

Iceland: National Action Plan for Recognition

Legislation

Lisbon Recognition Convention

The Lisbon Recognition Convention was ratified by the Icelandic authorities 21 March 2001.

Review of national legislation relevant to recognition

Professional recognition is regulated by the Recognition of Educational Qualifications Act, No. 83/1993 which implements the European Union's General System Directives on recognition and the procedure is handled by different Ministries (as competent authorities) under the direction of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

There is no specific framework legislation on academic recognition in Iceland. A new Higher Education Institutions Act entered into force 1 July 2006 (No. 63/2006) replacing the framework law on universities No. 136/1997. Under Article 10 of the new Act HEI's are authorised to evaluate studies from other HEI's for course credits and to recognize studies from other universities, schools or research institutions. When a university recognizes studies from another institution it warrants that these studies measure up to the quality standards prescribed by the Act.

Rules on recognition of studies are to be found in the regulations of each university/institution. According to the Higher Education Institutions Act 2006 the universities are to apply for accreditation. The accreditations process will take place in 2007 for all universities in Iceland. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture will secure that the universities who get accreditation have in their regulations provisions regarding academic recognition that must be in compliance with international agreements which Iceland is a party to as the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

Bilateral or regional recognition agreements

The Reykjavik Declaration (9 June 2004) on recognition (which replaced the older Sigtuna Agreement from 12 June 1975), by the authorities of the Nordic countries Denmark, Finland, Iceland,

Norway and Sweden fully conforms to the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

The Agreement on University Access between the Nordic countries Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden (4 March 1992).

Recognition practice

Criteria and procedures

According to Icelandic law the general principle has been and still is, that each university determines how, and to what extent, studies at another university are recognised. The primary role of the ENIC/NARIC office is to provide guidance on academic recognition and information on where to direct applications for recognition. But the power of decision rests with the educational institution in question. In its guidance the ENIC/NARIC office follows the Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and Periods of Study. The office has also introduced the Recommendations to other competent recognition authorities, i.e. the universities.

On the average the time required to process applications to the ENIC/NARIC office for advice on recognition is two weeks.

Joint degrees

Under Article 9 of the new Higher Education Institutions Act (2006) universities are authorized to offer degrees in co-operation with other universities, both on a national and international basis for all three cycles of higher education (bachelor, masters and doctoral). This gives Icelandic HEI's the possibility to offer and recognise joint degrees or double degrees. Before the revision of the University Act the legal basis for offering and recognising joint degrees was not secure.

Overview of institutional practice

The recognition procedures of each University and information on those who apply for recognition and the results in each case will be taken into account during the accreditation process. Should it emerge that a given Higher Education Institution does not adhere to the Lisbon Recognition Convention or other relevant agreements it will lead to a reprimand in the accreditation report and the HEI in question will be given certain time limit to correct its procedures.

If a student applying for recognition does not accept the conclusion reached within a HEI regarding his application, he may appeal to the HEI's students' Appeals Committee. The Committee operates according to provisions in a regulation based on the HEI's Act (2006) and is empowered to deliver rulings in cases where students consider that their rights have not been respected regarding academic recognition.

Transparency tools for recognition

Universities in Iceland have used a credit system based on workload for decades. The system has been based on the same principles as the ECTS system but the number of credits was different. With the new HEI Act (2006) this system was revised. The number of credits allocated per year has now been changed in accordance with the ECTS system.

Icelandic HEI's have issued Diploma Supplements to their graduates since 2005.

According to the new HEI's Act the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has published a National Qualification Framework for Iceland based on the Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area, as agreed by the Education Ministers of the Bologna-countries at their meeting in Bergen 2005. The HEI's have to have their descriptions of Learning Outcomes in accordance with the National Qualifications Framework ready before September 2007, as otherwise they will not get accreditation.

Borderless/transnational education

There are no specific national or institutional policies concerning assessment of borderless or transnational education. The same practice applies in this field as regarding academic recognition in general, but the "Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education" is taken into consideration in these cases. When applicable, institutions will take notice of relevant guidelines e.g. Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education issued by UNESCO/CoE in 2001.

Information provision

Provision of information on recognition

The database used by the ENIC/NARIC office of Iceland is not designed to offer online access to information on recognition that has already been granted but individual applicants can get information on the content of their results, but not online. The office intends to move its database to a new system which allows online access, but no timetable has been set for the change. When providing information on recognition the office takes data protection issues fully into account. The ENIC/NARIC office maintains its own homepage which is linked to the ENIC-NARIC Web site. There the methods used for the recognition process are explained and also how to apply for recognition and what documents are to be included with the applications. The office also maintains a homepage in co-operation with the other Nordic National Recognition Information Centres (NORRIC).

