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Policy Brief n. 11

THE VINDICATION OF HAQAA's APPROACH BY THE ECTS USER'S GUIDE REVISION UNDER WAY

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Note: The HAQAA Policy Briefs are written in the HAQAA-3 framework but engage only their authors.

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1.- INTRODUCTION. THE REVISION OF THE ECTS' USER'S GUIDE

The Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) is a body set up to give institutional continuity to the Bologna Process in between the biennial Ministerial Conferences. The European Commission participates in it.

In its own words

“Since its establishment in 1999, the Bologna Process has led to significant reforms in the field of higher education in the member countries. Nevertheless, this is a continuously evolving process, and information and knowledge sharing are considered crucial for gaining ownership of the policies agreed upon and their meaningful implementation. In answer to this challenge, the BFUG has approved, as part of the action plan of the Task Force on Enhancing Knowledge Sharing in the EHEA community (TF), the initiation of an EHEA Newsletter, which aims to be the gateway to the Bologna Process and EHEA environment”.

The Newsletter, launched in September 2023, has a biannual periodicity. In the last number, December 2025, it includes an extremely interesting article that refers to the revision of the *2015 ECTS' User's Guide* that has been going on for quite a long time. The European Commission (EC) has decided to take the leadership of the process and give a decisive push to it.

The very advanced state of the revision¹ is explained in the Newsletter in an article signed by the EC itself:²

“In January 2025, an Advisory Group chaired by the European Commission began reviewing the ECTS Users' Guide, following the Tirana (Ministerial) Communiqué mandate... After assessing how ECTS is currently applied, the group identified weaknesses and ambiguities... The group will incorporate feedback from the Copenhagen BFUG meeting in December 2025, aiming for ministerial approval of the revised guide at the 2027 Iași-Chișinău Ministerial Conference.”

¹ https://ehea.info/Download/BFUG_DK_LI_97_10_1_Draft_2_ECTS_Guide_01.12.2025.pdf “)

² (<https://us12.campaignarchive.com/?u=8a606729af9fc76be9254928b&id=53433159e3>),

2.- THE MAIN ASPECTS OF THE REVISION FROM HAQAA'S PERSPECTIVE

From HAQAA's perspective, the main aspects of the revision are two.

1.- The establishment of a clear distinction between “Transfer” and “Recognition”

2.- Section 5 on Mobility and Recognition, in particular sub-section 5.2 on “Planning a Mobility Experience”

1.- The distinction between “Transfer” and “Recognition”

The revision introduces a very sharp distinction between the two notions, which was already introduced by some Member States legislations (the Spanish one, for example):

“Transfer of credits is the process by which credits awarded by one education provider are included (i.e. accumulated) in the learner's record at another provider, in a learner's personal wallet, or in a learner's account/profile in a national database or repository.

Recognition of credits is the process of having transferred credits accepted to be stacked, i.e. counted towards a qualification. For example, credits transferred after a mobility period are counted towards the credits required for obtaining a qualification, replacing credits usually acquired through a course or module that is part of the programme. Credit recognition is necessary for successful mobility”.

So, what matters is **“recognition”**; **“transfer”** means simply that the credits obtained in another institution are somehow recorded but **“without counting”** for the obtention of a diploma. **“Recognition”** means that the credits obtained abroad **“replace”** the credits that would have been obtained in the home University

In the case study analyzed in HAQAA's framework (https://haqaa3.obreal.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Case-Study_Undergraduate_Student_Mobility.pdf) , the reader can find examples of both “transfer” and “recognition”.

2.- Agreements between Universities as the only feasible mechanism and frameworks of undergraduate mobility

The Guide's revision distinguishes three (and only three !) “different ways in which a mobility experience can be planned”: **a) Individual Mobility Period Based on a Learning Agreement, b) Embedded Mobility Pathways, c) Open Mobility.**

The analysis that follows is crystal-clear:

- We can disregard the third way (**Open Mobility**), which is what many have been made to believe is the “normal case”. In this way to mobility, “learners may ... decide to enrol in learning opportunities offered by other education institutions without coordinating with their home/sending institution specifically. **In this case, recognition cannot be guaranteed**, but can only be decided after the mobility has taken place”.

