

## **NATIONAL ACTION PLAN FOR RECOGNITION - NORWAY**

Based on the Guidelines elaborated by the ENIC Bureau, the NARIC Advisory Board and the Bureau of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee, and approved by the Bologna Follow Up Group in Vienna on 7 April 2006

## 1. Legislation

### 1.1 *Lisbon Recognition Convention*

- a. Norway ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention in April 1999.

### 1.2 *Review of national legislation relevant to recognition*

- a. The timetable and organization of the review of national legislation (including secondary legislation);

In March 2006, the Ministry of Education and Research nominated a commission for national and international recognition issues in, and limited to, higher education. The commission is expected to finalise its report to the Ministry in late January 2007. It is expected that the report will include recommendations concerning the provisions of the Higher Education Act relating to recognition, as these were not revised as part of the process of making a new law for higher education 2005, although a new degree structure had been introduced from 2003. It should be noted that both previous and present legislation on higher education has ensured, and does provide for, full recognition of higher education from abroad; it is the nature of the new degree programmes that would seem to necessitate a different phrasing of the relevant provisions, as the formulae used might not be easily applicable on the more integrated post-2003 degrees.

- b. Steps envisaged as a result of the review, e.g. as regards amending national legislation where needed and an indicative timetable for such amendments.

The report from the commission will be sent for formal consultation to all interested parties in spring 2007 (higher education institutions, social partners, various ministries and government agencies, etc). Depending on the proposals of the commission and the feedback from the consultation process, the ministry will consider the need for amendments of the Higher Education Act and relevant regulations, possibly late 2007/early 2008.

### 1.3 *Bilateral or regional recognition agreements*

- a. Conformity with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention

The Nordic ENIC offices have recently finalised a three-year project funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers, as a follow-up of the political goals of the Nordic Declaration on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education (the "Reykjavik Declaration"). With the Nordic Declaration on Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, the Nordic Ministers of Education and Research will in particular ensure:

1. That qualifications in the field of higher education shall be given full mutual recognition between the Nordic countries.
2. That the Nordic countries shall achieve better Nordic compatibility in the evaluation of qualifications obtained in both Nordic and other countries by means of continuing exchange of information and experience between ministries, the authorities appointed as national information centres on academic recognition and mobility (the ENIC offices, see Article X.3 of the Convention) as well as institutions of higher education.
3. That the appropriate authorities shall provide information and guidance on issues affecting the recognition of higher education between the Nordic countries.
4. That on a continuous basis, the national ENIC offices shall identify problems in implementing and applying the Nordic Declaration as well as the Lisbon Convention, and that they shall report to the Nordic Council of Ministers every second year. The first report was made at the end of 2005. (It was produced by NORRIC, the Nordic Recognition and Information Centres, for the Secretariat of the Nordic Council of Ministers.)

The main part of the 3-year project of the Nordic ENIC offices mentioned above, dealt with the mapping of recognition issues to identify possible problems. Information issues were also discussed. An application for the funding of a new three-year project will be submitted to the Council of Ministers in early 2007.

## **2. Recognition practice**

In the context of this action plan, the term Competent Recognition Authority is to be understood as authorities under the auspices of the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research.

### **2.1 Criteria and procedures**

- a. Overview of the practice of competent recognition authorities in applying the Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and Periods of Study.

Since its establishment in January 2003, NOKUT<sup>1</sup> is responsible for general recognition of higher education qualifications from abroad (see also section 4.1.b below) and for providing advice to the higher education institutions in recognition matters. The higher education institutions are responsible for recognition for admission, for further studies, and for the right to use Norwegian academic titles.

NOKUT is also responsible for the national follow-up of the Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and Periods of Study.

The Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and Periods of Study were fully implemented by NOKUT since its establishment. They are the basis for the handling of all applications, including applications regarding general recognition of studies undertaken in countries that are not party to the Convention.

All phases of the recognition procedure are described in detail and are a part of the internal quality assurance system. An overview of the procedure is provided in annex (in Norwegian only).

- b. Measures to improve implementation.

