

,BOLOGNA AND QUALIFICATIONS: QUALITY, RECOGNITION, CREDIT AND ACCREDITATION IN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

- An overview -

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1 Introduction

International credential evaluation is one of the pillars of the Bologna process. The creation of a competitive and attractive European education area, and the promotion of mobility and European employability, will have little chance of success if the knowledge and skills acquired in different European education systems are not recognized beyond national borders. This applies both to borders within the Bologna zone and beyond.

Whereas, in 1999, it received only a mention in the Bologna Declaration, international recognition is a key focus of the 2001 Prague Communiqué. The Communiqué also urges the ENIC and NARIC networks of recognition information centres to take up the 'recognition gauntlet' independently and in collaboration with the European Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).¹

In 2001 an ENIC/NARIC Working Party analyzed the Bologna process from a recognition perspective in its Recognition Issues in the Bologna Process – final report and used this to draw up a 'recognition agenda' for the next five years.² The ENIC and NARIC networks and ENQA have also established a collaborative venture based on two exploratory documents, which was given the green light in spring 2002 at the annual meetings of all three networks. These two international projects form the basis of this paper, which examines the relationship between recognition and quality assurance and possible implications for the national context. Although the debate surrounding GATS and education is also tangentially related to this matter, it will not be considered here.

2 International recognition in the Bologna process

The past 15 years have seen many notable achievements in the world of international recognition. They range from the Lisbon Recognition Convention of 1997, including the various instruments in its regime,³ to the Diploma

Supplement and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Consolidation is needed in some areas, while the Bologna process necessitates a change of direction in others.

Generally speaking, the following assumptions can be made.

There is no longer a need for *new* international legislative instruments. The focus needs to shift from legislative to more flexible solutions, such as Codes of Good Practice and Recommendations. Many more stakeholders could be involved in the latter, and the end product is easier to amend, which is an advantage given the rapid pace of development in education.

The harmonization of degree structures – the core of the Bologna Declaration – will undoubtedly benefit transparency and comparability. But we must remember that the introduction of a flexible bachelor's/master's structure will also – possibly above all – lead to more diversity, certainly in Master's degrees. There might be huge differences between degrees bearing the same name, in terms of admission requirements, content, learning objectives and function, as well as in the rights they confer. Furthermore, higher education institutions in Europe are more and more inclined to differentiate themselves from what is seen increasingly as the competition. Within this increased flexibility, we are also seeing a major increase in the individualization of education. A range of profiles is emerging within a more clearly defined framework of qualifications. Greater transparency does not therefore necessarily lead to 'automatic recognition'. The harmonization of degree structures in Europe will not obviate the need for individual recognition, but it will simplify the process. The availability and reliability of information, and trustworthy and accessible information brokers, will be crucial in the evaluation and recognition of qualifications. The recognition information centres and their networks will play an important role in both the gathering and passing on of information and the *interpretation of it in the national or regional context*.

Whereas, in the past, international recognition was mainly a matter of academic recognition to ensure that foreign students and graduates were placed correctly within the academic system, nowadays evaluation is becoming more and more important for professional purposes. Promotion of European employability goes hand in hand with a growth in professional recognition. Contact and

¹ There are two networks of recognition information centres in Europe: the Council of Europe and UNESCO's European Network of Information Centres on Recognition and Mobility (ENIC) and the European Commission's network of National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC). They have a joint website: <http://www.enic-naric.net>.

² *Recognition issues in the Bologna process – final report (of the ENIC Working Party on Recognition Issues in the Bologna process)*, 2001 (see: http://www.aic.lv/meeting/net_meet/English/It_5.htm).

³ *Recommendation of criteria and procedures for the assessment of foreign qualifications*, Strasbourg/Bucharest, 2001 (see: http://www.aic.lv/meeting/conv_com/eng/c_it_7.htm).

The UNESCO-Council of Europe Code of good practice in the provision of transnational education, Strasbourg/Bucharest, 2001 (see: http://www.aic.lv/meeting/conv_com/eng/C_Item_6.htm).