The student can certainly “transfer” its credits (in the sense of having them recorded) but have only the right to have them “considered” for recognition: the home institution may or may not, recognize them. In fact, this possibility has always existed: students have always had the possibility “to ask for” validation or recognition, or whatever name is used in national legislations, leaving to Universities whether to accept or not the demand.

- The first way (**Individual Mobility Period Based on a Learning Agreement**). In this way, “Learners should draft a proposal for the Learning Agreement with the support and guidance of both the sending and receiving institutions/organisations. A staff member should be appointed in each department or subject area and formally authorized to discuss the programme of study abroad with the learner. That staff member should be authorised to approve and sign the Learning Agreement on behalf of the sending institution”.

So, in real life, we can also disregard this way: Can you conceive that an individual student will be able to draft on his/her own a Learning Agreement and convince two Universities to agree to it?

- So, we are left as only viable way with the second one: “**Embedded Mobility Pathways**” (a nice nickname for “agreements between Universities for undergraduate mobility”). Indeed, this is how the Guide's revision defines this way:

“In this case, only the institutions enter into a general (bilateral or multilateral) agreement. This can be a dedicated agreement about the mobility pathway, a general cooperation agreement or any other suitable form. The agreement serves as a universal agreement and the pathways it creates are generally open to all learners. It specifies agreed rules, conditions or requirements that apply”.

But in this case,

“standard mobility pathways that are generally available to learners, **(there is no) need for individual Learning Agreements ...** (If the agreement) specifies agreed rules, conditions or requirements that apply... **individual Learning Agreements are not necessary**”.

Indeed, this is confirmed by the HAQAA Case Study referred to above, which explains that, in fact, Learning Agreements are an administrative requirement to obtain Erasmus scholarships, but are not signed when the mobility takes place without them.

3.- THE VINDICATION OF HAQAA’S DOCTRINE (I.- THE SENSE AND PURPOSE OF A CREDIT TRANSFER - AND RECOGNITION ! – SYSTEM)

HAQAA has always distinguished two interrelated but very different processes in what is often named “European HE integration”: a) the first is that launched and led by the European Union (before its creation, the European Economic Community), and b) the other is the Bologna Process, launched by some Member States, and to whom many other States (member and non-member of the European Union) have adhered), and in which the EU also participates.

A) As an integration process, the first is prior in time. HAQAA’s Policy Briefs number 9 and 10 explain this in detail. They explain also how the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was not conceived as an instrument for harmonization of national legislations but as an instrument for mobility. Policy Brief 9 explains in detail:

- That this is how the idea was launched in the Adonnino Report to the European Council. The Brief exact words are the following:
“The (1985 Adonnino) Report includes a section 5 on Youth, education, exchanges and sport with a subsection 5.6 on University cooperation which (emphasis added) points to

- (a) implement, on the basis of the experience acquired, a **comprehensive European inter-university programme of exchanges and studies** aimed at giving this opportunity to a significant section of the Community' s student population; and
 - (b) examine the possibility of introducing a European system of academic credits transferable throughout the Community (**European Academic Credit Transfer System**).. This system would **be implemented by means of bilateral agreements or on a voluntary basis** by universities and higher education establishments which, by arrangement with one another, would determine the procedures for academic recognition of such credits”.
- And that this is, indeed, how the ECTS was embedded in the first Erasmus decision approved by the EEC Council on the basis of a proposal of the European Commission. The Brief quotes Action 3 of the decision:

“The Community will undertake, through cooperation with the competent authorities in the Member States, ...:

1. measures to promote the European Community Course Credit Transfer System (ECTS) on **an experimental and voluntary basis** in order to provide a means by which students undergoing or having completed higher education and training may receive credit for such training carried out at universities in other Member States. ...

