

Joint Declaration on Full Implementation of the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the WB6

Preamble

We, the undersigned civil society organizations from the Western Balkans, reaffirm our commitment to advancing the recognition of higher education qualifications in the Western Balkans (WB6). We recognize the fundamental role of diploma recognition in **facilitating student mobility, improving employment opportunities, and fostering regional cooperation.**

We issue this joint statement after reviewing the commitments made by WB6 governments in:

- **The 2019 Declaration on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the Western Balkans¹**, signed under the framework of the **Berlin Process**, aimed to establish **automatic recognition of higher education qualifications** but has yet to be fully implemented.
- **The 2024 Agreement on Admission to Higher Education in the Western Balkans²**, promotes equal access and admission for students in public higher education institutions across WB6 but lacks enforcement mechanisms for diploma recognition and nostrification.
- **Existing bilateral and multilateral agreements between WB6 countries** on higher education recognition remain largely unimplemented or inconsistently applied.

Despite these commitments, **bureaucratic obstacles, lack of harmonized procedures, and delays in implementation continue to hinder the free movement of students and professionals** in the region. We call for urgent action to ensure that these agreements are not just signed documents but become **fully operational and enforced**. Therefore, we are demanding for:

Full Enforcement of Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications

- WB6 governments must establish **a legally binding framework** for **automatically recognizing Bachelor's, Master's, and Ph.D. degrees** awarded by accredited regional higher education institutions;
- Recognition must be **transparent, efficient, and free of unnecessary administrative barriers**, ensuring that all WB6 graduates can **continue their studies or access employment without delays**.

Urgent Reform of the Nostrification Process

- The **nostrification (validation) process for foreign diplomas** in WB6 must be streamlined and aligned with European Higher Education Area (EHEA) standards.
- Governments should **eliminate excessive fees and administrative delays** in diploma recognition.
- A **unified digital system for diploma verification** should be introduced to prevent fraud while **ensuring fast-track processing for legitimate degrees**.

Recognition of Short-Cycle and Integrated Degrees Without Barriers

- Short-cycle degrees (1-2 years) should be **recognized without additional administrative procedures**, allowing students to continue their studies or enter the labor market seamlessly.
- Integrated second-cycle degrees (e.g., 5-year law, medicine, engineering degrees) must be **automatically acknowledged as equivalent EQF Level 7 qualifications** without additional evaluation.

Implementation of Equal Access to Higher Education Across WB6

- In line with the **2024 Agreement on Admission to Higher Education**, all WB6 students must be granted **equal access to higher education institutions and programs** in any WB6 country without discrimination.
- The **same admission criteria** should apply to all students, regardless of their country of origin within the WB6.
- **Recognition of secondary education diplomas** for university admission should be processed within **30 days**, as outlined in the **2024 Agreement**, ensuring that no student is left without timely access to higher education.

Mutual Recognition of Study Periods Abroad Without Additional Validation

- Credits earned through **academic exchanges and mobility programs** should be **automatically transferred** between WB6 universities without additional verification requirements.
- **Legally binding agreements** between higher education institutions for credit transfer must be enforced and respected.

Establishment of the Regional Educational Initiative under the Berlin Process

- We advocate for the establishment of the **Regional Educational Initiative (REI)** as an official mechanism within the Berlin Process, bringing together the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the Education Reform Initiative of South East Europe (ERI SEE), and civil society organizations (CSOs) actively engaged in education reform across the region. This initiative should oversee the harmonization of recognition procedures, ensure compliance with the **2019 Declaration**, the **2024 Agreement**, and existing bilateral agreements, and publish annual progress reports on the implementation of diploma recognition and academic mobility. Additionally, the REI should facilitate cross-border cooperation between higher education institutions and national recognition bodies, accelerating the process of mutual recognition and eliminating barriers for students and graduates.

Strengthening Transparency, Accountability, and Quality Assurance

- WB6 countries must align their quality assurance systems with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Higher Education.
- National agencies responsible for accreditation and recognition should increase cooperation and data sharing to prevent delays and inconsistencies.
- Governments should publish annual reports on their progress in implementing automatic diploma recognition and academic mobility to ensure accountability.

Call to Action

The recognition of higher education qualifications has been a **priority of the Berlin Process since 2014**, aimed at fostering **regional cooperation and EU integration of the Western Balkans**. The **2019 Declaration** and the **2024 Agreement on Admission to Higher Education** were intended to remove barriers for students and graduates, yet **implementation remains weak and inconsistent**.

We call upon WB6 governments to:

- Immediately implement the commitments made under the Berlin Process, the 2019 Declaration, and the 2024 Agreement on Admission to Higher Education.
- Eliminate unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles that prevent students and graduates from moving freely between WB6 countries for study and employment.
- Establish the Regional Educational Initiative (REI) under the Berlin Process, ensuring that civil society organizations actively oversee progress and implementation.
- Engage the European Union and international partners in monitoring and supporting the full implementation of automatic diploma recognition across the region.

The youth of the Western Balkans cannot afford further delays. **Diploma recognition is a fundamental right, not a privilege.** The Berlin Process set the vision — now it is time for action.

We demand immediate and full implementation of the recognition of higher education qualifications across WB6.

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