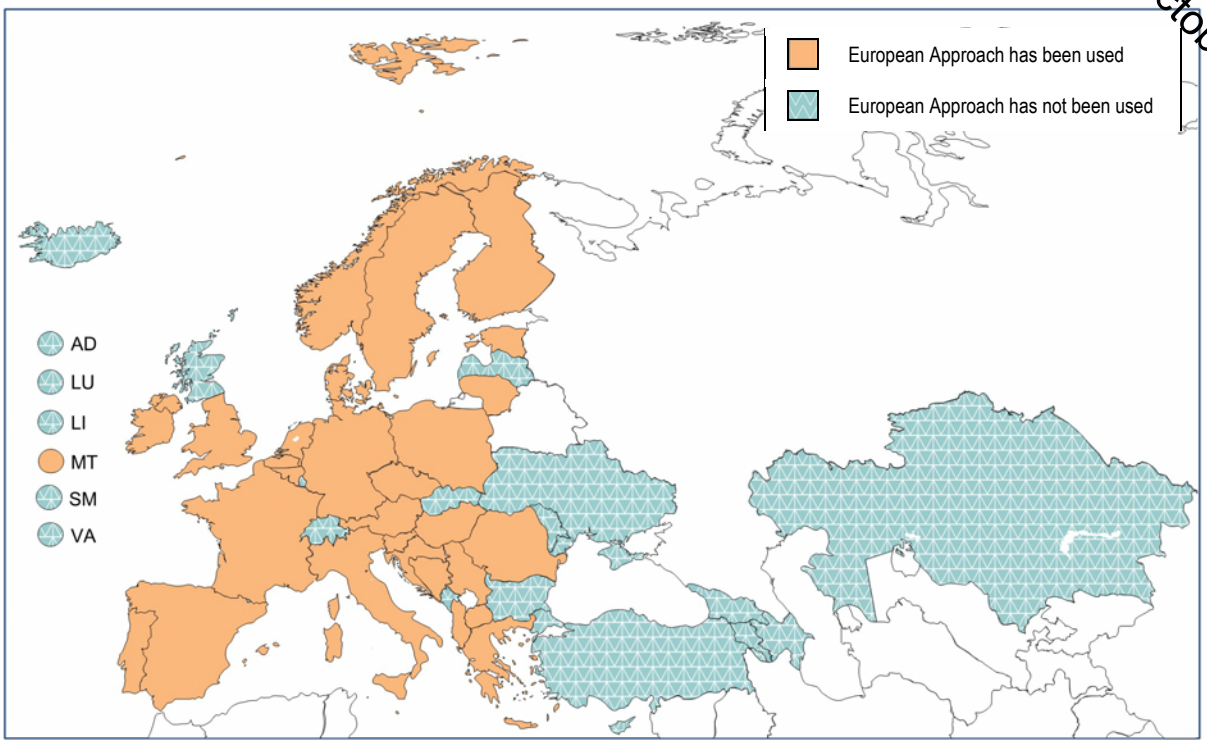
Source: EQAR.

Considering the use of the procedure, reports from quality assurance agencies show that institutions within 29 EHEA member countries (see fig 2.22 below) and six non-EU nations, including Finland and the UK, have successfully implemented the European Approach within their internal quality assurance systems.

When examining the use of the European Approach across various higher education systems, the DEQAR mapping data indicates that higher education institutions most frequently utilise European Approach procedures in countries where the legal framework is permissive. For instance, in France 13 higher education institutions have had joint programmes reviewed with the European Approach, 12 higher education institutions in Germany, 11 higher education institutions in Spain and 6 in the Netherlands. All these countries have introduced a legal framework to facilitate the use of the European Approach for the external quality assurance of joint programmes.

While the currently completed procedures with the European Approach are very few (a total of 32 procedures between 2016 and 2023), according to DEQAR data there has been an uptake of such procedures in recent years. This might be a sign that there is now increasing familiarity with the procedure.

Figure 2.22: Countries using the European Approach for quality assurance of joint programmes, 2022/2023



Source: EQAR.

2.4. Conclusions

2.4.1. Key commitments

This section looked at the progress made in the implementation of a common degree structure and the three main transparency instruments (the Diploma Supplement, National Qualification Frameworks and the European Credit, Transfer and Accumulation Systems). It also took stock of the programmes outside the Bologna degree structure framework, and the percentage of students involved. Finally, it explored the existence of the training modules within higher education institutions that lead to microcredentials.

The analysis shows that there continues to be no single model of degree programmes either for the first or for the second cycle. In the majority of EHEA countries, the most common structures are those of 180 ECTS workload programmes for the first cycle and 120 ECTS credits for the second cycle. The 180 ECTS workload characterises the majority of programmes in more than half of all EHEA countries. In the second cycle, the 120 ECTS model is present in virtually all EHEA systems. The 60-75 ECTS model and 90 ECTS model of second-cycle programmes are present in around a half of all EHEA countries. The most common combined (first and second cycle) workload corresponds to 300 ECTS credits in around three-quarters of all EHEA countries. In the eastern part of the EHEA, the most common workload is often more substantial, corresponding to 360 ECTS credits. This is mainly due to a higher workload of first-cycle programmes.

Slightly more than half of all EHEA systems offer short-cycle higher education programmes. In most EHEA systems, integrated/long programmes which lead directly to a second cycle degree exist, commonly justified by requirements of regulated professions.