Recommendation of criteria and procedures for the assessment of foreign qualifications, Strasbourg/Bucharest, 2001 (see: http://www.aic.lv/meeting/conv_com/eng/c_it_7.htm).

negotiation with the social partners and trade organizations is becoming steadily more important.

The well-known trends in education, from privatization to globalization, from virtualization to the concept of lifelong learning, have not only substantially altered the education landscape, but also the field of diploma evaluation. The formal degree at the end of a regular educational pathway now faces stiff competition. Transnational education is undermining concepts like 'national borders' and 'national context'. Lifelong learning is no longer merely a theoretical concept – it reflects a reality whereby, in people's life course and career, we are seeing a shift from formal education to various forms of learning.⁴ In evaluating qualifications acquired through formal education, the focus therefore lies less and less on the education process, the curriculum, and more and more on learning outcomes. When it comes to other forms of learning, assessment of competencies is more relevant, irrespective of the learning pathway followed. This means that traditional diploma evaluation has to be expanded to include a methodology and procedures that allow for the assessment of competencies. In 2001, therefore, the ENIC and NARIC networks made this a priority for the next five years.⁵

Finally, the close links between recognition and quality assurance, institutionalized in a collaboration between the networks and bodies involved, are extremely important for the future of credential evaluation. They are therefore the subject of this paper.

3 Quality assurance and accreditation as a recognition issue

For the purposes of this paper, quality assurance systems and accreditation have been regarded as one and the same thing. Of course this is not accurate from a methodological and procedural point of view. Whereas a quality assurance system aims mainly at raising standards, accreditation focuses on accountability and consumer protection. Accreditation shows that a course or institution has attained a certain established level of quality. But from the point of view of foreign consumers – or of someone evaluating credentials from an academic or professional perspective – this is the most pertinent issue, relevant to systems with either quality assurance or accreditation.

Where do the concepts of recognition and quality assurance/accreditation meet? The first thing to consider is the target groups.

Target groups	Who	What (main products/services)
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Higher education institutions	Recognition (R)	Admission and the acceptance of credits earned elsewhere
	Quality assurance/ accreditation (Q/A)	<i>Raising standards and accountability</i>
Students	R	<i>Evaluation of credentials; information on status of institutions and/or curricula and recognition options</i> <i>Information on education systems and qualifications from other countries</i>
	Q/A	(Information on status of institutions and/or curricula)
Graduates, professionals	R	Evaluation of credentials Information on other countries' qualifications (and systems)
	Q/A	<i>n.a.</i>
Government/ ministries	R	Evaluation of credentials or information on recognition procedures for professional purposes (regulated professions) Information on other countries' systems and qualifications
	Q/A	<i>Improvement and enforcement of quality assurance systems (accountability, public protection)</i>
Employers	R	Evaluation of credentials Information on other countries' qualifications (and systems)
	Q/A via R?	National context: indirect through management of quality assurance system (public protection) <i>International via R: information on status of institutions, programmes and diplomas.</i>

Both involve services or activities relevant to a range of clients: higher education institutions, students and government bodies. Recognition is probably only relevant to graduates and professionals. The common target groups are higher education institutions and students, while the labour market (employers) is a new and rapidly growing target group.

⁴ *Verkenning levensloop* ('A Life Course Exploration'), Ministry of Social Affairs & Employment et al. 2002.

⁵ Individual centres have taken it up as well. For example, the Dutch ENIC/NARIC has taken the matter in hand in its ACCEPT project, in close collaboration with the national *EVC Kenniscentrum* and the Empowerment Centre EVC, and with financial support from the European Commission: *Assessment of competencies in education, professional training and employment*.

In general, the main objectives of quality assurance and accreditation in the *national* context are the improvement and enforcement of standards, efforts to improve quality (mainly quality assurance), consumer protection, and accountability (mainly accreditation).

Of course, guaranteeing a minimum standard of higher education degrees and diplomas is an important aspect of the quality assurance and accreditation system. We can therefore regard the recognition of degrees and diplomas in other countries as the main aim of quality assurance/accreditation from an *international* perspective. And it is precisely the ‘minimum standard’ and/or accreditation that is so important in the evaluation of credentials and qualifications, for both academic and professional recognition.