NOKUT has elaborated and distributed to all HEIs a manual on recognition, explaining in detail all procedural aspects on how to deal with an application for recognition. Recognition officers of the higher education institutions are invited to national annual conferences on various aspects of recognition. These conferences are organised by NOKUT and regularly draw between 100 and 120 participants.

The results of a survey in October 2006 (see below, section 2.3) would indicate that these measures are insufficient, however, and that new measures are called for. The Ministry will therefore ask NOKUT to consider to make it compulsory to include recognition procedures in the formal quality assurance system of all HEIs.

Awareness-raising and information activities might also be relevant in this context, see section 3 below.

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<sup>1</sup> NOKUT is the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education. In addition to quality assurance and accreditation of higher education and other post-secondary vocational provision, NOKUT is Norway's ENIC-NARIC and information centre for the follow-up of the Lisbon Recognition Provision.

- c. Overview of the time required to process applications for recognition and measures to improve this time.

Since its establishment in 2003, NOKUT has worked systematically to reduce the time required to process applications for general recognition. The average processing time needed was thus reduced from an average of 4.5 months in 2003 to an average of approximately 3 months in 2005, despite an increase in the total number of applications, from 1614 in 2003 to 2452 in 2005. In 2006, NOKUT received 2208 applications for general recognition, and the processing time was further reduced – to an average of 2.6 months.

## **2.2 Joint degrees**

- a. Overview of the legal provisions concerning the recognition of joint degrees.

The 2005 Act on Higher Education allows for the recognition of joint degrees, see section 3-2 (1).

- b. Amendments to remove legal obstacles or to establish legal provision favouring the recognition of joint degrees.

As indicated in section a. above, there are no legal obstacles to the recognition of joint degrees. Academic recognition of joint degrees, whether national, international or mixed, is permitted – and even encouraged – provided all elements of a possible degree combination from the consortium in question are duly quality assured and/or accredited.

- c. Beyond legal provision, suggestion of policy measures to ensure the recognition of joint degrees.

NOKUT has elaborated standards, criteria and regulations regarding the establishment and accreditation of joint degrees to ensure that the level and quality assurance of joint degrees are on par with other Norwegian accredited higher provision.

- d. Overview of double and multiple degrees and policy measures to encourage the recognition of such degrees.

It is the policy of the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research that graduates should receive only one diploma per degree programme, and our policy is hence to encourage joint degrees rather than double or multiple degrees. However, within the present legislation, it is perfectly possible for students and graduates to obtain a new diploma without doing a full new degree programme, provided a minimum of 60 new credit points (90 for certain study programmes) have been successfully completed since the previous diploma was issued. It is irrelevant whether that diploma is of national or international origin.

## **2.3 Overview of institutional practice**

Recognition is done both by administrative and academic staff. As a rule, the administrative staff prepares the files and forwards them to the appropriate academic staff. At the larger institutions where the administrative staff handle a larger number of files, applications are often dealt with administratively by precedent.

Consider what measures have been or should be taken to allow national authorities to know

- a. whether higher education institutions and other competent recognition authorities comply with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and with national laws;

One measure taken, is a survey conducted in October 2006<sup>2</sup>. This survey had proved most useful. The main findings are that

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<sup>2</sup> The survey was conducted partly to prepare for this action plan, and partly for the commission on national and international recognition issues in higher education that was nominated by the Ministry of Education and

- most of the respondents (24) have written procedures, or are about to implement written procedures (4) on how to deal with recognition of qualifications from abroad.
- most respondents (21) report that they make no distinctions in treatment between the various types of applications. Some HEIs make it clear that for capacity reasons their own students and applicants who want to study at the HEI in question have priority over other applicants, They do not seem to exceed the 4-month processing deadline, however.
- only a small minority (5) have routines to detect possible mistakes or inconsistencies in their recognition procedures.
- a minority (11) routinely send receipts to confirm reception of applications.
- a few (8) routinely inform applicants about the expected time needed to process the application, others (4) inform applicants about procedures for recognition, while yet others (5) have this information on their web sites.
- a few (8) are actively working on measures to reduce the time for processing applications for recognition of higher education from abroad.

