



13 December 2006

**Ministry of Education, Research and
Culture**

Division for Higher Education

**National Action Plan for Recognition
SWEDEN¹**

1. Legislation

1.1 Lisbon recognition Convention

The convention was ratified 28/09/2001.

1.2 National legislation relevant for recognition

The convention was implemented into national legislation in 2001. The following is stated in the Higher Education Ordinance Chapter 6, Sect. 12 point 2:

If a student at an institution of higher education within the country has successfully completed a certain undergraduate programme, the student shall be entitled to credit for this programme when applying for study at another institution of higher education. This does not, however, apply if there is a substantial difference between the programmes at the different institutions.

The same provision applies to students who have successfully completed a certain programme at a university or other institution of higher education in Denmark, Finland, Iceland or Norway or in an entity that is party to the Council of Europe Convention of 11 April 1997 on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region.

¹ The action plan has been developed in close cooperation with the Department for Evaluation of Foreign Higher Education within the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (the Swedish ENIC/NARIC office). The plan has also been sent for comments to the International Programme Office for Education and Training, the Association of Swedish Higher Education (the rectors' conference), the Swedish Association of University Teachers and the Swedish National Union of Students.

All negative decisions on recognition of previous studies and access to higher education can be appealed to the Board of Appeals for Higher Education, an independent juridical body.

There were general regulations in the Higher Education Ordinance concerning the recognition of prior studies in Sweden and in other countries before the integration of the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

1.3 Bilateral or regional recognition agreements

On 9 June 2004, the Nordic ministers of education adopted a declaration which is to serve as an instrument for deeper co-operation concerning mutual recognition in higher education in the Nordic Region: the “Nordic Declaration on Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education” (or “The Reykjavik Declaration”). The Reykjavik Declaration is based on the Lisbon Convention, ratified by all of the Nordic countries, and tries to go one step further. Among other things, it sets out to ensure that Nordic higher education qualifications receive full mutual recognition, and that the Nordic countries achieve better agreement in assessing and recognising qualifications obtained in both Nordic and other countries. In 1996, prior to the creation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the Reykjavik Declaration, an agreement on admission to higher education was signed by the Governments of the Nordic countries granting applicants in another Nordic country admission to higher education institutions on the same or equivalent terms as applicants from their own countries.

2. Recognition practice

2.1 Criteria and procedures

a. Overview of the practice

National level

The Department for Evaluation of Foreign Higher Education within the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education is responsible for de facto recognition of foreign qualifications. The Department also acts as the Swedish ENIC/NARIC office. The primary purpose of evaluations is advice on the value of qualifications to employers. The recognition statements can also be used as guidance and tool for recognition at higher education institutions but are not binding decisions on academic recognition. The Department strictly follows the Recommendations on Criteria and Procedures for the assessment of Foreign Qualifications, not only for countries that have ratified the Lisbon Convention, but also for other regions. Complete applications are processed within the time limit of four months, 90% within three months. The Department continues its efforts to further shorten the processing time.

Qualifications for professions (de jure recognition) that are regulated in Sweden are evaluated by the competent authority appointed by the Government (for example the Swedish Bar Association, the Supervisory Board of Public Accountants, the National Board of Health and Welfare or the National Agency for Higher Education).

Institutions of higher education

Already in spring 2000 the General Assembly of the Association of Swedish Higher Education (the Swedish rectors' conference), that represents all higher education institutions, adopted recommendations on recognition of foreign higher education. The recommendations call upon the members to show generosity in their attitude towards recognition of foreign qualifications. The time limit for processing is set to four months. The code of good practice attached to the recommendation emphasizes the importance of transparent procedures.

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education conducted a follow up study on recognition of prior studies and professional experience in 2004. The implementation of the Convention was part of the study. All higher education institutions had to answer a detailed questionnaire. The review also included an analysis of judicial decisions of the Board of Appeals for Higher Education. Results show that practice has become more generous since the previous Government initiated study in 1998 and in many cases negative decisions were based on substantial differences in outcome of study periods or of qualifications rather than on differences in detailed content. The study was reported to the Government in 2004.