Defining and explaining a quality statement in the national context should present few problems. However, to do so effectively for target groups in other countries is more difficult. Firstly, the required information sources and channels are not always available, and those that are tend not to be transparent or clear enough for foreign consumers. Furthermore, the information and information channels will *not have been designed to suit the needs of a wide variety of consumers, particularly foreign consumers*. Experience in the field of professional recognition, in particular – recognition for the labour market – has shown that information on quality from other countries needs to be properly channelled or ‘translated’. The ENICs and NARICs are fulfilling this role as well as they can at the moment, but more structure is clearly needed. The problem gets worse when we come to areas where it is not clear whether there has been a quality check and, if so, who carried it out. This is the case, for example, with *joint degrees*, *franchising* and, above all, *transnational education (TNE)*.

As we have said, credential evaluation is impossible if we do not know about the standard of institutions and the programmes they offer. But we must bear in mind that, while this is a *necessary* precondition, it is *not enough* in itself. Knowledge of quality (and accreditation) alone is not an adequate basis for evaluating a credential. To position it correctly in the education system or labour market of the receiving country, one needs a thorough knowledge of the system that conferred the qualification. As stated above, this will not essentially change with the introduction of the bachelor’s/master’s system throughout Europe.

4 ENIC/NARIC networks and ENQA

The above developments, and the call in the Prague Communiqué, prompted the ENIC/NARIC networks and the European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA)⁶ to establish a joint working group to analyze the problems and devise solutions.

4.1 Background and exploration of the issues

Its first observation was that the issues surrounding quality from a recognition perspective can be divided into two categories.

The first category concerns matters associated with the national context:

- regular accreditation/quality assurance
- quality differentiation
- not officially recognized/accredited programmes offered by officially recognized/accredited institutions.

Closer international cooperation on quality assurance and accreditation would guarantee that many problems were solved on an ad hoc basis. Information on a course or qualification is always available somewhere, and in the worst case it would simply have to be dug up, possibly ‘translated’ and passed on.

Of course for some regions it is still crucial that the regular accreditation system be made more transparent to guarantee the international credibility of the regular education system. But generally speaking the national systems in the Bologna zone safeguard the ENQA standards. And international initiatives launched by organizations like INQAAHE and UNESCO to develop a worldwide ‘label’ for accreditation bodies should certainly bear fruit in the future (see below).

Quality differentiation is a more difficult area. In most countries, one assumes that higher education meets a guaranteed standard comparable to all formally recognized higher education institutions. Ranking is a sensitive issue in virtually all countries, apart from the US, for example. It is nevertheless important for those evaluating credentials that they have some insight into possible differences in quality, particularly in regions or higher education systems where there is reason to doubt whether the standard of all higher education institutions is properly safeguarded. If these doubts are ignored, this generally means that good institutions are ultimately also damaged by the growing mistrust, and that they too have difficulty getting their qualifications recognized in other countries.

Non-accredited programmes offered by accredited institutions, such as the Dutch postgraduate master’s degrees in the pre-NAO⁷ era, require particular attention. But the Dutch example is not the only one. Although such programmes of study meet minimum quality requirements (sometimes definitely, sometimes most probably), they cannot be formally recognized or accredited. The current, rather unsatisfactory solution is to explain their status and quality to the consumer on a case-by-case basis. The solution that the Working Group of the networks suggests is to devise a way of describing formats that can be applied to this kind of programme, and would include an explanation of why they cannot be accredited. Such a

⁶ <http://www.enqa.net/>

⁷ Together with the introduction of the Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees structure in the Netherlands, the Dutch authorities established an accreditation system run by the Netherlands Accreditation Organisation (NAO).

statement could then be sanctioned by the three networks, giving the programme an authoritative or even semi-official status in the countries affiliated to the networks. This method also has broader application, allowing the networks to tackle various problems that can be solved by means of what we might call *authoritative communication*. The second category consists of issues related to the *international context*:

- virtual education not covered by regular national accreditation or quality assurance mechanisms
- transnational education (not covered by a national accreditation system)
- private education.

