

NATIONAL ACTION PLAN FOR RECOGNITION – IRELAND

1. Legislation

1.1 *Lisbon Recognition Convention*

Ireland ratified the Lisbon Convention in March 2004.

The Lisbon Convention sets out that each country designate a National Information Centre to assist students in securing appropriate recognition of their qualifications. Qualifications Recognition – Ireland, which is located within the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, is the National Information Centre for Ireland. Qualifications Recognition – Ireland promotes the awareness and implementation of the principles of the Lisbon Convention on a national level. In July 2005, in collaboration with the Department of Education and Science and higher education institutions, Qualifications Recognition – Ireland prepared a pamphlet entitled The Lisbon Convention which highlights the main points of the Lisbon Convention and explains the implications of the Lisbon Convention for higher education institutions. The pamphlet was subsequently distributed to all recognised higher education institutions in Ireland.

1.2 *Review of national legislation*

All relevant national legislation is generally compatible with the principles enshrined in the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 is a central piece of legislation in the education and training sector. It made provision for systematic change of the education and training system in Ireland. The purpose of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 is to put the learner at the centre of education and training in Ireland by supporting and recognising lifelong learning. The Act focuses on issues such

as the establishment of consistent standards in education and training, the promotion of quality, increasing access, transfer and progression opportunities and being able to recognise and compare qualifications gained both in Ireland and internationally.

Under the Qualifications Act 1999, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland is responsible for promoting recognition outside the State of awards made by bodies in the State and recognition in the State of awards made by bodies outside the State. Qualifications Recognition – Ireland was established within the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and is the ENIC-NARIC and NRP centres. An integrated national policy approach to the recognition of international qualifications in Ireland has been established by Qualifications Recognition – Ireland, in consultation with stakeholders. The policy approach thoroughly encompasses the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, it is available at:

<http://www.qualificationsrecognition.ie/recognition/Publications>

During autumn 2006, Qualifications Recognition – Ireland visited all Irish universities, Institutes of Technology and a selection of other higher education providers. During the visits, the processes and procedures for recognition of foreign qualifications currently in place in Irish higher education institutions was discussed in detail. The findings of these visits confirmed that current recognition practice at all Irish higher education institutions is in keeping with the spirit of the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

As the current recognition practice at a national level conforms to the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, no amendments to national legislation are envisaged as a result of the ratification of the Convention.

1.3 Bilateral or regional recognition agreements

On 8 November 2006, Ireland became the first European country to verify the compatibility of its National Framework of Qualifications with the Bologna Framework. The alignment of the National Framework of Qualifications to the Bologna Framework

and anticipated future alignment of the National Framework of Qualifications to the proposed European Qualifications Framework are crucial to and will greatly facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications between signatory countries. The verification document is available at:

<http://www.nqai.ie/en/International/File,1762,en.doc>

Ireland has also entered into a number of bilateral initiatives and agreements which facilitate the recognition of qualifications between Ireland and other countries. All such agreements have been drawn up in spirit of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and conform to its principles. A summary of the agreements and initiative are as follows:

- The Irish awarding bodies and qualifications authorities and the UK awarding and qualifications regulatory bodies have undertaken an exercise to align/cross reference the qualifications frameworks in the UK and Ireland. The exercise was completed in June 2005 and the document, *Qualifications can cross boundaries - a rough guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland* was published in July 2005. The document is a ready reckoner for employers, learners and other interested parties, designed to enable broad comparisons to be drawn between qualifications and their levels in Ireland, Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The document is available at:
<http://www.qualificationsrecognition.ie/recognition/ComparingqualificationsinIrelandandUK/>
- The Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications between the Government of Ireland and the Government of The People's Republic of China was signed by the two respective Ministers for Education on 23 February 2006 and came into effect on 23 May 2006. The Agreement aims to facilitate the mutual recognition of higher education qualifications from sub-degree (higher certificate) to doctorate levels awarded to students in Ireland and in China by their higher education awarding bodies. It will ensure that students and graduates traveling between both countries for the pursuit of further study or

employment will have their existing qualifications recognised. The Agreement is available at

<http://www.qualificationsrecognition.ie/recognition/RecognitionAgreementBetweenIrelandChina/>

2. Recognition practice

2.1 Criteria and procedures

As stated previously, the recognition procedures put in place by Qualifications Recognition – Ireland, as described in the national policy approach to the recognition of foreign qualifications, conform to the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. All qualifications which are submitted to Qualifications Recognition – Ireland are given a fair assessment. Foreign qualifications are recognised as being comparable to Irish qualifications which are placed at a particular level on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications. Foreign qualification holders are given adequate access to an assessment of their qualifications and applications are processed within a reasonable timeframe. The recognition service provided by Qualifications Recognition – Ireland is widely publicised to the target audience via newspaper advertisements, labour and study fairs and liaison with groups and bodies which represent the non-Irish national communities in Ireland etc.