The time required to process applications for recognition seems to be well below the four months stipulated in the Lisbon Recognition Convention. There is no precise information on actual average time available, but the information given through the survey indicates that the figure would be somewhat below 3 months.

Although most HEIs, including all the big ones, comply with the requirements of the Lisbon Recognition and its supplementary texts in terms of the time needed to process recognition applications and the availability of relevant routines, much remains to be done to improve these routines – in terms of information to applicants and on the web, receipts, systems for detection of errors or inconsistencies.

In the survey, the higher education institutions were also asked to estimate their own degree of implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention on a scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high). 20 HEIs responded, of which 3 reported full implementation (score 5), 10 gave themselves score 4, six score 3 and one claimed to have score 1. A surprisingly high number (15) did not answer this question at all. The majority of those that did not respond are the small university colleges which are the ones most likely to receive the smallest number of applications, and hence to be the least experienced and proficient regarding recognition procedures. It is unclear whether the lack of response is due to lack of knowledge about the Convention or else to such a modest number or applications that the question was not perceived as relevant.

The most effective measures to improve procedures relating to the processing of recognition applications and to further reduce the average time used to process applications for recognition would be:

- to include the use of the Criteria and Procedures in the higher education institutions' system for quality assurance (see also section 2.1.b above)
- to further improve the information provided by NOKUT.

The main measure implemented in Norway to allow national authorities to know whether the HEIs comply with the Lisbon Recognition Convention, is a national database on recognition,

in which all recognition decisions concerning higher education qualifications should be registered. One deficiency in the design of the database is that it only shows the end result of the recognition process, and not whether the HEIs actually comply with the Convention and the Criteria and Procedures at all stages. In addition, the Ministry has recently discovered that many higher education institutions do not use the database, and that the follow-up of it has been insufficient. In order for the database to function according to intention, the Ministry will ask NOKUT to set up a working group to look at possible ways of improving it, or else to replace it by a new and more functional database.

- b. what measures could be taken if given institutions or authorities were shown consistently not to apply the Convention and/or relevant national laws.

As the survey mentioned above has revealed flaws in the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the Ministry will raise this issue as a general point at all the governance meetings with the higher education institutions in 2007.

If it was discovered that an institution or authority still consistently failed to apply the Convention and/or relevant national legislation, the first step would be to raise the issue more in-depth at the formal annual governance meeting between the Ministry and the higher education institution/authority in question. What measures that would have to be taken if this turned out not to be sufficient to rectify matters, would have to be decided on a case to case basis.

#### **2.4 Transparency tools for recognition**

- a. Plans and timetable for the implementation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)

The ECTS system (or, more correctly, a national system fully compatible with the ECTS as developed in the Erasmus Programme) is fully implemented in Norway. A system of credit points (20 per year of full-time study) was gradually introduced from the 1960s onwards, starting in the natural sciences, and was fully implemented in the early 1990s. This system was revised with the Quality Reform of higher education in 2001, implemented in 2003, to be (even more) ECTS compatible, with 60 credits per year of full-time study.

- b. Plans and timetable for the implementation of the Diploma Supplement

The Diploma Supplement is fully implemented in Norway. It became compulsory for all state higher education institutions (that cater for nearly 90 % of all students) through a revision of the Universities and University Colleges Act in 2002, and it became compulsory for all HE institutions, i.e. also including the private ones, with the 2005 Act on Higher Education.

- c. Plans and timetable for the implementation of possible other transparency tools.

As mentioned above (section 2.3.a), in spring 2007, NOKUT will be asked to set up a working group to propose improvement or replacement of the national database on recognition.

A working group with stakeholder participation has proposed descriptions for a national qualifications framework for higher education in Norway. The proposal will be sent for formal consultation among all interested parties in the spring of 2007.

#### **2.5 Borderless/transnational education**

- a. National and/or institutional policies concerning the assessment of borderless/transnational education.