These programs might lead to a degree, or they might represent the so-called non-degree programs.

We must above all avoid equating *accredited/non-accredited* with *good/bad*. It is no longer acceptable to reject a programme simply because it is not accredited. There are now too many valuable programmes, provided by many institutions, that are not accredited.

The bottom line is that we need insight into the quality of study programmes. If there is no national mechanism to provide this, how can we guarantee quality? Although the right information sources are very important, a more proactive approach is needed. The three networks have decided to launch joint initiatives to analyze the problems and put forward solutions.

4.2 Specifics

A number of specific issues have been placed on the Working Group's agenda for 2003. They should lead to a more detailed approach to the matter outlined above.

Firstly, joint degrees are often referred to as a possible focus of joint activity. The uncertainty surrounding the quality of study programmes leading to joint degrees in some countries is a major obstacle to their recognition. Prompted by the European Association of Universities' study of this issue, among other things, an informal working group of the ENIC/NARIC networks have produced draft international recommendations on the structure and recognition of joint degrees. After ENQA representatives have had the opportunity to make comments and suggestions, the document will be presented to the competent authorities so it can function as an official recommendation under the Lisbon Recognition Convention, thus promoting the international acceptance and recognition of joint degrees.

One of the most essential concepts within credential evaluation methodology, and as such the cornerstone of recognition legislation such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the EU Directives on professional recognition, is that of "essential differences". A diploma or qualification must be recognized in the receiving country unless the receiving country can demonstrate substantial differences between the programmes in question. According to the Lisbon Recognition Convention, these differences concern the content,

structure, duration/study load and quality. The Convention and associated documents look in greater depth at the possible differences in content, structure and duration/study load, but say nothing about quality. The Working Group has therefore decided to address this issue with the ultimate aim of producing a typology of accreditation/quality assurance systems from the perspective of recognition. The typology recently devised by the ENQA will be taken as the starting point.

In the light of the introduction through Europe of the 'Bologna structure' (basically bachelor's and master's degrees), there is likely to be a great need for a typology of degrees. Several interesting initiatives are already underway, both nationally and internationally. The developments mentioned in the preceding paragraph are particularly important. The Working Group has decided that the ENICs/NARICs will comment on the existing initiatives, in which many people in the quality assurance sector are already actively engaged. The main ones are the Joint Quality Initiative's Dublin Descriptors and the Tuning Project (see below). The ENICs/NARICs will therefore also recommend that the initiators of these projects work together.

Attempts are also being made to tackle the issue of transnational education (TNE), or at least 'real' TNE, i.e. education that cannot be traced back to a national education system in any way whatsoever, unlike franchising, for example.

One possible solution is to promote joint compilation of Codes of Good Practice for education providers.⁸ Providers that observed such a code would be assured that the ENICs/NARICs would consider their degrees. Furthermore, in the debate on the Codes of Good Practice, the ENICs/NARICs could specify exactly what quality criteria they regard as important. The quality assurance systems could then take this into account in the future.

The setting up of new evaluation (not accreditation) mechanisms for this kind of programme has also been suggested. The ENQA could take the initiative, and the ENIC and NARIC networks would accept the outcomes.

The subject of the increase in non-degree programmes, which credential evaluators all over Europe are encountering, has also been discussed. Although the problem is acknowledged by all, it currently does not fall within the competence of the ENQA, so it will not be tackled jointly for the time being.

Finally, the subject of information provision remains high on the agenda, although it is assumed that this can in fact best be tackled in the framework of actual collaboration between the national ENIC/NARIC and the quality assurance or accreditation body.

⁸ It should be noted that such a Code of Good Practice already exists, as one of the documents/recommendations appended to the Lisbon Recognition Convention. What is in fact needed is an implementation mechanism.

5 Other relevant initiatives

A number of the initiatives mentioned above have important implications for the 'meeting' of recognition and quality assurance/accreditation. Some are discussed in brief below. This overview is by no means comprehensive, as it concentrates only on the initiatives regarded as important from the point of view of the ENIC and NARIC networks.