Measures to improve implementation

Due to increased demand on the recognition services of Qualifications Recognition – Ireland, a number of measures are being put in place in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the recognition services offered by the centre as follows –

- Additional resources are being allocated to running the centre. Two additional staff members were assigned to the centre in 2006 and staff levels may be further extended during 2007.

- Qualifications Recognition – Ireland will develop a database of information regarding education and qualifications systems abroad and the recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland. The database will be available to the public online and free of charge.
- The communications strategy for Qualifications Recognition – Ireland will be further extended to increase public awareness of the services offered by the centre.

2.2 *Joint degrees*

The recognition of joint degrees is subject to the same integrated national policy approach as the recognition of single institution foreign qualifications. To date in Ireland, few joint degrees have been presented for recognition. However, provided the competent authority or the Irish institution was satisfied with the delivery of the programme and the status of the institutions which awarded the joint degree, problems recognising such qualifications are not envisaged.

Irish higher education institutions and national awarding bodies support and encourage collaboration in the development and delivery of programmes of higher education and training including joint degrees. HETAC makes and recognises joint awards and accredits or jointly accredits collaborative programmes subject to the provisions of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. There is no absolute norm across Irish universities. In November 2006, the National University of Ireland passed a new statute which enables the NUI constituent universities to award joint degrees. The detailed arrangement for the awarding of joint degrees vis-à-vis form, wording and preparation of parchments will be agreed on a case-by-case basis between the National University of Ireland, the constituent university and the partner institution(s) concerned. Other Irish universities that currently provide joint programmes in collaboration with foreign institutions generally issue dual awards. This is being reviewed at present.

2.3 *Overview of institutional practice*

Over recent years, Ireland has experienced a large growth in immigration, with large numbers of non-Irish nationals moving to Ireland to take up employment and/or further learning opportunities. In addition, many Irish higher education institutions have set the strategic objective of attracting more foreign students to study at their institutions. As a result of the above factors, the issue of recognition of foreign qualifications has become a much more prominent and pressing one for higher education institutions. As a result, recognition procedures in institutions have become quite formalised and standardised, with institutions applying common procedures and processes in recognising foreign qualifications. The principal points of note regarding institutional practice with regard to the process for recognition of foreign qualifications are as follows –

- Candidates who wish to apply for programmes at institutions complete a common application form and submit a minimum required set of documents relating to their qualification.
- The recognition process in place in most institutions is well documented and recognition procedures are applied in a consistent manner.
- Applications for entry to higher education programmes are processed quickly and efficiently.
- Applicants who are not successful are informed in writing as to why their application did not satisfy minimum entry criteria. In many cases, alternative routes are suggested to applicants if they were not deemed eligible for entry based on their previous foreign qualification e.g. they are advised to undertake a Higher Diploma course prior to being admitted to a Masters register.
- Unsuccessful applicants have the facility to lodge informal appeals if they are dissatisfied with the recognition of their qualification.

In order to reach a recognition decision, institutions refer to a number of standard publications, the principal ones being the following –

- The Institutes of Technology have published a document called “World of Access” which specifies the minimum entry requirements for the final school examinations of over 100 foreign countries. This document is available at <http://www.qualificationsrecognition.ie/recognition/Publications/>
- The National University of Ireland has published a document which describes the final school qualifications of 25 EU countries and details the grades which candidates are required to have in order to satisfy minimum entry criteria to their universities.
- Many institutions refer to the UK NARIC database which describes the education and qualifications systems of most countries worldwide and gives comparability advice regarding their qualifications.

Recommendations for improvement

A number of initiatives which will improve the recognition system in place in Irish institutions have been suggested and will be implemented. These are as follows –

- Many institutions rely on UK NARIC in order to establish the comparability of foreign qualifications. This is not ideal as UK NARIC compare qualifications to the UK system and Irish institutions then have to translate the advice of UK NARIC to the Irish education and training context. Qualifications Recognition – Ireland has agreed to develop a database of information regarding the recognition of foreign qualifications specific to the Irish context and will make this publicly available online.
- Qualifications Recognition – Ireland will seek to network on a more frequent basis with the higher education institutions in order to advise and support the recognition of foreign qualifications at a national level.
- A number of institutions have raised concerns regarding the authenticity of documentation presented for recognition. Where possible, Qualifications Recognition – Ireland will refer Irish institutions which are interested in verifying

documentation to the relevant parties in foreign countries, via the centre's links with other ENIC-NARIC centres.