Taking into consideration that the study was conducted a relatively short time ago, no new questionnaire was sent out in connection with the present action plan. The Association of Swedish Higher Education was requested to give its opinion on the current situation. According to the answer the majority of institutions have now internal policy documents on recognition based on the Code of Good Practice. The principle of generous attitude towards acceptance of foreign qualifications is followed. Only necessary documents are requested. Students have to submit detailed course descriptions only in exceptional cases. Students automatically receive information on their right to appeal against negative decisions.

b. Measures to improve implementation

After the Convention had been ratified the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education was commissioned to ensure its implementation at institutional level. An information campaign involving all institutions was carried out in Fall 2002. The Convention and all supplementary texts as well as examples of good practice were presented. The national brochures presenting the Convention and the code of good practice were distributed. The Agency has got a permanent responsibility for information on the Convention. Biannual national conferences on recognition of foreign qualifications are held in order to provide information and training to persons responsible for recognition at institutional level. Updated

information on the Convention is available at the Agency's web site. The Agency is also answering questions on implementation of the Convention in individual cases and on request organizes training for higher education institutions.

c.

The time to process applications should not exceed four months at neither national level nor at institutional level.

2.2 Joint degrees

The award of joint degrees is not possible at present but the ambition is to solve this issue as soon as possible. There are no legal obstacles to establish joint programmes or to award and recognise double or multiple degrees. Joint programmes can be established and double or multiple degrees can be awarded within all three cycles.

The establishment of joint programmes has been encouraged by the Government. After a Government initiative the National Agency for Higher Education has adjusted the template for the Diploma Supplement in order to better describe degrees that have been awarded after the completion of programmes carried out jointly by two or more HEIs.

Policy of the Department for Recognition of Foreign Higher Education within the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education

A foreign joint degree that is considered to belong to a higher education system, or is subject to quality assessment in the meaning of the Convention² in at least one country, should be recognized. Double and multiple degrees are assessed according to the Department's general practice for recognition of foreign degrees.

2.3 Overview of institutional practice

Since 2002, when the Lisbon Convention was incorporated in the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance, it has also become subject for legal supervision at the national level. The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education is the Agency that supervises higher education institutions in Sweden. That means that it ensures their compliance with the laws and regulations in force in the area of higher education.

The Agency inspects a number of higher education institutions every year. These visits are intended to ensure compliance with the laws and regulations that apply to higher education. Inspections focus in general on legal rights of students and the Student Union is always requested to express its opinion. Results of the visits are published. In case of established deficiencies the Agency afterwards requires a report on measures taken to improve the situation. Sustained problems can be reported to the Government.

² Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees.

The Government, the Agency itself, organizations or individuals can also initiate investigations of a specific issue. One of the examples is the above-mentioned follow-up study on recognition of prior learning in 2004. The studies can suggest changes in legal regulations. The majority of the investigations are the result of student complaints.

2.4 Transparency tools for recognition

a. Implementation of ECTS

The existing credit system that is compatible with ECTS will be replaced by a system that is more closely in line with ECTS from 1 July 2007.

b. Implementation of Diploma supplement

Diploma supplement was introduced on 1 January 2003 and is automatically issued to all students in English and free of charge.

c. Other tools

Diploma supplement for doctoral degrees will also be issued starting 1 July 2007.

The Swedish Agency for Higher Education will be given the task by Government to compile and publish a national qualifications framework for higher education on the basis of the already existing legal documents before the implementation of the new higher education structure on July 1 2007. The Agency has also been given the task to establish a database for the translation of full degree names and a web-based Swedish-English dictionary for higher education and research terminology. The database and dictionary are created in order to promote a coherent and transparent translation of Swedish higher education and research terms into English.

2.5 Borderless/transnational education

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education recognizes qualifications³:

- Obtained by distance learning from recognized programmes and institutions
- From branch campuses that are accredited separately from the mother institution
- From international institutions if the degree is recognized in the country where the programme is provided
- Issued by recognized institutions for studies at other institutions abroad (franchised degrees) if a corresponding programme is also provided at the “mother” institution.

The same policy is recommended to institutions of higher education.

³ Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education.