The Joint Quality Initiative is an informal network consisting mainly of representatives of quality assurance organizations and ministries, which aims to increase the transparency of collaboration between quality assurance systems, and to clarify the bachelor's/master's structures in Europe.⁹ Three of its projects are important for recognition. Firstly, the 'Shared descriptors for bachelor's and master's degrees' (the 'Dublin descriptors'), whereby generic learning objectives or competencies are set out for bachelor's and master's. Secondly, 'Distinction in naming of degrees', whereby the various names of degrees in different countries are described, including any differences between professional and academic degrees. Finally, the Joint Quality Initiative is devising a 'Draft description format' which would describe the main features of a qualification or degree, including its accreditation status. Work is also underway on a 'Glossary of Terms for the Development of the National Framework of Qualifications'. Obviously, all these initiatives are very important for anyone with responsibility for recognizing qualifications and degrees in Europe. A follow-up to the Dublin descriptors with input from the ENICs and NARICs would constitute a good step towards more transparency, and therefore towards better comparability between European degrees. The qualification format must of course be consistent with the international Diploma Supplement developed by the ENICs and NARICs.

The Tuning Project – 'Tuning education structures in Europe' – aims to harmonize education structures in Europe, more specifically the nature of bachelor's and master's degrees.¹⁰ The focus is mainly on subject-specific competencies (or learning objectives) in a number of selected disciplines. Irrespective of the results, which are very relevant, the discussions within the process are important for recognition.

The European Association of Universities (EUA) was established in March 2001 and is a merger of the CRE-Association of European Universities and the Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences.¹¹ It is the largest European association of higher education institutions and it aims, among other things, to promote a culture of or inclination towards quality assurance in institutions. It also concerns itself with the recognition of qualifications, as evidenced for instance by its coordinating role in ECTS and the Diploma Supplement. It also coordinates research, such as the studies on the

introduction of bachelor's and master's degrees in Europe and the problem of joint degrees. This organization's work most certainly straddles the boundary between recognition and quality assurance.

An initiative launched by UNESCO in September 2001 – the Global Forum for Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Diplomas, actually established in October 2002 – could be an important development. Its aim is to place and maintain issues concerning quality assurance and the accreditation of programmes (or institutions) and the international recognition of diplomas on the agenda of the higher education sector and national and international policymakers. Cross-border education will receive particular attention. UNESCO's approach is global, and therefore transcends the boundaries of most other initiatives, which tend to have a regional focus. But that could also be its Achilles' heel, because it has to take account of huge differences (including in pace) in different parts of the world.

We should also mention UNESCO's European education organization, CEPES, in Bucharest.¹² This organization, co-secretary of the ENIC network alongside the Council of Europe, is also active in the field of accreditation with its 'Indicators for Institutional and Programme Accreditation in Higher/Tertiary Education' project, part of 'Strategic Indicators for Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century (2001-2003)'. A working group is currently analyzing quality indicators recently used in accreditation, and drawing up a set of core standards and corresponding performance indicators for both programme and institutional accreditation.

Another international initiative is the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE).¹³ The main aim of this network is to gather and disseminate information on existing and forthcoming quality assurance methodologies and practices in higher education. The idea behind this is to promote best practice in quality assurance and quality improvement. Its network function is very important, as it provides a place where quality assurance and accreditation organizations can literally and figuratively 'meet'. INQAAHE also aims to foster use of credit transfer systems and encourage institutions to provide material to facilitate the international recognition of diplomas. The network also intends to sound the alarm on dubious accreditation processes and organizations, an activity which will be highly important for recognition.

