

Strasbourg, May 2006

GUIDELINES FOR NATIONAL ACTION PLANS FOR RECOGNITION

elaborated by the ENIC Bureau, the NARIC Advisory Board and the Bureau of the
Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee

Approved by the Bologna Follow Up Group, Vienna April 7, 2006

INTRODUCTION

In the Bergen Communiqué, Ministers committed themselves to

draw up national action plans to improve the quality of the process associated with the recognition of foreign qualifications. These plans will form part of each country's national report for the next Ministerial Conference.

On this background, the ENIC Bureau, the NARIC Advisory Board and the Bureau of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee have drawn up draft guidelines for the national reports and hereby submit the draft to the Bologna Follow Up Group.

The Guidelines were approved by the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) at its meeting in Vienna on April 7, 2006. The present version reproduces the Guidelines as adopted by the BFUG.

The Guidelines will be found in Appendix 1.

An explanatory note will be found in Appendix 2. This note also provides a number of useful references.

APPENDIX 1

NATIONAL ACTION PLANS FOR RECOGNITION

Guidelines for national action plans to be elaborated under the Bologna Process, proposed by the ENIC Bureau, the NARIC Advisory Board and the Bureau of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee

1. Legislation

1.1 *Lisbon Recognition Convention*

- a. Plan and timetable for ratification if not yet accomplished

The Republic of Macedonia has signed the Lisbon recognition Convention on April 10, 1997, the ratification has been done in 2002, by the Law on Ratification, June 20, 2002. Information Centre is the most important body for the implementation of the Convention, assisting and playing in the same time the important role in the development of the overall process of recognition within Europe. Cooperation with the ENIC Centers is important especially in the questions related to accreditation of the institutions and programs, explanation of the national higher education system and the national structure including the qualifications framework, Diploma Supplement and ECTS, or grading scale, mark range and the descriptor referring to them.

1.2 *Review of national legislation relevant to recognition*

Should include:

- a. The timetable and organization of the review of national legislation (including secondary legislation);
- b. Steps envisaged as a result of the review, e.g. as regards amending national legislation where needed and an indicative timetable for such amendments.

Could also include:

- c. When and how the outcomes of this review will be published;
- d. How partners in the European Higher Education Area will be informed of the outcomes.

Macedonia is a Signatory State of the Lisbon Convention. Regulation on Recognition of foreign qualifications is incorporated into the Law on Higher Education, as well as regulation related to ENIC and Quality Assessment in Higher Education.

The procedure for the recognition in Macedonia is regulated by the Law on Higher Education from 2000 and the amendments from 2003 and is coordinating by the Information Centre.

- Law on Higher Education 2000;
- Law on Amendment and Supplement to the Law on Higher Education (2000), July 25, 2003

The Law on higher education regulates academic and professional recognition of foreign HE qualifications. The EU Directives for the professional recognition are still not in place

but the preparation is in place. The Information Centre provides the relevant information about the HES and the institution when the subject of evaluation is the qualification for the professional purposes.

As will be seen from the Law on HE, the text the Lisbon Convention is already introduced: fair, transparent, coherent and reliable recognition procedure is pointed out, as well as reasonable time limit, explanation of the reasons where recognition is refused, right to appeal a recognition decision and so on.

Currently, a wide debate is launched about a new Law on Higher Education. The targets of the current reform process in higher education system are: democratization, academic freedom, higher quality of higher education, international compatibility and comparability, private higher education institutions, modernization of study programs however the reforms are aimed at bringing Macedonian higher education system closer to European and worldwide standards.

Within the new legal documents improvements are going in a way of further introducing international documents and instruments, regulating more concretely the new issues in recognition such as recognition of joint degrees, recognition of transnational education, recognition of qualification issued from private HE provides and learning occurred in various educational settings: formal, non-formal and informal, recognition of prior learning. Overall draft document will be discussed during upcoming months.

The new draft Law is going to be in force until the end of 2007.

The secondary legislation on recognition regulates more precisely the procedure and the competency as well as the issues related to all other aspects in the recognition matters substantial differences in particular

Macedonian Informative Centre has its main responsibility, according to the Law on HE: affirmation and information of outcomes of the improvements within the legislation, affirmation of the international documents on recognition and strengthening their implementation within the national legal project and secondary legislation.

1.3 Bilateral or regional recognition agreements

- a. Conformity with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention

The responsibility of the Informative Centre is in initiating and participation in negotiating process and conclusion of the bilateral agreements.

Macedonia has signed the bilateral agreements with Turkey, Albania and Bulgaria.