2.4 *Borderless/transnational education*

There are very few examples of applicants holding these types of awards applying for entry to Irish higher education institutions. The institutions have indicated that the general approach would be that, provided that adequate quality assurance arrangements were in place for borderless and transnational education and provided that the institutions involved were recognised institutions, a transnational or borderless qualification would be recognised.

3. Information provision

3.1 *Provision of information on recognition*

Qualifications Recognition – Ireland provides extensive information in both electronic and print format regarding its recognition services to relevant parties. Some examples of information provision initiatives are as follows –

- Qualifications Recognition – Ireland has established and maintains its own website, which is linked to other relevant sites regarding recognition i.e. ENIC-NARIC website, websites of Irish institutions etc. The website is currently being redeveloped so that information regarding the services provided by the centre is presented in a more user-friendly manner. As stated previously, a database of information regarding foreign education and qualifications systems will be included as part of the new site.
- The Recognition Application form and relevant information can be downloaded from the website.
- The recognition services provided by Qualifications Recognition – Ireland are widely publicised to the target audience via newspaper advertisements, labour and

study fairs and liaison with groups and bodies which represent the non-Irish national communities in Ireland etc.

- In November 2006, Qualifications Recognition – Ireland published a leaflet advertising its services. The leaflet was circulated in the national newspapers.

3.2 *Information package for applicants*

Higher education institutions publish extensive information regarding the process and procedures regarding the recognition of foreign qualifications. Such information is available in both electronic and print format in a number of locations e.g. on the website of the institution and the websites of various state bodies and agencies, programme prospectus of the institution etc.

Information is publicly available regarding how foreign qualifications are recognised and the minimum entry requirements expected for many foreign qualifications frequently specified. A number of institutions publish this information in a number of foreign languages for certain target nationalities, e.g. Chinese and Indian.

In general, provision of information packages for holders of foreign qualifications was found to be adequate, no recommendations are suggested for improvement.

4. Structures

4.1 *National information centre*

a. Background and formal status of centre

The Department of Education and Science considered that the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland should become the national centre for recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland and responsibility for the recognition of foreign qualifications was transferred to the Authority in February 2003.

Qualifications Recognition – Ireland, located within the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, was established as the recognition centre and is the national ENIC/NARIC and NRP centres. The principal role of the centre is to facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland and the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad.

An integrated national policy approach to the recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland was established in summer 2004 by the Authority in consultation with stakeholders. This integrated approach is operated through Qualifications Recognition – Ireland.

b. Legal competence

The recognition services provided by Qualifications Recognition – Ireland are advisory in nature. The advice given regarding foreign qualifications is for guidance purposes only and is not legally binding. Qualifications Recognition – Ireland also advises relevant applicants regarding the professional recognition system in Ireland and refers applicants to the appropriate competent authority in Ireland which is responsible for professional recognition in the relevant professional area. Competent authorities also liaise with and seek advice from Qualifications Recognition – Ireland regarding foreign qualifications. Again, information provided regarding foreign education and qualifications systems in response to such queries is advisory in nature and is not legally binding.

c. Staff and budget

There is a continuing increase in the demand for the services of Qualifications Recognition – Ireland. With the increase in non-Irish nationals residing in Ireland over recent years, the demand for the recognition services of Qualifications Recognition – Ireland is doubling year on year. As a result, the volume of resources needed to implement the agreed policy approach to the recognition of international awards is steadily increasing. By the end of 2006, there will be four full-time employees working in Qualifications Recognition – Ireland. In addition, there are three people involved in processing recognition applications on a part-time basis at the Further Education and

Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Department of Education and Science.

In all instances, the above staff are supported by senior policy experts in the respective organisations who are not dealing with the processing of recognition applications as their primary job.

In addition, a number of experts and internship students from foreign NARICs and higher education institutions in Poland, Germany and Italy have worked for short periods with Qualifications Recognition – Ireland.

