

Too much or just right: how can information for recognition be improved?

Presentation by Prof. Stephen Adam to the Council of Europe Seminar on Recognition Issues in the Bologna Process, 11-12. apr 2001.

This session seeks to explore the very real problems faced by us all (as students, credential evaluators, student advisors, citizens, higher education institutions, employers, etc.) concerning how we deal with the increasing amounts of 'recognition-related' information that is available to us. Too much information is not necessarily a good thing! The session explores issues associated with how we filter, select, access, quality assure, interpret, present and organise such information from the differing perspectives of those who provide information and those who consume it. In addition to analysing these broad problems, the main information sources will be mapped from the national and international level (NARICs/ENICs) to the local level (higher education providers, Diploma Supplement). Finally, a series of concrete suggestions will be made to suggest ways in which information for recognition and transparency must be improved.

□ FOUR BASIC CONTENTIONS:

1. We are faced with a common set of serious problems:

- There is vast range of 'recognition' information available – sometimes too much, sometimes too little – the problem is how to navigate it.
- The dilemma facing us in the 21st century is how to *identify / filter / select / quality assure / interpret / present / organise / access* the right information.
- These problems illustrate different perspectives and highlight the complex and multi-dimensional nature of information issues.
- Information does not automatically create transparency - often it achieves the reverse!

2. We must recognise that divergent motives exist between information providers and receivers:

- There are two essential actors in these situations - those who receive information and those who provide it. We need to consider both of these, bearing in mind that often each has very different motives.
- In addition to the traditional providers and receivers of information there is a third interested party, that of the independent organisation or 'competent authority' who seeks to provide impartial information and advice, to referee, interpret and quality assure the situation e.g. Ministries, NARICS¹, ENICS², etc.

¹ National Academic Recognition Information Centres (EU/EEA network).

² European National Information Centres (Council of Europe/UNESCO network).

3. There is ignorance and a lack of clarity regarding responsibilities and appropriate approaches in this area:

- There is still confusion and ignorance about where to go for information. Those who require information need to know where to find the appropriate national, local or international information providers.
- It is not always clear who is responsible (at different levels) for the provision of information. There are sometimes confusion, duplication and overlap between different information providers.
- Often there are problems as to the status of the ‘recognition’ information that is available – is it advertising material or impartial advice? Once information is found/produced we need to consider the reliability and source of the information, e.g. who is responsible for providing clear, unbiased high-quality information? Does information need to be ‘kitemarked’ and quality assured – is this possible?
- Very often, help and guidance with the understanding and decoding of information is needed. Similarly, students often do not know what questions to ask, e.g. about the status and accreditation of institutions, what professional recognition a qualification might provide, and rights of appeal.
- It is vital to remember that lack of access to information, and ignorance as to how to navigate it, are primary ways in which some sections of society are excluded and disadvantaged.

4. We need to be aware that existing recognition devices (codes of practice, organisations, tools, and processes) are often severely compromised by their poor and uneven application:

- The Bologna process will simplify many of the problems of mobility, recognition and transparency but it alone is not enough, without clear help and guidance being available to citizens concerning the new opportunities opened up by the creation of the European higher education area 2010.
- The basic framework and systems for the purposes of recognition of qualifications are now in place (The Lisbon Convention, ENIC/NARICS, various codes of practice, ECTS³, etc.). The problem is how to make sure they are fully implemented - to monitor what is happening.
- Many of the key action lines in the Bologna process depend on the provision of clear, unambiguous information, e.g. line one ‘*Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees*’⁴ - directly relates to the Diploma Supplement.
- Credential evaluators and admission officers will be greatly helped by the widespread introduction of the Diploma Supplement⁵. An enormous effort will be required to inform everyone concerned about its correct production and application. It has the potential, in the medium and long term, to

³ European Credit Transfer System.

⁴ The Bologna Declaration, signed 19th June 1999 (line one of the objectives).

⁵ In Europe, approximately 17 EU/EEA/Associated countries, are introducing the Diploma Supplement by law and a further 5 are in the process of promoting its use by other means.

resolve a large proportion of academic and professional recognition problems, providing it is correctly implemented and linked to national quality assurance systems.

□ **A REVIEW OF SOME OF THE MAIN INFORMATION SOURCES:**

A bewilderingly large range of information providers in the 'recognition' area exists, together with a diverse range of ways the information is imparted:

- Information is provided by text (hard-copy brochure, catalogue, etc.), electronically via the web and Email, by telephone, by post (individual letter), and by face-to-face meetings. Whatever the delivery mechanism, the recipients have to interpret what they receive.
- International level information providers include: the Council of Europe, Unesco, the European Commission, The National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB), International organisations and professional associations, European Universities Association (EUA), Social Partners, European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), etc.
- National level information providers include: ENICS, NARICS, Ministries, national non-government organisations/agencies, competent authorities, quality assurance agencies, Rectors' Conferences, etc.
- Local level information providers include: higher education institutions (HEI), regional bodies, local government authorities, etc. The main provision at this level is by HEI who are responsible for Diploma Supplements, programme catalogues and prospectuses.