Turkey: Law on ratification of the Agreement for mutual recognition of certificates, diplomas and qualifications and scientific degrees and titles obtained in Republic of Macedonia and Republic of Turkey (“Official Gazette of the RM” no 7/1999)

Albania: Law on ratification of the Agreement between the Macedonian Government and the Albanian Government on co-operation in the fields of Education and science (“Official Gazette of the RM” No. 12/2002)

Bulgaria: Law on ratification of the agreement between Government of the Republic of Macedonia and Government of the Republic of Bulgaria for mutual recognition of the documents for education and scientific degrees (“Official Gazette of the RM: No. 12/2002)

The further intention is reaching the agreements with the neighboring countries and especially the countries of the former Yugoslavia where the similarities in the systems of higher education are present. The first reason for such agreements would be because the most of the applicants for recognition are actually from the region, so when the agreement exists the procedure is much simpler. The Commission within the Information Center in these cases is completely responsible for the recognition and the decisions are based on the stance that by signing the bilateral agreement the common basic compatibility and comparability is already agreed. However, each HE qualification fall under the regular procedure the same for the qualifications earned out of mentioned countries.

The conformity with the principles of the Lisbon recognition Convention is reached accordingly.

2. Recognition practice

2.1 *Criteria and procedures*

- a. Overview of the practice of competent recognition authorities in applying the Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and Periods of Study.
- b. Measures to improve implementation.
- c. Overview of the time required to process applications for recognition and measures to improve this time.

The Law on HE regulates academic and professional recognition of foreign HE qualifications. The EU Directives for the professional recognition are still not in place but the preparation is widely present. The Information Centre provides the relevant information about the HES and the institution when the subject of evaluation is the qualification for the professional purposes.

The secondary legislation on recognition regulates more precisely the procedure and the competency.

Recognition of higher education qualifications or of a part of higher education studies gained abroad is an integral part of the right to education and the promotion of the freedom of movement.

Within the procedure of recognizing foreign higher education qualifications, differences are acknowledged between and among higher education systems, any form of discrimination and prejudice is avoided in the assessment of a foreign higher education qualification, mutual trust and transparency are provided.

The Ministry of Education and Science, on the basis of a proposal from the Expert's Commission, decides separately on each request for recognizing higher education qualifications gained abroad or of a part of studies followed abroad.

The Expert's Commission at the Universities exists and is established by the education-scientific, the education-art or the teaching council of the higher education institution being closest to the education-scientific field within which the recognition of a foreign higher education qualification is done.

The Commission creates the proposal following the review on its part of all the documentation submitted by the applicant and after having obtained an opinion from the information centre, within 60 days following the date of submitting the relevant request on the part of the minister.

In case the commission does not provide its opinion in this term, the minister may establish another commission having new composition.

Taking into account the objectives of the recognition and evaluation of higher education in accordance with this Law and the international principles, the following aspects are used as the main criteria:

- the system of higher education where the higher education was acquired;
- the fact whether the foreign institution of higher education is recognized, i.e. whether it is authorized by competent bodies in its country of location to issue diplomas and certificates;
- the curriculum, i.e. the list of subjects;
- academic achievements;
- the type of education organized by the institution of higher education according to the academic, i.e. professional orientation;
- conditions for admission in the institution of higher education;
- the rights provided by the document in the home country;
- duration of the higher education;
- rights arising from the higher education;
- objectives of possible recognition etc.; and
- the former practise, i.e. the previous solved similar cases.

The recognition body may, when find as necessary take into consideration some other aspects as important for recognition of the higher education qualification (the fact that the document of higher education has already been recognized by another country, the date of issuance of the document, etc.).

The form and the documents for the procedure on recognition are determined by the Ministry and prescribed by the Rulebook on recognition.

However, the improvement of the implementation is drafted within the draft version of the new higher education legislation which would be going in the following direction: “The procedure for recognition of the higher education at an institution of higher education in the Republic of Macedonia should commence with a request submitted by the holder of foreign document, in already prescribed form by the Information centre. Along with the appropriately filled form and the necessary documentation determined by the Rulebook on recognition, the applicant shall also make a statement, signed personally that the documentation is valid in accordance with the legal regulations of the country of origin and in the Republic of Macedonia”.

Recognition of international qualifications is denoted as a process of assessing the abilities, experience, knowledge and respecting the differences in the programs and methods of studying. According the draft Law, recognition will be in dependence on documents issued by an institution, which is part of the officially recognized higher education system in the host country.