3. **measures to promote, on a voluntary basis, joint curriculum development between universities** in different Member States ...”

- B) When action by the EEC was already underway, the EEC Member States who launched and then participated in the Bologna Process made a different use of the ECTS as an instrument of reform of higher education. This is the use that has prevailed as a model in Africa, forgetting that it is not the original one.

4.- THE VINDICATION OF HAQAA'S DOCTRINE (II.- THE NEED TO CLARIFY THE DIFFERENT MEANINGS, CONTENTS AND PURPOSES OF "RECOGNITION")

HAQAA initiated its Policy Brief Series with that on Recognition (Policy Brief n. 1: <https://haqaa3.obreal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/POLICY-BRIEF-1-on-RECOGNITION.pdf>)

It explains that the term "Recognition" embraces three different issues when applied to diplomas or qualifications in HE. Distinguishing them is essential in order to discuss, from the perspective of African Continental and Regional Integration, the right policy frameworks and the needed or best instruments to tackle them.

- First, a very neat distinction must be drawn between the **academic** and the **professional effects of diplomas**. The distinction must be discussed by reference to ***the effects***, not the diplomas themselves.
- Second, as far as the academic effects, a distinction must also be drawn between those of the **diplomas** required to access further periods/stages of instruction and those of **credits/disciplines** that are components of one programme leading to the obtention of a diploma.

The Brief goes on emphasizing that:

- The *professional* effects of academic diplomas are, in most if not all countries, a heavily regulated area (with, very often, different regulations for the different diplomas/professions). Their application lies outside the remit of Universities and other HE institutions (HEIs).
- Contrariwise, the *academic* effects of diplomas and qualifications in order to pursue studies is much less regulated (depending on the degree of autonomy conferred in each country to Universities and HEIs). And, in any case, it belongs to Universities and HEIs to apply the regulations.

The distinction is, then, framed into an analysis of European integration in HE, distinguishing its two tracks, interrelated but very different: EU action and the Bologna process. The following table summarizes its main features:

	<i>EU action</i>	<i>Bologna Process</i>
<i>Professional effects of diplomas</i>	Partial harmonization by the enactment of legal rules	Nothing
<i>Academic effects of diplomas</i>	Not a priority	No public activities. Unilateral action Mainly left to Universities' autonomy. Government agencies and services may provide assistance.
<i>Academic effects of components of diplomas (credits/disciplines)</i>	Common public activities (Erasmus programme and others) Diplomatic instruments (promotion of ECTS and agreements between Universities)	No public activities Diplomatic instruments involving governments Mainly left to Uni. Autonomy and to bi-plurilateral agreements between Universities, taking advantage of EU action

On the basis of this framework of analysis, Policy Brief 1 concludes that:

- The issue of the recognition of professional effects of HE diplomas is, mainly, an issue covered by the rules on the organization of economic activities and linked to the more or less free circulation of services, professionals and qualified workers; so, falling outside the remit of Universities.
- **But, If we concentrate in the issue of the recognition of the academic effects of both diplomas (to enter higher levels of study) and components of diplomas (to move among different Universities at the same level of studies – mainly undergraduate), we come to a conclusion that is quite obvious but that has remained hidden by misunderstandings, too often provoked by confuse explanations and analysis: the main actors of the process leading to (more or less) recognition (and mobility insofar as previous academic recognition is required) are the Universities themselves, either acting unilaterally or by signing bi- or plurilateral agreements between them.**

However, the EU has been very successful in its use of Common Public Activities and Diplomatic Instruments. The launch of the Erasmus programme and the promotion of ECTS has favoured the multiplication of agreements between Universities and the introduction of much more open criteria when individual Universities assess the diplomas and credits obtained in other fellow Universities in order to decide whether they “validate” / convalidate” / recognize them as “equivalent” in order to accept students.