Advice on the assessment of borderless/transnational education is partly covered by the supplementary document to the Convention: Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education, which all HEIs have been informed of by the Ministry of Education and Research and encouraged to apply.

The most recent advisory document is the UNESCO/CEPES and OECD guidelines for quality provision of cross border higher education. A representative of the ministry in fact chaired the working group that developed these guidelines (Mr Jan S. Levy), a sign of the national importance that is given to the existence of an international framework in this field. The ministry has informed about the guidelines at a good number of conferences and seminars. In order to ensure that all institutions are aware of them, the ministry will (again) send the guidelines to all the higher education institutions to encourage them to use them. This is all the more relevant, as the October 2006 survey referred to several times above in fact also revealed that the true meaning of borderless/ transnational education seemed unclear to a good number of the respondents.

### **3. Information provision**

#### **3.1 *Provision of information on recognition***

- a. Measures taken or envisaged to improve the provision of information on recognition criteria and procedures and on the national education system;

Measures taken:

Criteria and procedures described in detail are available at NOKUT's website (i.e. the Norwegian ENIC). There is also a link to the Eurydice Database on Education, where one can find detailed descriptions of the national education systems of the 31 participating countries. NOKUT's website also includes chapter 8 of the Diploma Supplement. A database with system descriptions and possible general recognition results covering some 46 countries is available online.

The information available at the websites of the HEIs is more fragmented and varying both in terms of quality and of completeness.

Measures envisaged:

The commission that was established in March 2006 to review the entire field of academic recognition both at the HEIs and at NOKUT will deliver its final report in late January 2007, and it is expected that it will contain recommendations relating to information. Possible measures will be considered depending on the proposals from the commission and the results of the consultation process, see also above, section 1.2.b.

- b. The timetable envisaged for such measures;

Depending on the costs of the measures proposed, relevant minor measures could at the earliest be included in the 2008 budget; very costly measures would have to wait for the 2009 budget – at least.

- c. The bodies or institutions responsible for the measures;

Information in the Eurydice database: the Norwegian Ministry for Education and Research. The other measures mentioned above: the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) and the individual higher education institutions, respectively.

- d. The state of electronic provision of information on recognition;  
All information is available online.

- e. Whether the national information centres establish and maintain their own web pages, linked to the ENIC-NARIC Web site.

NOKUT, i.e. the Norwegian ENIC-NARIC, maintains a rather extensive website duly linked to the ENIC-NARIC Website.

### **3.2 Information package for applicants**

- a. The extent to which information packages are provided for applicants by higher education institutions and other competent recognition authorities and,

As will have appeared from the above, excellent information on recognition matters is available on NOKUT's website, but few, if any of the higher education institutions provide applicants with information packages.

- b. If needed, how practice could be improved.

The commission looking at recognition issues, and whose report will be finalised at the end of January 2007, will make proposals relating to information, see above, section 3.1.a

## **4. Structures**

### **4.1 National information centre**

Outline the functioning of the national information centre (ENIC/NARIC), e.g. with regard to:

- a. The formal status of the centre;

NOKUT is an independent government agency.

- b. Legal competence (e.g. advisory or decision making; academic, de jure professional, de facto professional recognition);

Decisions on general recognition i.e. recognitions aimed at the non-regulated labour market, are formal – since an amendment of the Universities and University Colleges Act valid from 1 January 2003.

- c. Staff and budget;

Staff: NOKUT has 10 ½ full-time equivalents devoted to recognition issues.

Budget: NOKUT as a whole has approx. NOK 42 million (2006), i.e. about Eur 5 090 909, the ENIC-NARIC function within NOKUT has approx. NOK 5 million (Eur 606 061).

- d. Capacity building in terms of expertise and service to the public;

NOKUT focuses on capacity building of staff and offers extensive services to the public at both individual and organisational level. The information to the public at large could be improved regarding the procedures and division of labour, particularly in the rather fragmented area of professional recognition in Norway. See also sections 1.2.b and 3.1.a above.

- e. Networking and cooperation at national level and internationally.

