

National Action Plan for Recognition

1. Legislation

1.1. Lisbon Recognition Convention

The Lisbon Recognition Convention was signed by Belgium on the 7th of March 2005. It was ratified by the Flemish Parliament on the 15th of December 2006.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention is referred to explicitly in the articles regulating the equivalence of foreign degrees in the Decree of the Flemish Community concerning the restructuring of higher education in Flanders of the 4th of April 2003. All the principles contained in the convention are applied.

1.2. Review of legislation relevant to recognition

The following legislation is in force :

- Decree of the Flemish Community on the structure of higher education in Flanders of the 4th of April 2003 (art. 87-88)
- Decree of the Flemish Community of the 14th of October 1992 concerning the definition of the conditions and the procedure for the recognition of the complete equivalence of foreign diplomas and study certificates with the diplomas of the academic degrees, with exception of the academic degrees of the first cycle
- Decree of the Flemish Community of the 10th of June 1997 concerning the definition of the conditions and the procedure for the individual recognition of the complete equivalence of foreign diplomas or study certificates with diplomas delivered by the university colleges in the Flemish Community
- Decree of the Flemish Community of the 15th of April 1997 concerning the definition of the conditions and outline of the conformity attestation for the posts of recruitment in education implementing the European directives 89/48/EEG and 92/51/EEG

As mentioned above the existing legislation conforms to the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Modifications will be made if necessary.

1.3. Bilateral or regional recognition agreements

The Flemish Community of Belgium does not have bilateral or regional agreements concerning the automatic recognition of foreign degrees at the level of higher education.

At the level of secondary education, there is an automatic recognition of secondary school examination certificates (baccalaureates) awarded by the European school, the International Baccalaureate Organization (Geneva) and by SHAPE's international school (NATO).

2. Recognition practice

2.1. Criteria and procedures

The general principles of the “Recommendations on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications” adopted in Riga on the 6th of June 2006 are respected by the authorities responsible for the recognition of foreign qualifications, i.e. the Agency for Higher Education and Adult Education (Department of Education) and the higher education institutions. If complete equivalence cannot be granted, it is possible to have partial equivalence.

The main criteria considered for granting academic recognition are :

- the conditions for access to the programme
- the characteristics and the structure of the educational system
- the level of the institution
- the level of the study programme
- the essential elements of the study programme, including traineeships, practical exercises, dissertations and theses
- the volume of the study programme
- the professional recognition of the study programme in the home country
- the relevant professional experience

Standardised documentation is available for users on the Internet. A brochure with “Frequently Asked Questions” will be spread in 2007. This documentation can also be asked for via electronic mail, by telephone or by visiting the NARIC offices.

Documents that have to be submitted for the application and that are not made up in Dutch, French, English or German must be translated by a sworn translator.

The procedure is cost free.

The duration of the equivalence procedure is three months.

There are two appeal procedures : either re-examination on basis of new information or recourse to the jurisdiction of the Council of State

2.2. Joint degrees

The legislation of the Flemish Community of Belgium allows universities and university colleges to award joint degrees in the framework of cooperation conventions for the organisation of studies between several institutions. For a doctorate at least 6 months of the research has to be done in a partner institute.

The legal reference text is :

- article 94 §3 and §4 of the Decree of the Flemish Community of the 4th of April 2003 on the structure of higher education in Flanders

2.3. Overview of institutional practice

Until now no specific inquiry has been made about the institutional practice, but it is intended for the near future.

2.4. Transparency tools for recognition

A Flemish credit system based entirely on ECTS has been applied to university programmes since 1991 and university college programmes since 1994. The decree of the Flemish Community of the 4th of April 2003 on the structure of higher education in Flanders and the decree of the Flemish Community of the 12th of October 2004 on the establishment of measures for restructuring and flexibility in higher education endorse the basis of the existing credit system on ECTS. All programmes have adopted the ECTS system. As a consequence of these decrees the rigid year system as the leading organisational principle of the study programme has been replaced by a credit-based modular system.

In Flanders a compulsory Diploma Supplement has been awarded automatically to all graduates since 1991 at the universities and since 1994 at the university colleges.