5.- THE VINDICATION OF HAQAA’S DOCTRINE (III.- UNIVERSITIES AS DEVELOPMENT AND INTEGRATION AGENTS)

HAQAA’s Policy Brief 5 deals with the issue of “African Continental integration in and through higher education: Empowering Universities as Development and Integration Agents” (<https://haqaa3.obreal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/POLICY-BRIEF-5-ON-EMPOWERING-UNIVERSITIES.pdf>)

The Brief defends that Universities should not be considered, nor consider themselves, “recipients” of continental integration but essential actors of it. The argument can be summarized as follows:

“African leaders have always recognized the need of education as a critical instrument for its development. Education, in general, and higher education in particular, have not only been embraced as a policy area by African Regional Economic Communities. It has always been in the core of African Continental integration...

Accordingly, various educational initiatives have been formulated by African leaders. The African Union, and the African Union Commission (AUC) in its behalf, have over the years launched ambitious initiatives to promote continental higher education integration...

But these initiatives have not sufficiently succeeded to translate these efforts in concrete impactful actions. Africa needs to take concrete and effective actions that can promote its development and break the barriers of disintegration...

Many of these continental educational initiatives in Africa have not translated to development and integration in the continent for various reasons...

the fourth and main major (reason) ... to emphasize is the inability of the continental initiatives to be transmitted to actions at the national levels and to engage educational actors, including the universities who ought to implement their tenets at the grassroots level.

Indeed, Universities of Africa have for long remained the un-used strength that has been ignored by African governments”.

Therefore, the Brief emphasizes the urgent need to 1. Refocus continental integration in and through higher education. 2. Empower African Universities as development agents (the overriding purpose of African integration).

But the political neglect for the role of Universities as integration and development agents has been interiorized by Universities themselves. Therefore, the Brief concludes that

“Universities must also be reminded that their collaboration with other fellow Universities in other African States is not only a possibility all of them must consider (instead of concentrating only in the collaboration with non-African Universities) but an obligation, ethical and political. This twofold obligation stems from the assumption, unanimously accepted by all African political leaders and institutions, that Continental African integration is needed, as previously mentioned, to bring African nations to the level of development and world influence that they deserve”.

This conclusion is fully warranted by the ECTS User’s Guide’s revision we have been referring to. Indeed, in such an advanced HE integration process as the EU/European one,

- the main agents of integration have been the Universities themselves through a thick web of agreements between them;
- and the wisdom of the European Commission has lied in choosing the right integration instruments: Common activities (Erasmus) and Diplomatic instruments (promoting a political framework that favours the cooperation between Universities).

6.- A FINAL RECOMMENDATION AS A CONCLUSION

The arguments developed in the previous sections cannot but lead to a conclusion that we will state as a three-pronged recommendation:

- **To African Universities:** Please do not wait for some sort of “deus-ex-machina” to integrate African Higher Education. This deus-ex-machina has not existed in Europe, or even in the more restricted space of the European Union, where national legislations on HE remain divergent and not harmonized. Universities (in Africa as in Europe) can and must collaborate between them, in particular at undergraduate level. And they can do so on the basis of existing divergent applicable national legislations (in Africa as in Europe). Universities are not “recipients” of integration but “agents” of it.
- **To the African Union and, in particular, the African Union Commission:** Please do not intend what is impossible; i.e. to create a fully integrated African Higher Education. Promote an African HE Area as a framework for cooperation to be used in all sorts of variable geometry (or variable geography) that incentivizes the cooperation between Universities pointed to in the previous indent.
- **To the European Union and, in particular, the European Commission.** Please do not look for an African integration in HE that would be deeper and broader than that really existing in Europe. Please draw and apply the best lessons of European integration in HE, centered on its most successful feature: the promotion of student mobility at undergraduate level achieved by the Erasmus programme, launched by the European Commission forty years ago. The main building block for it already exists: the Intra Africa Academic Mobility Scheme; it suffices to broaden it to the undergraduate level and to substantially augment its weight in the Africa – EE Partnership.