NOKUT co-operates with a multitude of stakeholders both nationally and internationally, and is an active partner in international networks like the ENIC and NARIC networks, NORRIC (the Nordic Recognition and Information Centres), ECA and ENQA. Nationally, it is NOKUT's annual recognition conferences that are most noticed, see section 2.1.6 above.

### **4.2 Cooperation recognition/quality assurance bodies**

- a. Information exchange between the bodies responsible for recognition and quality assurance;

As bodies responsible for recognition, quality assurance and accreditation are in fact all – or both – parts of NOKUT, the possibility for information exchange is very good.

b. Discussion of and agreement on working methods between these bodies;  
See answer to point 4.2 a. above. Both “bodies” consult each other when needed.

c. Use of information on the outcomes of quality assessments in the recognition of qualifications;

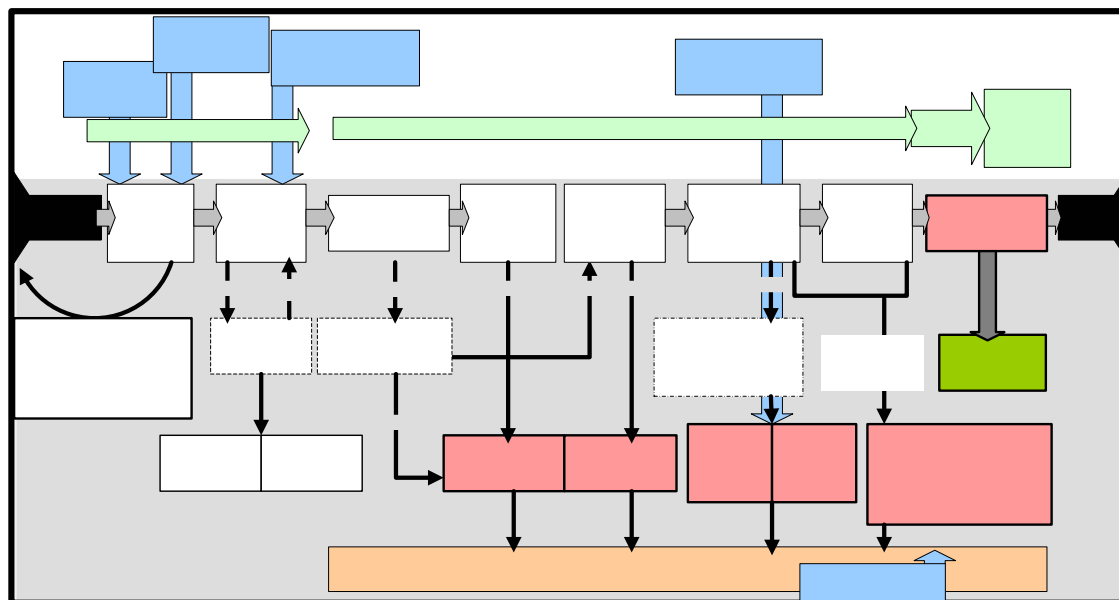
Recognition of qualifications is, directly or implicitly, based on the outcomes of quality assessments. All parts of a foreign higher education qualification must be from an accredited or otherwise quality assured provider (or provision). The quality assurance agency in question must be governmental or working on behalf of, or on contract with, the national authority in the country of the educational provider. In countries without an established QAA, only qualifications from state approved providers are considered for recognition.

d. Use of membership of international networks and associations in recognition (e.g. ENIC and NARIC Networks) and quality assurance (e.g. ENQA) for the mutual benefits of both bodies.

NOKUT is an active member both of the ENIC and NARIC Networks and of ENQA. This ensures the maintenance and further development of knowledge in both fields. NOKUT benefits from active memberships in these bodies and the ensuing information sharing.

### Annex

An overview of the procedure regarding applications for general recognition handled by NOKUT (unfortunately only available in Norwegian)



**PROSEDYRE-  
BESKRIVELSER**

3-Generell  
godkjenning

4-Registrering  
av søknader

5-Beha  
originald

**Registrering/komplettering**

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NOKUT  
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Er  
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