Finally, we should like to mention one more interesting and so far unique initiative: a consortium involving UNESCO, INQAAHE and the International Association of University Presidents (IAUP), which has proposed that a 'Worldwide Quality Label for Quality Assurance and Accreditation' be instituted.¹⁴ This initiative would not only foster international cooperation between quality

⁹ <http://www.jointquality.org>

¹⁰ <http://odur.let.rug.nl/TuningProject/index.htm>

¹¹ <http://www.unige.ch/eua/>

¹² <http://www.cepes.ro/>

¹³ <http://www.inqaahe.nl>

¹⁴ <http://www.ia-up.org/iaupinfo.htm#mission>

assurance and accreditation bodies, it would also do great service to the world of recognition, allowing diploma evaluators all over the world to verify the reliability of quality assurance systems or accreditation mechanisms.

6 Implications for the national setting

Given the developments discussed above, what priorities should the national recognition information centres (ENICs/NARICs) be setting?

To summarize, we can say that there is a common misunderstanding that the introduction in Europe of the bachelor's/master's structure, combined with the realization of compatible quality assurance or accreditation systems will lead to the automatic mutual recognition of diplomas and degrees, with no intervention by a 'translation' body. Quality and accreditation is just one aspect of the information that diploma evaluators are expected to provide to education institutions and employers. Other important aspects include content, structure, selectivity, educational approach and function.

As the outgoing Dutch education minister, Maria van der Hoeven, put it in an interview in 2000: 'Even if you are participating in the bachelor's/master's structure, employers still need an idea of the content of programmes in other countries, of what job applicants can and can't do'.

But the issue of quality is crucial for recognition, and thus for international mobility and employability, as called for in the Bologna Declaration.

It is safe to conclude that the traditional products and services of the recognition centres will remain essential: case-by-case diploma evaluation will continue to be a highly relevant product. In most countries, the centres will also have to support various bodies implementing the international statutory instruments, particularly the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the EC Directives.

Furthermore, the ENICs/NARICs will play an important role in the further development and introduction of transparency instruments, such as the international Diploma Supplement and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

But the new directions that diploma evaluation and recognition will be required to take are more relevant to the subject of this paper. They are also important for both the ENIC/NARIC networks and the national centres themselves. In future, information provision will be a product that, in terms of relevance, can match up to regular, case-by-case diploma evaluation. On-line communication will play a key role in this. The aim is:

- a) to give various target groups in other countries an insight into the quality assurance and/or accreditation status of programmes covered by an official accreditation system (see also below);
- b) to reflect generic similarities and differences in the bachelor's and master's degrees offered in Europe, on the basis of a number of defined criteria.

The emphasis is shifting more and more towards evaluation for the labour market: professional recognition, with non-traditional qualifications steadily gaining in

importance. The world of recognition, and the Dutch ENIC/NARIC, must therefore take account of a continual shift in its customer base, and an important future role for direct contact with *employers*. This means that the ENICs/NARICs will be involved in explaining foreign qualifications to employers, from the accreditation results to learning objectives. One really satisfactory solution would be to reflect both qualifications and employers' requirements in *competencies*.

What does this imply for the relationship between the worlds of accreditation/quality assurance and recognition at national level?

As we have already noted, information provision is a key issue. The ENIC/NARIC networks and ENQA expect that it will be possible to answer the most important questions concerning study programmes covered by a single official accreditation system simply by providing enough information. It is therefore important that each country devises a transparent on-line system offering information about quality and accreditation status for the entire educational system. It should cater for a range of target groups, both at home and abroad. In view of the above, this can probably best be guaranteed by close collaboration between the national ENICs/NARICs and the authorities that are responsible for accreditation or quality assurance in higher education.

The tuning of bachelor's and master's degrees, or at least the identification of differences and similarities, is attracting national and international attention. Developments abroad and their implications for international recognition are important to the national debate on this issue – from the description of learning objectives to the English names of degrees. It is therefore highly recommended that national recognition information centres contribute their specific expertise and experience in their own country too.

Finally, the problem of non-accredited programmes (and qualifications), including TNE, must be tackled also in the national context. This can vary from developing Codes of Good Practice, to launching various evaluation initiatives. The strategy will thus vary from country to country. In the Netherlands for example, the Centre for International Recognition and Certification, that also functions as the Dutch ENIC/NARIC, has taken up the challenge by deciding to certify non-degree programmes targeted at foreign students.