So, this brief summary reveals an extensive range of providers and ways to receive information. The question to be answered is does the citizen know what to do and where to go when faced with this bewildering situation? Unfortunately, the answer is often no!

□ **THE PROBLEMS OF INFORMATION ACCESS & INTERPRETATION**

A further set of problems exists at the micro-level of the information spectrum – the actual presentation and design of recognition information can be confusing. The following are some of the common problems:

- Often information is not user-friendly (e.g. explore at random university catalogues available on the web!) and difficult to access and navigate electronically.
- Not everybody has access to computer technology and information must be available in many forms, e.g. written documents, pamphlet, letter, by telephone and face-to-face meeting, etc. We must guard against the rise of 'digital elites'.
- Much of the electronic information that is available is very difficult to interrogate. It is often best when information is targeted to the needs of different types of user.
- Information usually needs to be interpreted for the non-expert. In addition, further follow-up questions and help are often necessary but it is not always clear where this can be obtained.

- Too much information is provided in English only!

□ **HOW CAN INFORMATION FOR RECOGNITION AND TRANSPARENCY BE IMPROVED?**

The basic tools and devices for recognition purposes are largely in place. What now needs to be done is to ensure they are fully and appropriately implemented. The provision of clear, accessible, unambiguous information will play a central role in the successful creation of the European higher education area. All local, national and international information providers have a responsibility for supplying precise, high-quality information and advice. The following are suggested for consideration:

1. At the **local level** – higher education institutions should **re-examine the sorts of information they provide** and **how they provide it**.

Higher education institutions should:

- Explore how easy their information is to access and navigate and whether it caters for all types of user.
- Organise their information in a user-friendly way and ensure that it is explained in relation to the appropriate Bologna innovations (using credits, issuing Diploma Supplements, identifying first and second cycle distinctions, etc.).
- Regularly update all the information they provide.
- Include appropriate links to other national information sources, e.g. ENICS/NARICS, etc.

2. At the **national level** - governments need to play a more prominent role in ensuring that **help and guidance** (for students, employers, HEIs, agencies, citizens, etc.) is provided to navigate the nationally produced information. In addition, they should **quality assure** the information that is produced. This is indispensable if Section IX of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, *Information on Recognition Matters*⁶, is to be fully applied.

National authorities should:

- Clarify responsibilities for recognition information (who supplies what, where and how).
- Link the web sites of the main information providers, preferably to a central national information portal (one-stop shop) which acts as the main gatekeeper. Ensure that an integrated national system for recognition information is available via the ENIC/NARIC.

⁶ The full text of the Lisbon Convention can be found at the Council of Europe web site: http://www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural_Co-operation/education/Higher_Education/.

- Signpost and publicise exactly where recognition information can be found. Empower citizens in this area, publicise their rights and supply guidance on what questions to ask.
- Ensure that recognition information is included within the remit of appropriate quality assurance agencies (including the Diploma Supplements, programme catalogues, etc.).
- Organise information so that it is truly user-friendly.
- Ensure that training and information is provided on the interpretation of Diploma Supplements, use of good practice recognition codes and the Lisbon Convention.
- Monitor the state of implementation of the Lisbon Convention and the associated codes.

3. At the **International level** - all the major international bodies and agencies should be **cross-referenced and linked** to the appropriate main national organisations. In general, the web sites of the Council of Europe, UNESCO and European Commission are clear and have some cross-referencing⁷.

International authorities should:

- Concentrate on providing high quality, general information, accessible to all citizens and provide directions to appropriate national organisations for more specific information.
- Structure and organise their information so that the appropriate parts are directly related and accessible to the different groups that require it (citizens, refugees, employers, national governments, credential evaluators, etc.).
- Provide information on citizen's rights regarding recognition issues in an unambiguous user-friendly manner.
- Supply guidance to students/citizens designed to assist them in what questions to ask and what to look for at prospective institutions or when dealing with recognition issues, something similar to the US Council for Higher Education and Accreditation (CHEA) fact sheets that can be found at www.chea.org . It would be useful to develop a series of similar fact sheets (or toolkits) indicating questions to be asked concerning trans-national education, the recognition of qualifications and credits, etc. Individuals need to be fully informed if they are going to discriminate between choices and know their rights.

⁷ Respectively: http://www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural_Co-operation/education/Higher_education/ ; <http://www.cepes.ro/map.htm> ; www.europa.eu.int/comm/education/rec_qual_en.html

□ CONCLUSIONS

- We are now moving to a second stage of development and refinement in the area of recognition. I suggest that part of this advance needs to focus on information and information tools.
- It is not just a matter of too much or too little information. It is a matter of how to identify / access / present / filter / select / quality assure and interpret the right information.
- We need to focus our attention on the quality and form of the information provided. It must become more user-friendly, more user-specific and available to all sectors of society.
- If we fail to pay more attention to the quality of information we will dilute the impact of many of the new developments in recognition.
- If some or most of the above analysis is accepted it might be worth considering the creation of an international working party to produce some European good practice standards (code or charter?) on the provision of recognition information. This could consolidate and build upon existing recommendations about information in e.g. the 1997 *Lisbon Convention*, *Code of Good Practice for the Provision of Trans-national Education*.

Stephen Adam, University of Westminster, April 2002.