Information package for applicants

When students apply for academic recognition it is explained that they must submit certified copies of official degree certificates issued by the relevant institution or a statement of their course performance. This information appears on the homepage of the ENIC/NARIC office. The home page will provide special application forms and/or a checklist with this information, and there are plans to publish leaflets on recognition and recognition procedures.

Structures

National information centre

In 1990 the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture entrusted the University of Iceland, with the supervision of Iceland's ENIC/NARIC (then NEIC) office; this was decided because the University already had decades of experience of recognition of preparatory courses (Icelandic and from abroad) for admission and of individual course units taught in other higher education institutions (HEI), particularly outside Iceland. Prior to the establishment of the ENIC/NARIC office in Iceland, the university had for many years provided the Ministry with advice in connection with academic assessment and recognition.

ENIC/NARIC functions at the University of Iceland are now formally provided for under an agreement between the University and the

Ministry on the university's educational functions; this agreement was renewed in 2003. From the outset, a clear distinction has been drawn between work concerned with academic recognition, on the one hand, and the supervision of student exchange schemes and student mobility on the other. Recognition issues are handled by the ENIC/NARIC office; mobility issues (other than those involving recognition) are managed by the Office of International Education, which, under an agreement with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, administers student exchange programmes, both the Socrates programme of the European Union and Nordic student co-operation programmes. The Office serves all higher education institutions in Iceland. Professional recognition in accordance with EU's General System Directives on recognition is handled by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (National coordinator) and the other ministries as appropriate. As can be expected, a considerable amount of liaison takes place between the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and the ENIC/NARIC office in connection with academic recognition.

As stated earlier the general principle has been, by law, that each university determines how, and to what extent, studies at another university are recognised. The same applies to assessment for the purpose of exemption from formal entry requirements for third-level study.

The primary role of the ENIC/NARIC office is, to provide guidance on academic recognition and information on where to direct application for recognition. The unit also provides general information on the Icelandic Education System, current legislation, regulations and international agreements (e.g. the Lisbon Convention and the Nordic agreements such as the Reykjavik Declaration and the Nordic Agreement on University Access). The office works closely with the Office of International Education which compiles information concerning study overseas and provides and gathers information on courses offered by institutions abroad. The Office of International Education also gives advice to students and serves as a documentation centre for the ENIC/NARIC office.

All the staff involved in the work of Iceland's ENIC/NARIC office attends to these duties on a part-time basis; none are employed to do this work full-time. Altogether, five people are involved: a lawyer, two specialists in academic recognition and two information officers. The two specialists have both been involved in academic recognition for more than 20 years.

As stated earlier the ENIC/NARIC office functions under an agreement with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The Ministry does not pay for its day to day operations, but has paid for variable costs. Decisions on the payment of these expenses are taken on an *ad hoc* basis.

Apart from this, the unit is financed from the budget of the University of Iceland.

The Icelandic ENIC/NARIC office takes part in the ENIC/NARIC network, and cooperates with the other Nordic ENIC/NARIC office in the NORRIC network. Staff of the Office for Academic Affairs at the University of Iceland have been active in the Bologna process and ECTS/DS. They also participate in the work of the NUAS Ekvivaleringsgruppen, and NUS (the Association of Nordic Universities) and EUA (European University Association). The head of staff is the Secretary General of the Icelandic Rectors Conference.

Cooperation recognition/quality assurance bodies

As stated earlier in this document the universities are responsible for academic recognition. The framework law on Universities did not stipulate any formal control regarding the recognition procedures used by the institutions. During external evaluations so far the universities have not been asked for information on their recognition procedures but this will now be a part of the accreditation process in accordance with the new HEI Act.

Individuals who are denied recognition by the universities can appeal against such decision by a university. They are first to appeal to the University Council in question and if the applicant does not agree with the conclusion reached within the university, he may appeal to the university students' Appeals Committee. The Committee operates according to regulation based on the Higher Education Institutions Act and is empowered to deliver rulings in cases where students in state universities or third-level institutions that have been recognised by the Minister of Education, Science and Culture consider that their rights have not been respected in connection with academic recognition, assessment of the progress of their studies, applications for admission, etc. The Committee does not review the marking of examination papers or the professional findings of teachers, assessment committees or examiners. No appeals may be brought before the Committee until the University Council has delivered a written ruling on the matter, or if three months have elapsed since a complaint was first lodged in writing with the University Council. As of today the Committee has

reported no cases regarding recognition. All applicants should however be duly notified about the possibility of appeal.