Key components of the recognition in Macedonia however are:

- Authentication:
- Ensure that document have not been altered or tempered with in any way, genuine document;
- Issuing institution, public or private is legitimate, accredited institution, part of the HES in the country of origin;
- The bearer of document is the person whose name appears on those documents.
- Evaluation: determination of comparability of programs and institutions, finding appropriate qualification in the own HES;

Recognition: practical application of the assessment-decision on recognition

2.2 *Joint degrees*

- a. Overview of the legal provisions concerning the recognition of joint degrees.
- b. Amendments to remove legal obstacles or to establish legal provision favouring the recognition of joint degrees.
- c. Beyond legal provision, suggestion of policy measures to ensure the recognition of joint degrees.
- d. Overview of double and multiple degrees and policy measures to encourage the recognition of such degrees.

The current Law on HE (Official Journals No. 113/2005; 49/2003; 64/2000) regulate establishing joint studies with other universities within the all three cycles, giving a very general framework for organizing international studies. The issue of joint degree, as a double and multiple degree certificate awarded by two or more institutions, is not mentioned in the articles of the current Law on HE.

The Ministry of Education and Science is working on the new draft- Law on Higher Education where more precise introduction of joint degrees is provided as well as the recognition of joint degrees. The Law is expected to be in force before the end of 2007. The National Strategy for Development of Education in the Republic of Macedonia 2005 – 2015, considering joint degrees as potentially useful instrument for fostering the internationalization of European higher education provide the responsibility for the Ministry of Education and Science to develop secondary legislation for study programs that will lead to the joint degree certificate. However it is legally difficult regulating issues of one qualification in the name of several institutions and with regard to foreign institutions. Another difficulty goes with the amount of the credits taken at the institutions in order to obtain the degree by the institutions.

Macedonia therefore is going to review its legislation with a view to facilitating the organization of study program leading to joint degrees, but also organization of quality assurance and the recognition of joint degrees. The Diploma Supplement and ECTS are important tools that assist the recognition of qualifications. In this case, the main intention is stressing the joint aspect of the curriculum within the Diploma Supplement and making clear link to the education system to which it belongs.

However, there were some obstacles to be overcome in the co-operation with a university from one country in making agreements with a university in another country such as: organization in academic years rather than in semesters or in some universities exist an internship within their study program or some differences in modules.

Fact is that higher education in Europe is fragmented and that national degrees could hardly be compared and the use of different terminology hinder transparency in some extent.

Double degrees, when nationally-recognized diplomas are issued separately by the universities involved in the integrated study program, improve in some point the competitiveness of the institutions and are aimed to increase the employability of internationally mobile students. The potential policies recently discussed in Macedonia are in a way of facilitating to the graduates of international programs, who had spent one part of their studies abroad to be enabled to apply with university qualification known to the employers in the host country. In general, Macedonia expects to become available for the European Commission Programs, such as Erasmus, Socrates, and to offer its full contribution to the issue.

2.3 *Overview of institutional practice*

Consider what measures have been or should be taken to allow national authorities to know

- a. whether higher education institutions and other competent recognition authorities comply with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and with national laws;
- b. what measures could be taken if given institutions or authorities were shown consistently not to apply the Convention and/or relevant national laws.

2.4 *Transparency tools for recognition*

- a. Plans and timetable for the implementation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)
- b. Plans and timetable for the implementation of the Diploma Supplement
- c. Plans and timetable for the implementation of possible other transparency tools.

Higher education institution in the Republic of Macedonia has committed themselves to the application of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Despite certain weaknesses in the application of the methodology for defining credits, most of the faculties have implemented the standards of ECTS, i.e. have decided on applying 60 credits in one study year (30 per semester) with a total of 240 credits for undergraduate studies. The key indication is explained as: one credit would stand for 25-30 hours of working hours and that student workload in CTS includes the time spent in attending lectures, seminars, independent study, preparation for, and taking of, examinations. It is provided that within the CTS the value of credit is the learning outcome which related to it. Study programs with three-year duration accumulate 180 credits.

There are no some specific provisions for the Diploma Supplement in the existing Law on Higher Education. With the upcoming legislative changes the Diploma Supplement is expected to become a part of the University documents.

Universities in Macedonia have adopted the Diploma Supplement starting from the year 2002 and the document is in accordance with the EU/CoE/UNESCO Diploma Supplement model. The first students will receive the Diploma Supplement in the academic year 2008-2009, free of charge in English language besides the national languages and automatically.

Gradually, HEI in Macedonia will introduce the rest of transparence tools such as Europass.