3. Information provision

3.1 Provision of information on recognition

a. Information on recognition criteria and procedures

Most of the information is available in electronic form. The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education has published several documents describing detailed criteria and procedures used for recognition of foreign qualifications. All publications are available in Swedish at the Agency's web site. Information for applicants that includes short descriptions of criteria and procedures is published in English and six other languages. Examples of evaluations are stored in a public database for use as an information source primarily for higher education institutions. The Agency also acts as an expert body and answers requests on recognition of individual qualifications.

Information on the Swedish higher education institutions is available at the Agency's English web site. The legal provisions concerning higher education are published in English at the Swedish Government web site. A description of the education system is also included in English in the national format for Diploma Supplement.

b. Timetable for additional measures

A pilot study for a special web site for stakeholders was conducted by the Agency in 2005/06. The web site will give comprehensive information on criteria and procedures, results of evaluations as well as descriptions of education systems for several countries. At present the development has to be postponed for technical reasons but will continue during year 2007.

c. Bodies responsible for such measures

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education acts as the Swedish ENIC-NARIC. The web pages on recognition are connected to the network's web site. The Agency is also responsible for information on the Lisbon Convention and the EC directives. The Swedish Institute is responsible for information to foreign students about higher education studies in Sweden.

d.

All information is available electronically.

e.

The web site of the Agency is linked to the ENIC-NARIC web site.

3.2 Information package for applicants

a. Provision of information packages to applicants

Information on the right to recognition of studies abroad is given by the Swedish higher education institutions. In general students are informed at the beginning of their studies. The information is included in catalogues, student sites on the web and in local degree regulations. The local study advisors act as contact persons in recognition matters and inform individuals on further details such as requested documents etc. Special information packages exist only for the organized student exchange programmes. Higher education institutions are legally obliged to give information on the right to appeal negative decisions.

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education has extensive web based information. When the application is submitted the applicant receives a letter with information on other measures that he/she can take while waiting for the recognition decision. The expected waiting time is stated.

b.

The National Agency for Higher Education stressed the need for more active information measures at the higher education institutions in the follow-up study of 2004.

4. Structures

4.1 National information centre

a. The formal status of the centre

The National Information Centre is a part of The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, which is a central governmental Agency and its status and duties are defined in the Ordinance with Instruction for The National Agency for Higher Education (2003:7). In accordance with Swedish public administration the Agency is independent, but gets its instruction and funding from the Government. Each year the Government issues a budget document where the funding and objectives for the Agency's activities are set. In the Instruction Ordinance (2003:7) for the National Agency for Higher Education it is stated that the Agency shall i.a. evaluate foreign higher education qualifications in line with national regulation as well as international directives and conventions.

The Government has appointed the Agency to fulfil the duties according to articles IX.2 and IX.3 in the Lisbon Convention and to be a member of the ENIC-network in accordance with article X.3. The Agency has also been assigned to be the Swedish NARIC and the national contact point for

directives 89/48/EEC and 92/51/EEC on a general order for the recognition of higher education diplomas.

According to the annual Government budget document for the National Agency for Higher Education the Agency should enhance the integration of people with foreign qualifications on the Swedish labour market through the evaluation and recognition of foreign tertiary qualifications. The Agency should also act as an expert agency in supporting the work of the institutions in recognising foreign study periods and qualifications. The Agency also evaluates qualifications and issues certificates to individuals who have completed teacher training programmes outside Sweden according to chapter 2, section 4 in the Educational Act (1985:1100). This certificate qualifies for permanent employment in a teaching post in Sweden. Decisions on teaching certificates have formal legal status. Negative decisions can be appealed to the administrative court of justice.

b. Legal competence

De facto Professional Recognition

The Agency evaluates foreign higher education programmes for applicants for purposes of employment in Sweden. Only completed degrees are evaluated. The evaluations are intended to serve as recommendations for employers and are not legally binding assessments. They can also serve as guidance for higher education (HE) institutions.

De jure Professional recognition

Regulated professions require authorisation, certification or the equivalent (de jure recognition). Qualifications for a profession that is regulated in Sweden are evaluated by the competent authority appointed by the Government (for example the Swedish Bar Association, the Supervisory Board of Public Accountants, the National Board of Health and Welfare or the National Agency for Higher Education).

