

Towards mutual recognition of accreditation decisions

by Mark Frederiks

Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions has been an item of increasing importance in the Bologna process.

The introduction of the first cycle (Bachelor) and second cycle (Master) degrees along the lines of the Bologna Declaration stimulated accreditation in many European countries. The reasoning behind this was that the quality and the standards of the newly established Bachelors and Masters programmes should be made internationally transparent. It is all very well to introduce Bachelors and Masters everywhere but if the quality varies widely from country to country then the ambitions of Bologna are lost. Accreditation tackles this quality problem because it establishes threshold standards; assesses the quality of programmes or institutions against these standards; and translates the assessment results into a formal decision (mostly yes, no, or conditional).

The next step is that accreditation systems and outcomes are mutually accepted. In the Prague Communiqué, the Ministers responsible for higher education emphasised, “the necessity of close European cooperation and mutual trust in and acceptance of national quality assurance systems ... to design scenarios for mutual acceptance of evaluation and accreditation/certification mechanisms”. Against this background 14 accreditation organisations from eight European countries decided to set up a consortium. In June 2003 the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA) held its first plenary meeting in The Hague. In November 2003 ECA was formally established in Córdoba. The aim of ECA is to achieve mutual recognition of accreditation decisions among the members before the end of 2007.

The rather broad wording of mutual acceptance and trust in the Prague Communiqué has been made explicit by ECA’s aim of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. In the Bergen Communiqué the Ministers, “underline the importance of cooperation between nationally recognised agencies with a view to enhancing the mutual recognition of accreditation or quality assurance decisions”. The Council of the European Union and the European Parliament recommend to member states to, “promote cooperation between agencies in order to build up mutual trust and the recognition of quality assurance and accreditation assessments, thus contributing to the recognition of qualifications for the purpose of study or work in another country”.

Why is mutual recognition of accreditation decisions necessary?

As mentioned above mutual recognition of accreditation decisions is supported by the 45 ministers responsible for higher education and by the European Union. In addition, the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education recommend that quality assurance and accreditation bodies, “reach mutual recognition agreements with other bodies on the basis of trust in and understanding of each other’s professional practice”. But all this welcome support is not the main reason why accreditation organisations are cooperating within ECA. The Consortium was neither set up top-down nor given mandates from ministers at the start. ECA is a bottom-up initiative of accreditation organisations that are committed to contributing to the Bologna aims and understand that they can play

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an important role in increasing mobility. The members of ECA believe that mutual recognition of accreditation decisions facilitates the recognition of qualifications. And better recognition of qualifications makes it easier for students and graduates to move across borders within the future European Higher Education Area.

Why is mutual recognition of accreditation decisions necessary to facilitate the recognition of qualifications? First, the ENIC/NARICs with whom ECA cooperates have made it clear that ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention does not solve all the recognition problems. A case by case approach is still necessary and quality is an important ‘substantial difference’ on the grounds of which recognition can be denied. The Bergen agreement on European standards and guidelines for quality assurance, the current process of setting up a European register of quality assurance agencies and the development of national qualification frameworks linked to the overarching European framework are important initiatives for promoting good practices in quality assurance across Europe. But it will take away neither the necessity of a case to case approach nor the denial of recognition on the grounds of substantial difference in quality. It is also clear that the implementation of these measures would take some years. In addition, the nationally based reviews and self-certify-

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ing processes in 45 Bologna countries would allow for a wide variety of national approaches and sincerity.

Second, recognition of foreign accreditation decisions and qualifications is ultimately based on the question whether there is sufficient trust in these accreditations and qualifications. For ECA members this process of trust-building involves mutual understanding of systems, close cooperation and observation, as well as agreement on and external evaluation of shared standards and procedures. At the end of this intensive process ECA members can wholeheartedly engage in mutual recognition agreements. In turn these agreements and the availability of fully transparent information on accreditation decisions will lead to the trust needed by the recognition authorities to automatically recognise the accredited qualifications. This will truly contribute to the mobility aims of Bologna.

Third, mutual recognition of accreditation decisions, followed by automatic recognition of qualifications, would solve many problems that institutions and students are experiencing with cross-border cooperation. It would prevent that joint programmes and joint degrees need to be accredited and recognised in each of the

participating countries. And that would make it much easier for institutions and students to participate in these cross-border programmes which by definition increase mobility.

A road map to mutual recognition

There are currently 15 member organisations from 10 European countries (Austria, Flanders, France, Germany, Ireland, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, and Switzerland). A road map has been developed containing the essential activities and tools needed to come to mutual recognition agreements. An important milestone was that the members of ECA have signed a joint Code of Good Practice in December 2004. The Code guarantees comparability of accreditation procedures and defines the internal quality assurance measures of accreditation organisations. The Code contains 17 standards with correlating questions and points of reference. The Code corresponds with the ENQA Standards for External Quality Assurance Agencies. The standards of the Code should be implemented by members by the end of 2006. It will be externally evaluated whether ECA members fulfil the requirements of the Code of Good Practice.

A second milestone is that in June 2005 ECA members agreed on common principles for the selection of experts. A third milestone is that a number of ECA members and ENIC/NARICs signed a joint declaration in December 2005. The aim of this joint declaration is the automatic recognition of accredited qualifications following the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions or results. The development of a transparent information tool has also been agreed upon. This information tool will provide on-line information on the accreditation organisations, systems and decisions as well as information on the qualifications of accredited higher education programmes and institutions. A challenge for the future will be to encourage governments, stakeholders, recognition authorities and accreditation organisations in other countries to join the road map to mutual recognition. For more information on ECA, please visit www.eaconsortium.net, or contact the author. ■

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