2.5 *Borderless/transnational education*

- a. National and/or institutional policies concerning the assessment of borderless/transnational education.

In Macedonia the national framework for quality assurance, accreditation and the recognition of qualifications still not geared to addressing the challenges of cross-border provision. The one of reasons is the lack of comprehensive frameworks for coordinating initiatives at the international level, together with the diversity of the quality assurance and accreditation systems at the national level, which make difficulties in the quality assurance of cross-border higher education. The increase in cross-border student, academic staff, researcher and professional mobility certainly has put the issue of the recognition of academic and professional qualifications very actual however there is a need for additional initiatives, for strengthening international cooperation and networking and more information on procedures and systems of quality assurance, accreditation and the recognition of qualifications.

3. Information provision

3.1 *Provision of information on recognition*

- a. Measures taken or envisaged to improve the provision of information on recognition criteria and procedures and on the national education system;
- b. The timetable envisaged for such measures;
- c. The bodies or institutions responsible for the measures;
- d. The state of electronic provision of information on recognition;
- e. Whether the national information centres establish and maintain their own web pages, linked to the ENIC-NARIC Web site.

In order to contribute to higher education policy development and legislation at national, regional and European level, the Information Center:

- collect and regularly update information on education systems and qualifications in different countries and their comparability to the qualifications in Macedonia;
- promote a fair recognition of qualifications based on international and national documents;

Information Center closely co-operate with the:

- ENIC/NARIC Network;
- the Higher Education Institutions;
- the ENQA;

The web page of the Macedonian ENIC is: <http://www.mon.gov.mk>

Information Center gives the information on Macedonian system of higher education:

Educational structure;

Adult education and lifelong learning;

- Legal framework;
- Type and status of institution-list of recognized HE institutions;
- Study program;
- Degree structure;
- Qualification framework;
- Grading and examination system;
- Quality assurance;
- Access qualifications/requirements;
- Samples of credentials;

3.2 *Information package for applicants*

- a. The extent to which information packages are provided for applicants by higher education institutions and other competent recognition authorities and,
- b. If needed, how practice could be improved.

(Mentioned in 4.1)

4. Structures

4.1 *National information centre*

Outline the functioning of the national information centre (ENIC/NARIC), e.g. with regard to:

- a. The formal status of the centre;
- b. Legal competence (e.g. advisory or decision making; academic, de jure professional, de facto professional recognition);
- c. Staff and budget;
- d. Capacity building in terms of expertise and service to the public;
- e. Networking and cooperation at national level and internationally.

Information Centre operates within the Ministry of Education and Science as a part of the Department on Higher Education. The legal competences are stipulated at the above mentioned Law on HE. Information Centre provides advices for the academic recognition but also in the cases of recognition of qualifications which are regulated by law and those which are self-regulating. Information Centre is actively involved in the introduction of the EU Directives and their implementation within the Macedonian legislation.

The Information Centre is closely cooperating with the Department on European Integration at the Government of the Republic of Macedonia. The Center is actively working on implementation of the EU Directives within the national legislative framework on higher education, and especially in the field of professional recognition of qualifications.

The role of the Information Centre is regulated by Law. By the Law on Higher Education (2000) and the Law on Changing and Supplementing the Law on HE (2003) this body is fully accredited to monitor what is happening in the field of recognition by examining the state of implementation of the Lisbon Convention and all associated documents as a

coherent whole. This function is ensured by examining the final recognition decisions that are issuing by the HEI, and by verifying them throughout the Informative Centers' Commission on Recognition and the Ministers' final signature on the decision. In addition, the Information Center is actively involved in preparing the legislative framework of the overall higher education in Macedonia, the framework of recognition in particular. Starting from the Law on Higher Education, which provides a new legal framework for tertiary education and establishes new institutional structures, a series of changes to the Law on Higher Education are aiming to adjustments of the legal basis for the reforms foreseen within the Bologna process. By elaborating the Bologna Action Lines and analyzing examples of application of the Bologna Process in certain European countries, Information Centre is assisting, as sort of inputs for implementation and development, the reform progress in Macedonia towards the Bologna objectives. Participation in preparation of the policy document on higher education, the strategy for development of higher education and bilateral agreements on mutual recognition of certificates and diplomas is also the task of the IC.

There is one issue that is becoming increasingly important as one of the major challenges of the Bologna Process: creation of a qualification framework where the specific profile of qualifications will be transparently described, where the subject specific competences and the whole context of learning will be clearly described as much as possible. In this sense, Macedonian IC is playing an important role in gathering and passing on to the HEI information and interpretations on current European projects in the national context.