The Decree on the structure of higher education endorsed the concept of the Diploma Supplement and adapted it to the international one.

All students receive the Diploma Supplement automatically in Dutch and free of charge. They may apply for an English version, also free of charge. Much attention is paid to the format to comply with the EU/COE/UNESCO Diploma Supplement format. A special Decision of the Flemish Government has been made on the format both for the Dutch and the English version.

The legal reference texts are :

- Decree of the Flemish Community on the structure of higher education in Flanders of the 4th of April 2003
- Decision of the Flemish Government on the definition of the format of the diplomas and the content of the diploma supplement delivered by the institutions of higher education in Flanders of the 6th of October 2004. A revised version of this decision will be currently approved.

2.5. Borderless/transnational education

The new regulation on CBHE (Cross Border Higher Education) is situated in the recent legislative reform on recognition, quality assurance and accreditation. The Decree on the establishment of measures for restructuring and flexibility in higher education in Flanders of the 16th of June 2006 provides further measures facilitating the implementation of the Bologna process in Flanders. It includes measures in the area of validation/recognition of prior learning, flexible learning paths, quality assurance and accreditation. It makes explicit reference to cross-border higher education. In the explanatory note the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education are mentioned as guiding principle.

3. Information provision

3.1. Provision of information on recognition

A section of the website of the Agency for Higher Education and Adult Education is dedicated to NARIC-Vlaanderen and the equivalence of degrees. It can be accessed by the link <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/NARIC>.

A lot of interesting information as well as useful links can be found there.

A brochure with frequently asked questions about recognition of foreign diplomas in Flanders is being prepared. Each year NARIC-Vlaanderen produces a brochure and CD-Rom about higher education in Flanders.

An electronic database on precedents in decisions concerning academic recognition, that can be consulted by the public, is currently in preparation.

3.2. Information package for applicants

The office of NARIC-Vlaanderen is open to the public from Monday till Thursday (9h – 11h30 and 14h-15h30) and by appointment outside the office hours.

The users can ask for information by phone, fax or e-mail. NARIC-Vlaanderen has its own e-mail address.

The application forms and standard information about equivalence matters can be consulted at the website.

The admission services at the higher education institutes advice the foreign students about the admission conditions for higher education in Flanders. The universities and university colleges are themselves responsible for partial equivalence.

4. Structure

4.1. National information centre

NARIC-Vlaanderen is part of the Agency for Higher Education and Adult Education.

The decisions taken in the name of the minister have a legal status. Thus, a favourable decision on the equivalence of a foreign diploma to a diploma awarded in the Flemish Community of Belgium provides the same legal effects as the diploma awarded in the Flemish Community to which it is considered equivalent.

The decisions aim at the academic recognition of completed studies of higher education and adult education. This academic recognition has a professional outcome (“de facto” recognition) insofar as no other official body treats requests for professional recognition aiming at the exercise of non-regulated professions. The responsibility for “de jure” professional recognition relating to programmes leading to regulated professions is vested with the relevant Ministry and/or the professional organisations.

For example, NARIC-Vlaanderen is responsible on behalf of the Flemish Ministry of Education when it comes to teaching diplomas awarded by members of the European Economic Area.

NARIC-Vlaanderen currently employs 11 persons (7,5 FTE) who are mainly assigned to the concrete treatment of decisions. It does not have a specific budget and falls under the budget of the Agency for Higher Education and Adult Education.

The creation of a one-stop office dealing with all demands for the equivalence of diplomas (higher education, secondary education, adult education) is currently being studied. This would allow applicants to be guided more effectively.

NARIC-Vlaanderen is the contact point for the application of the European Directives on the subject of recognition. It is a member of the ENIC-NARIC network and is active in events related to information about higher education in Flanders and the recognition of diplomas and qualifications (EAIE, presentations for official bodies, professional organisations or target groups, ...)

4.2. Cooperation recognition/quality assurance bodies

There are regular contacts between NARIC-Vlaanderen and the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO). Each year a CD-Rom about Flemish higher education is produced in cooperation between NARIC-Vlaanderen and the NVAO.

The NVAO is a full member of ENQA and ECA.