Around one-third of EHEA systems also offer programmes outside the Bologna-degree structure, which cannot be associated easily with the three cycle-degree-structure. These programmes claim to respond to specific needs, often related to professional development and lifelong learning. They often aim to develop the skills oriented towards labour market needs, and have some similarities in this respect with programmes leading to microcredentials. Whether or not these programmes could be integrated into Bologna degree structures (as other countries have done) cross-country readability remains a key issue to ensure that these qualifications can be understood and used throughout the EHEA. Correct use of ECTS credits and positioning in national qualifications frameworks offer solutions to tackle the issue.

The results of the data analysis show that in more than half of the education systems (28), mainly in Western Europe, higher education institutions offer learning modules or courses that lead to microcredentials. Yet, only 10 of them place such courses in their NQFs, and even fewer express their workload in ECTS. Despite the growing popularity of microcredentials in the EHEA, few education systems have yet taken steps to ensure their transparency, cross-country readability and portability. Moreover, legal frameworks regulating microcredentials reveal that the concept is not yet understood in the same way across countries. In some education systems, microcredentials are closely associated with lifelong learning, continuing professional development and re-skilling.

While the majority of countries have put in place enabling legal frameworks to ensure that higher education institutions have the possibility to develop flexible modules leading to microcredentials, 7 systems that report the existence of microcredentials also report that legislation does not make provisions for them. Instead, higher education institutions have used their autonomy to pursue their development.

Further research is needed to better understand the emerging role for microcredentials in the higher education landscape, and to monitor the implementation of key aspects of the European Approach outlined in the 2022 Council Recommendation.

With regard to key transparency tools, twenty-five systems require external quality assurance agencies to monitor all key aspects of the implementation of ECTS during their regular evaluation processes. All EHEA countries have introduced the Diploma Supplement, with a large majority (38) fully complying to all ministerial engagements (issued automatically, to all first- and second-cycle graduates, in a widely spoken European language and free of charge). Most countries have fulfilled their commitment to establish and use a QF-EHEA compatible national qualifications framework. 31 education systems have established their national qualifications framework for higher education, self-certified them to the QF-EHEA and made available on the public websites. In addition, in these countries, the NQF is used by national authorities for at least one of the agreed purposes. Although good progress can be observed in the implementation of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) compatible with QF-EHEA, more actions are needed to fulfil this key commitment in the near future.

2.4.2. Recognition

Formal compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) is well established across the EHEA. Significant progress can also be observed since the publication of the 2020 Bologna Implementation report: seven countries have recently embedded all main principles in national legislation. However, despite the overarching legal framework established and the progress reported, many countries still need to take action to ensure that all aspects of the convention are properly implemented in national legislation.

Some countries report recent policy development in relation to the implementation of Article VII of the LRC that offers refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation the opportunity to

have their qualifications recognised, including in cases where documents are missing. In total, 28 out of 49 education systems now have a requirement in national legislation for specific recognition procedures to be in place. Other countries claim that procedures are in place even if there is no legal requirement for them. However, there are still five systems that have no requirement for specific recognition procedures to be in place for refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation, and this represents neglect to the implementation of an international legal commitment.

Despite the potential advantages of using the European Qualification Passport for Refugees and the toolkit developed by ENIC-NARIC for recognition of qualifications held by refugees in cases where documentary evidence may be lacking, few EHEA countries take advantage of these tools in practice. Only three countries both tools systematically, while seven countries make use of them occasionally. In around a quarter of systems there is no information on the use of these tools.

System-level automatic recognition of qualifications and degrees for academic purposes applies in one-third of the education systems. In slightly more than one-third of the systems, automatic recognition applies to some EHEA countries, usually based on regional, bilateral or multilateral agreements. The remaining systems still need to up their game to allow qualitied learners automatic access to higher education in other countries.

A possible relationship can be observed between the workload of first-cycle programmes and automatic recognition. Education systems where most of the first-degree programmes comprise 180 ECTS (see Figure 2.1) are likely to apply automatic recognition of qualifications for academic purposes. However, with few exceptions, education systems where the workload of most first-cycle programmes is 240 ECTS have not put in place a system to facilitate automatic recognition. More investigation would be needed, however, to find out whether the high workload of first-cycle programmes is an obstacle to the automatic recognition of qualifications.

2.4.3. Quality Assurance

The quality assurance section provides an overview of the evolving landscape of quality assurance, with efforts being made to align national efforts with Bologna commitments to further the trust and transparency of the European higher education.

The implementation of the key commitment on external quality assurance is picking up some speed. Since the last implementation report, new countries have joined the green category, with efforts being made in Italy, Malta, Moldova, and Slovakia to develop their national quality assurance agencies and seek EQAR registration.

In some countries, student participation in quality assurance follows the agency's alignment with the key commitment, with several countries implementing measures to involve students in governance and review processes. ENQA is playing a crucial role in supporting these efforts, as well as the internationalisation goals of quality assurance agencies. This is particularly important at a time of challenges to internationalisation in the post pandemic context.

Cross-border quality assurance remains an area of considerable variation, notably in the eligibility conditions and requirements set in countries. While activities have increased in number, which is a sign of progress, many institutions lack the option for the cross-border external evaluation to be recognised in their own higher education system.

The use of European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes has increased in recent years, albeit from a very low starting point. However various national regulations continue to hinder its widespread adoption, with only 20 out of 49 EHEA systems fully embracing it.