As recognition of the learning outcomes concerns, the issue is going to be addressed starting from the upcoming changes in the legislative field where more flexible approach to the recognition procedure should be applied. The overall process is to be regulated as less legalistic as possible and more conceptual. Importance of assessing the skills and knowledge gained throughout the learning process in the process of recognition is widely acquired.

Furthermore, IC is informing about the mobility opportunities. Introducing the portability of national loans and grants, public or private, for widening access to higher education and assumingly enabling students to carry out short or longer periods of study in other European countries is the upcoming goal.

Macedonian Informative Centre is practicing the method of co-operation and co-ordination and is serving as a main national body that facilitate the overall co-operation and communication within the higher education community in Macedonia. In that sense, IC is calling for promotion of closely co-operation between the universities. IC is offering its assistance to the HEI about how and where to find the information in relation to the appropriate Bologna Action Lines and how to operate with hem. By showing the appropriate providers (Council of Europe, UNESCO, EUA, ESIB, ENIC/NARIC Network) the Information Center is truly expecting that Macedonian universities in the future will be acting unitary and will respond positively to the new European trends in higher education.

Information Centre is also offering its assistance to the universities in a way to how to make their own information as precise as possible. The quality of information is pointing out and examples of such information are presenting. The importance of making

information easy to access for various concerned users: students, employers, HEIs, Quality Assurances bodies, student organization, especially student loans/grants bodies, and citizens in general is strongly suggested.

The Informative Centre target groups are:

- Higher Education Institution;
- Ministries of Education;
- ENIC/NARIC Network;
- Professional organizations;
- Mobility and exchange organizations;
- Quality assurance organizations;
- Students;
- Parents;
- Refugee organizations;
- The Press;

- Others.

The Information centre includes persons specialised in areas of recognition of the qualifications acquired abroad, i.e. the worldwide education systems, as well as in the comparability with the system of higher education in the Republic of Macedonia. The information centre distributes information to the institutions of higher education in the Republic of Macedonia, the foreign institutions of higher education, international organizations and the applicants.

○ **Cooperation recognition/quality assurance bodies**

- b. Information exchange between the bodies responsible for recognition and quality assurance;
- c. Discussion of and agreement on working methods between these bodies;
- d. Use of information on the outcomes of quality assessments in the recognition of qualifications;
- e. 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.

In Macedonia the awareness that higher education would no longer be taken as granted and that it must be demonstrated and verified is present. Issues such as standard setting, capacity building and the role of higher education institutions and academic staff are important if the Bologna process is going to change European higher education and make it responsive to the settled demands. Quality assurance in Macedonia intends to rebuild the structure of higher education and to assess institutions and programs and to provide a measure of assurance which would help recognition. However Macedonia's current accreditation and quality assurance systems are still not well documented and transparent.

The Information Centre does seek to facilitate and inform decisions about the comparability of qualifications and the outcomes of quality assessment.

APPENDIX 2

NATIONAL ACTION PLANS FOR RECOGNITION

Explanatory note to the Guidelines

INTRODUCTION

In their Bergen Communiqué, adopted on May 20, 2005, the Ministers responsible for higher education of the Bologna Process reviewed progress and objectives with regard to the recognition of qualifications and committed to elaborating national action plans for recognition to improve the recognition of qualifications.

The part of the Bergen Communiqué related to recognition reads:

We note that 36 of the 45 participating countries have now ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention. We urge those that have not already done so to ratify the Convention without delay. We commit ourselves to ensuring the full implementation of its principles, and to incorporating them in national legislation as appropriate. We call on all participating countries to address recognition problems identified by the ENIC/NARIC networks. We will draw up national action plans to improve the quality of the process associated with the recognition of foreign qualifications. These plans will form part of each country's national report for the next Ministerial Conference. We express support for the subsidiary texts to the Lisbon Recognition Convention and call upon all national authorities and other stakeholders to recognise joint degrees awarded in two or more countries in the EHEA.

We see the development of national and European frameworks for qualifications as an opportunity to further embed lifelong learning in higher education. We will work with higher education institutions and others to improve recognition of prior learning including, where possible, non-formal and informal learning for access to, and as elements in, higher education programmes.

The Bergen Communiqué further underlines the importance of recognition policy in establishing the European Higher Education Area, and Ministers have undertaken further commitments in this area. Due reference is also made to the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention and to the role of the ENIC and NARIC Networks.