Academic Recognition

According to the Government's budget document the National Agency for Higher Education shall, as an expert organ, assist HE institutions with expert knowledge about recognition of foreign higher education. The task involves providing HE institutions with information and knowledge about principles for evaluation of foreign higher education. It also includes assisting institutions in individual cases through information, analysis and guidance.

c. Staff and budget

The information centre is part of the Department for Evaluation of Foreign Higher Education, within the National Agency. The Department has a staff of 22 of whom 16 are credential evaluators.

The collected experience and competence within the field is very high in the Department. Half of the staff has been working with credential evaluations

for more than ten years. Several others have now about five years experience. Recruitments have often been done from HE institutions or agencies with similar tasks.

All evaluators have at least a Bachelor Degree, which is a prerequisite for employment. The language competence is broad. Apart from common languages as English, German, French and the Nordic languages, including Finnish, the office handles documents in Spanish, Russian, Polish, Turkish, Chinese, Japanese and Arabic.

The budget for the Department is about 11.5 million SEK (of which 10.5 are costs for staff), plus overhead costs.

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

The office is prepared and has good competence to serve the public with expertise on request. The web is an important tool and the Department is in the process of developing more differentiated information according to possible target groups.

The Department is also in the process of developing better contacts with agencies and organisations that need knowledge about the recognition process such as employment agencies and employers' associations. As a result the external bodies should be able to improve their services to the public.

Services of the Department are highly appreciated according to the recent quality evaluation of the office conducted by the Nordic network for recognition, NORRIC – Nordic National Recognition Information Centres, (<http://www.norric.org/Default.aspx?ID=4523>).

e. Networking and cooperation at national level and internationally

The Department has close contacts with the staff at higher education institutions concerned with recognition and is often interacting with them, both in day-to-day activities and in seminars and conferences. Co-operation with other competent authorities and stakeholders is also well established.

On the international arena the centre is an active participant in the ENIC/NARIC network. Over the last years the Nordic recognition centres have developed a thorough and fruitful cooperation. The centre has also well-established contacts with several other important recognition bodies and higher education agencies throughout the world. The staff participates actively in EAIE (European Association for International Education) conferences and training activities.

4.2 Cooperation recognition/quality assurance bodies

The Swedish ENIC/NARIC office was recently evaluated in the Nordic context using the same methods that are used in quality assessment of higher education. The evaluation gave good insight into the methodology for quality assessment.

a. Information exchange between the bodies

Both bodies are located within the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education. The Department for Evaluation of Foreign Higher Education has first hand information on results of evaluation of programmes and subjects as well as on decisions on entitlement to award degrees. This fact facilitates the task of information on Swedish higher education to other ENIC/NARIC offices. On the other hand information on recognition of Swedish degrees abroad is forwarded from the Department to the quality assurance body and has influenced procedures of quality assurance.

b. Discussion and agreements on working methods

Methodology for quality assessment is well known within the Department responsible for recognition. When the general methodology for recognition of foreign qualification was developed the quality assurance body was represented within the consultative group. Specialists on specific subjects from the quality assurance body have been involved in the development of rules for recognition of foreign qualifications in corresponding disciplines.

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

In general only qualifications that are recognized in the country of origin are recognized in Sweden. If outcomes of quality assurance are prerequisites for the state recognition of qualifications in the country of origin then they are used in recognition in Sweden. The working methods in recognition will be reviewed in the near future. There are plans for development of a principle that results of the national quality assessments should influence recognition of foreign qualifications.

d. Use of membership of international networks and associations in recognition and quality assurance for the mutual benefits of both bodies

At present the synergy effects do not exist, but the connection between these two areas should be enhanced.

5. Some additional comments

In the Bill New world – new university from 2005 the Government presented a strategy for internationalisation of higher education. In the strategy the implementation of national and international regulation on recognition and the improvement of recognition procedures are seen as important preconditions for increased mobility.

The guidelines for the national action plan for recognition is closely linked to the Lisbon Recognition Convention. The Swedish plan follows the guidelines closely. We would nevertheless like to emphasise the active work presently done at different levels to implement directive 2005/36/EC concerning recognition of professional qualifications.