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

Since the establishment of Qualifications Recognition – Ireland in 2003, the centre has been steadily growing its resources and expertise concerning foreign qualifications and education systems. The main recognition services provided are as follows –

Recognition of Foreign qualifications in Ireland – Qualifications Recognition – Ireland advises holders of foreign qualifications regarding the comparability of their qualification in Ireland. The information provided is advisory in nature and does not have a legal status in Ireland.

Recognition of Irish qualifications abroad – Qualifications Recognition – Ireland assists and advises holders of Irish qualifications regarding how to have their Irish qualification recognised abroad.

Information on Irish education and training system – Qualifications Recognition – Ireland publishes extensive information regarding the Irish education and training system from primary education through to higher education and training.

International Qualifications Database – Qualifications Recognition – Ireland is currently developing an online database which will provide advice regarding the comparability of foreign qualifications in Ireland as well as information regarding education and training systems abroad. Information on a number of countries will be available by the end of 2006 with additional countries being added over the coming months.

e. networking and cooperation at national level and internationally

At a national level, Qualifications Recognition – Ireland established a consultative group to advise it on its approach to performing its recognition co-ordination function and to working with stakeholders, in general, and awarding bodies, in particular, in this regard. National higher education institutions and training providers, awarding bodies and regulatory bodies are represented on the consultative group. The work and initiatives undertaken by Qualifications Recognition – Ireland are planned and discussed in consultation with the consultative group.

In terms of implementing the policy approach to the recognition of foreign qualifications, meetings have been held with the key migrant community groups to highlight the recognition services. In addition, Qualifications Recognition – Ireland liaises on continuous basis with State bodies on joint initiatives regarding recognition of foreign qualifications as they arise.

At an international level, Qualifications Recognition – Ireland is an active member of the ENIC/NARIC network and liaises on a frequent basis with ENIC/NARIC centres abroad. Examples of recent collaboration at international level include the following –

- In June 2005, Qualifications Recognition – Ireland hosted the joint ENIC/NARIC networks annual meeting.
- During 2006, Qualifications Recognition – Ireland hosted study visits from the ENIC/NARIC centres of Greece and Poland in order to facilitate collaboration and information exchange between the ENIC/NARIC centres of the respective countries.
- A representative of Qualifications Recognition – Ireland has participated on the ENIC Bureau for a two year term from 2003 to 2005 and has also participated on a joint ENIC/NARIC and ENQA working group.

4.2 Cooperation recognition/quality assurance bodies

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

At a national level, there are strong links between Qualifications Recognition – Ireland and the various quality assurance bodies in Ireland. The main fora for information exchange are as follows:

- The Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN) was established in 2003 and provides a forum for the discussion of quality assurance/quality improvement issues amongst the principal national stakeholders involved in the quality assurance of higher education and training in Ireland. The Secretariat for the IHEQN is located in the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, thus ensuring a comprehensive exchange of information between the recognition and quality assurance bodies.
- There are strong direct links between the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and quality assurance bodies in Ireland such as the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB).
- Under the Qualifications Act, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland is responsible for overseeing the development and implementation of the quality assurance arrangements of the Dublin Institute of Technology. Also, under section 9 of the Qualifications Act, the Authority may review from time to time the performance by the Awards Councils of their functions. A review of HETAC was undertaken by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland in 2006 which included reviewing its quality assurance arrangements.

b. Discussion of and agreement on working methods between these bodies

The communication channels between the recognition and quality assurance bodies are open and are utilised frequently. Recognition and quality assurance bodies are represented on each others working groups and discussion fora and are invited to attend

each others promotional events and information dissemination sessions. Thus, information is continuously exchanged regarding issues of interest to both parties.

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

Qualifications Recognition – Ireland has disseminated information internationally regarding the outcomes of quality assessments in Ireland and has consulted with national and international quality assurance bodies regarding quality assessments which have been undertaken abroad. Such information is used to inform recognition decisions.

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

Qualifications Recognition – Ireland seeks advice from HETAC, the Irish universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology regarding its recognition decisions. HETAC is an active member of the ENQA association and informs Qualifications Recognition – Ireland regarding its member organisations, information sources etc.

As the Chief Executive of the Irish Higher Education and Training Awards Council is a Vice President of ENQA and a representative of Qualifications Recognition – Ireland served a two year term on the ENIC Bureau from June 2003 until June 2005, the Irish ENIC/NARIC has forged strong links with ENQA and utilises these links in order to obtain accreditation information from members of the ENQA association. In addition, ENQA members have contacted the Qualifications Recognition – Ireland in order to obtain specific information regarding the Irish education and qualifications system.