In this context, the Bologna Follow Up Group has expressed the desire – and indeed the expectations – that the ENIC and NARIC Networks put forward a proposal for guidelines for the national action plans for recognition that should be elaborated in time for the London Conference of “Bologna Ministers” in May 2007. With the present proposal, the

ENIC Bureau and the NARIC Advisory Board, acting on behalf of both Networks, as well as the Bureau of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee, put forward suggested guidelines for the National Plans.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

As stated in the Bergen Communiqué, the national action plans should improve the quality of the recognition process. This should be interpreted to mean that recognition practice should facilitate the fair recognition of learners' qualification, so that learners can move between higher education systems as easily and flexibly as possible without losing the real value of their qualifications through unreasonable procedures and practice. This again relates to recognition practice, which in the worst case may discourage learners from applying for recognition or from completing their application procedure, and to content, where unreasonable assessments could grant learners with foreign qualifications less than the real value of their foreign qualifications as expressed in terms of the education system of their host country¹.

The Bologna Process acknowledges a number of texts that provide guidance with respect to recognition practice, and that also entail obligations for parties. Thus is above all true with regard to the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention, which was adopted in 1997 and which entered into force in 1999. As of February 24, 2006, 37 of the 45 members of the Bologna Process had ratified this Convention, while a further 5 members of the Bologna Process² had signed but not ratified the Convention and 3³ had neither signed nor ratified.

In addition, the four subsidiary texts to the Convention, adopted by the Convention Committee, offer guidance. These are:

- Recommendation on International Access Qualifications (1999);
- Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and Periods of Study (2001);
- Code of Good Practice in the provision of Transnational Education (2001);
- Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees (2004).

All the above texts, as well as the Joint ENIC/NARIC Charter of Activities and Services, are available in a joint publication⁴ and on the web. Web references will be given in the relevant parts of this explanatory note.

The National Action Plans should identify what, in the view of the Minister responsible for higher education, needs to be done in each country in order to ensure fair recognition.

¹ Which can be the learners' home country if they have obtained their qualifications abroad and then return to their country of origin.

² Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Turkey

³ Andorra, Greece and Spain.

⁴ *Standards for Recognition: the Lisbon Recognition Convention and its Subsidiary Texts* (Strasbourg 2005: Council of Europe Publishing – Council of Europe Higher Education Series no. 3).

The precise actions and measures will of course depend on the situation of each country, but it is entirely possible to offer guidelines as to what major areas of policy and practice might be considered in elaborating the national action plans and what kind of measures might be envisaged.

It should be noted that since Ministers committed to issuing the Diploma Supplement automatically, free of charge and in a widely spoken European language by the end of 2005, and since the implementation of this commitment will be a part of the stocktaking report for 2007, the Diploma Supplement is not included in the outline for the National Action Plans.

OUTLINES OF AN ACTION PLAN

The components of an action plan are outlined below, organized around four major categories:

1. Legislation
2. Recognition practice
3. Information provision
4. Structures

1. Legislation

1.1 Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention

The action plan should

- Specify whether the Convention has been ratified and,
- If it has not, what the plans for ratification are.

It should be borne in mind that for the purposes of the Convention, “ratification” means that the instrument of ratification has been deposited with one of the depositories of the Convention, i.e. the Secretary General of the Council of Europe or the Director-General of UNESCO. This follows after completion of the ratification procedures at national level⁵.

1.2 Review of national legislation relevant to recognition

In the Bergen Communiqué, Ministers committed themselves to “ensuring the full implementation of its principles [i.e. the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention], and to incorporating them in national legislation as appropriate”. This cannot be ensured without a review of national legislation to verify that it is fully compatible with and promotes the implementation of the Convention and its subsidiary texts.

⁵ An updated overview of ratifications and signatures may be found at <http://conventions.coe.int>; search for ETS 165.

The action plan *should* outline

- The timetable and organization of the review of national legislation (including secondary legislation);
- What steps are envisaged as a result of the review, e.g. as regards amending national legislation where needed and an indicative timetable for such amendments.

In addition, the action plan *could* outline

- When and how the outcomes of this review will be published;
- How partners in the European Higher Education Area will be informed of the outcomes.

It should be underlined that even countries that consider that their legislation in general complies with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and takes on board the subsidiary texts may wish to review its legislation since legislation may still contain clauses that – perhaps unexpectedly – hinder recognition.

Reference documents

The Lisbon Recognition Convention
Subsidiary texts, cf. above

1.3 *Bilateral or regional recognition agreements*

Many countries are party to bilateral and/or regional recognition agreements. The national action plan could assess whether these are in conformity with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and, to the extent they are not, consider what measures could be taken to bring them to conformity.

2. Recognition practice

2.1 *Criteria and procedures*

The Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and Periods of Study, adopted in 2001, outlines the main steps involved in processing an application for recognition as well as the main considerations of substance and form.

The Action Plans should consider

- To what extent the practice of competent recognition authorities in the country implements the Recommendation;
- What measures could be taken to improve implementation;

- The time required to process applications for recognition and measures to improve this time.

It is recalled that the time a competent recognition authority requires to process an application is of key importance to the applicant. Parties to the Lisbon Recognition Convention undertake to make decisions on recognition within a reasonable time limit specified beforehand by the competent recognition authority.

Reference document

Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and Periods of Study⁶

For the obligation to make decisions within a reasonable time limit, see also Article III.5 of the Convention and the Explanatory Report to this Article.

2.2 Joint Degrees

Joint degrees are an important instrument for developing student mobility as well as the Europe dimension of higher education. In some contexts, they are still referred to as “double degrees”, even if there is a clear difference between joint and double degrees (see definitions below). A part of the discussions within the Bologna Process have focused on how to develop further joint degree programmes, but the recognition of qualifications granted within such arrangements is also a key policy measure.

The National Action Plans should

- Provide an overview of the legal provisions concerning the recognition of joint degrees;
- Suggest amendments to remove legal obstacles or to establish legal provision favouring the recognition of joint degrees;
- Beyond legal provision, suggest policy measures to ensure the recognition of joint degrees;
- Provide an overview of double and multiple degrees and suggest policy measures to ensure the recognition of such double and multiple degrees.

Definitions :

- Joint degrees : a "real" joint degree is a degree awarded by at least two higher education institutions together with one joint degree certificate issued and where this certificate is valid without being supplemented with any single national degrees".

- Double degrees : a double degree is defined as two national diplomas issued officially by two higher education institutions involved in an integrated program.

⁶ Available in the publication referred to and at http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/HigherEducation/Recognition/Criteria%20and%20procedures_EN.asp#TopOfPage

- *Multiple degrees* : multiple degrees are defined as more than two national diplomas issued officially by more than two higher education institutions involved in an integrated program"

Reference document

Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees⁷

2.3 *Overview of institutional practice*

In most countries, many recognition decisions are made by higher education institutions or other competent authorities that are not part of Ministries or agencies of the government. The principle of institutional autonomy is also one of the basic principles of the European Higher Education Area. The Convention, in Section II, recognizes that the legal framework of parties varies in this regard. Nevertheless, even if national authorities may have limited legal competence in recognition cases, they would have an interest in obtaining and providing information on the practice of competent recognition authorities and to encourage these to follow international best practice. They will of course also need to follow national laws, where applicable. Possibly, national Bologna groups made up of both Ministry and academic representatives may play a role in this regard.

The National Action Plans may wish to consider what measures have been or should be taken to allow national authorities to know

- Whether higher education institutions and other competent recognition authorities comply with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and with national laws;
- What measures could be taken if given institutions or authorities were shown consistently not to apply the Convention and/or relevant national laws.

2.4 *Transparency tools for recognition*

The transparent recognition of qualifications is one of the main objectives of the Bologna Process, as a key means of improving mobility within the European Higher Education Area. At European level, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the Diploma Supplement are key transparency tools. While the Prague Communiqué refers to “a credit system such as the ECTS or one that is ECTS-compatible”, no alternative system has been developed at European level. In the Berlin Communiqué, Ministers renewed their support for ECTS. However, some countries have developed national credit systems. Countries may therefore implement the ECTS either by adopting and implementing the ECTS in their national context or by specifying how their national system, provided it be based on student workload and applicable for both

⁷ Available in the publication referred to and at <http://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=836481&BackColorInternet=9999CC&BackColorIntranet=FFBB55&BackColorLogged=FFAC75>

transfer and accumulation, articulates with the ECTS so that national credits may easily be translated into ECTS credits for mobility purposes. Other transparency tools such as the Language Portfolio are listed in the EUROPASS initiative⁸.

The National Action Plans should include

- Plans and timetable for the implementation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS);
- Plans and timetable for the implementation of the Diploma Supplement;
- Plans and timetable for the implementation of possible other transparency tools.

Reference documents

ECTS User's Guide⁹

Diploma Supplement¹⁰

Europass¹¹

2.5 Borderless/transnational education

The emergence of higher education provision not linked to national systems and often also without a clear geographical location is an important development over the past decade. The Lisbon Recognition Convention applies to programmes and institutions that are a part of the national education systems of parties, yet its provisions can be adapted to other provision, whether from the national systems of non-parties or to provision not linked to national systems. A major concern with borderless or transnational provision is that it is often difficult to assess its quality, and that opportunities for providers to undergo quality assessment may be lacking.

The national action plans could outline

- Whether there are national and/or institutional policies concerning the assessment and recognition of qualifications awarded under borderless/transnational education provision;
- What the main points of such policies are or, alternatively;
- Whether such qualifications are turned down for formal reasons, without further consideration of their content;

⁸ The web link to Europass is <<http://europass.cedefop.eu.int/>> <http://europass.cedefop.eu.int/>

⁹ Available at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/usersg_en.html

¹⁰ Available at http://www.aic.lv/ace/ace_disk/Dipl_Sup/index.htm

¹¹ http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/europass/index_en.html

- Whether any action has been taking to implement the UNESCO/OECD¹² guidelines for quality provision of cross border higher education.

Reference document

Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education¹³

3. Information provision

3.1 Provision of information on recognition

Provision of information on the procedures and criteria for recognition and on the education system of the country are of key importance to the mobility of students, staff and holders of qualifications. Information will often need to be adapted to specific target groups and be provided through a variety of means, including electronic means. The ENIC and NARIC Networks have established a joint Web site¹⁴, which is currently managed by the Canadian ENIC and an ENIC/NARIC Working Party. Links to the web sites of national information centres as well as other relevant pages are provided from this site.

The National Action Plans could describe

- What measures have been taken or are envisaged to improve the provision of information on recognition criteria and procedures and on the national education system;
- What time table is envisaged for such measure;
- What bodies or institutions are responsible for the measures;
- The state of electronic provision of information on recognition;
- Whether the national information centres establish and maintain their own web pages, linked to the ENIC-NARIC Web site.

Reference document

ENIC/NARIC Code of Good Practice on Information Provision¹⁵

¹² <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/27/51/35779480.pdf>
or http://www.unesco.org/education/guidelines_E.indd.pdf

¹³ Available in the publication referred to and at
http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/HigherEducation/Recognition/Code%20of%20good%20practice_EN.asp#TopOfPage

¹⁴ <http://www.enic-naric.net/>

¹⁵ Available at
http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/HigherEducation/Recognition/ENIC%20NARIC%20Code%20information%20provision_EN.asp#TopOfPage

3.2 *Information package for applicants*

A particular point in the Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures concerns the provision of information on the rights of applicants and the criteria and procedures for recognition to all applicants, where the Recommendation suggests applicants should be provided with an information package at the same time that receipt of the application is acknowledged.

The National Action Plans could consider

- To what extent information packages are provided and;
- If needed, how practice could be improved.

Reference document

Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and Periods of Study, paragraphs 13 – 16 and the Explanatory Memorandum

4. Structures

4.1 *National information centre*

The action plan should outline the functioning of the national information centre (ENIC/NARIC) and set goals for improving the functioning of the centre. This could comprise considerations of:

- The formal status of the centre;
- Legal competence (e.g. advisory or decision making; academic, *de jure* professional, *de facto* professional recognition);
- Staff and budget;
- Capacity building in terms of expertise and service to the public;
- Networking and cooperation at national level and internationally.

Reference document

Joint ENIC/NARIC Charter of Activities and Services¹⁶

4.2 *Cooperation recognition/quality assurance bodies*

The action plan should outline how the national information centre cooperates with the body responsible for quality assurance and, if required, how this cooperation could be improved. Regardless of whether the national information centre and the QA body are

¹⁶ Available at

<http://wcd.coe.int/com.instranet.InstraServlet?Command=com.instranet.CmdBlobGet&DocId=822012&SecMode=1&Admin=0&Usage=4&InstranetImage=43867> as well as in the publication mentioned in above.

located within the same organization or in different organizations, this could comprise considerations of how

- Information is exchanged between these bodies;
- Working methods are discussed and agreed;
- Information on the outcomes of quality assessments are used in the recognition of qualifications;
- Membership of international networks and associations in recognition (e.g. ENIC and NARIC Networks) and quality assurance (e.g. ENQA) are used for the mutual benefits of both bodies.

Reference documents

Lisbon Recognition Convention, Section VIII
Joint ENIC/NARIC Charter of Activities and Services
European Quality Assurance Standards¹⁷

¹⁷ Available at http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/EN/BASIC/050520_European_Quality_Assurance_Standards.pdf