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Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research (CD-ESR)

RECOGNITION ISSUES IN THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

**International seminar, Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian
11 – 12 April 2002**

*A Council of Europe contribution to the European Higher Education Area, in
cooperation with the Ministry of Education of Portugal*

REPORT BY THE GENERAL RAPPORTEUR

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Recognition in the European Higher Education Area An agenda for 2010

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Report by Lewis Purser, European University Association General Rapporteur

INTRODUCTION

This international seminar highlighted the crucial role which recognition issues will play in the ongoing development of the European Higher Education Area.

It took place on the fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Council of Europe / UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (the “Lisbon Recognition Convention”). The seminar therefore considered issues relating to the implementation of the Convention, now signed by 40 countries and ratified by 28 of these.

The seminar also thoroughly considered specific issues arising from the Council of Europe/ENIC report on Recognition Issues in the Bologna Process, including:

- the assessment of learning outcomes and non-traditional qualifications;
- the recognition of qualifications from transnational education arrangements including the implementation of the UNESCO / Council of Europe Code of Good Practice;
- recognition for the labour market, and the respective roles of higher education institutions, the ENIC (European Network of Information Centres) / NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centres) and employers;
- the need to promote transparency by ensuring an improved quality of information on recognition issues and procedures.

The seminar was attended by approximately 130 representatives of Ministries, including members of the Bologna follow-up group, higher education institutions, networks and student organisations, as well as recognition specialists from countries party to the Bologna Process and from other countries party to the European Cultural Convention.

As well as addressing the above issues, the seminar was also specifically designed to link closely with the European University Association / Swiss Confederation conference on the European Credit Transfer System, to be held on 11-12 October 2002 in Zürich, likewise in the framework of the Bologna Process.

BACKGROUND

The seminar served to remind participants and indeed all players in the Bologna Process of the primary purposes of recognition:

- to encourage and facilitate mobility between higher education systems and institutions, whether these be in the same or different countries;
- to encourage and facilitate access to further education;
- to encourage and facilitate access to the labour market;
- to allow for and ensure the correct use of academic titles.

The lack of fair and effective recognition procedures can likewise endanger mobility and access, to the detriment of the individuals directly concerned, but also of the academic or professional communities where those individuals will study and work, and to which individuals may also return after their period of mobility.

At a time when Europe is rapidly developing towards the goals of a knowledge society and more specifically towards the goals of the European Higher Education Area, it is crucial that recognition issues are given sufficient attention to ensure that their primary purposes are fulfilled.

Links between recognition issues and the Bologna Process

Recognition issues are also important in working towards a majority of the specific goals expressed in the Bologna Declaration and the Prague Communiqué. These goals include the:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees. Without improved recognition procedures, citizens will not be able to use their qualifications, competencies and skills throughout the European Higher Education Area, and such a system will not bring the benefits which are expected;
- Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles. Given the diversity of the academic offer currently available across Europe, recognition issues will be essential in helping clarify the adaptation of undergraduate/postgraduate structures, and in facilitating different orientations and profiles of study programmes;
- Promotion of mobility. This goal is considered by Ministers to be of utmost importance, and the full application of the provisions of the Lisbon Recognition Convention would be a significant step forward in pursuing the removal of all obstacles to the free movement of students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff;

- Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance. The seminar underlined to necessary links between quality assurance and recognition, and the need for closer co-operation between actors in these two fields, at institutional, national and European levels;
- Promotion of the European dimensions in higher education. The correct application of recognition issues can play an important facilitating role in development of partnerships and joint degrees between institutions in different countries;
- Lifelong learning. Prior learning assessment and recognition and the assessment of non-traditional qualifications are essential in facilitating lifelong learning opportunities and strategies;
- Promotion of the attractiveness of the European higher education area. Recognition issues are an integral element of ensuring the enhanced attractiveness of European higher education to students from Europe and other parts of the world.

From the presentations and discussions at the seminar, it was clear that recognition issues are now moving centre stage, having remained for some time in relative obscurity. Without clearer, more transparent and more forward-looking recognition procedures, none of the goals mentioned above will be fully achievable.

GENERAL ISSUES

Information

Two separate surveys were undertaken in advance of the seminar – one through the Council of Europe’s Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research and the members of the Bologna follow-up group, the other through the ENIC / NARIC networks. Both of these surveys touched on the topic of information currently available on recognition issues. The results of both surveys showed that the problem is not so much the lack of information *per se*, but rather the lack of targeted and transparent information and in particular information on specific education systems and qualifications. Relevant information, even within one country, is often spread over several non-linked and sometimes contradictory sources.

The flow of information to (prospective) students, graduates, employers, as well as to credential evaluators in other countries, is organised in very different ways across Europe, at both national and institutional levels. It is not clear that these main target audiences are aware of the existence of such information, or where to look for it and how to obtain it.

There is a clear need for a more pro-active approach to the flow of information, for ensuring clearer and more coherent structures at national level, and for developing European good practice in this field. A more systematic exchange of practice could lead to the development of a “virtual European platform”, building on accumulated knowledge and experience. It would also be interesting to examine the usefulness of

supplying standard guidance to students in the form of essential questions which they should ask when looking at potential institutions and considering recognition issues.

Recognition and Quality Assurance

As called for in the Prague Communiqué, there is a need for closer links between recognition and quality assurance at all levels.

Higher education institutions should examine closely how they treat recognition issues, and their own internal quality assurance mechanisms should also cover recognition procedures.

At national level, recognition and quality assurance procedures and practice in each country need to be linked in a much more explicit and effective way.

At European level, first contacts have been made between the ENIC / NARIC networks and the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA). However, this co-operation needs considerable strengthening as well as extension to cover all countries of Europe.

Learning outcomes

There is general agreement on the need for a framework in which learning outcomes can be described and assessed. Such a framework will need to take account of the different contexts of learning – both academic and professional, both national and international. The different purposes for which the assessment will be used are also of importance.

Learning outcomes are important for recognition, since the basis for recognition procedures is in the process of shifting from quantitative criteria such as the length and type of courses studied, to the outcomes reached and competencies obtained during these studies. The principle question asked of the student or graduate will therefore no longer be “what did you do to obtain your degree?” but rather “what can you do now that you have obtained your degree?”. This approach is of more relevance to the labour market, and is certainly more flexible when taking into account issues of lifelong learning, non-traditional learning, and other forms of non-formal educational experiences.

There is considerable scope for co-operation at European level in developing a framework for the recognition of learning outcomes and competencies. The development of this framework could be a European joint venture between the higher education institutions, employers and professional organisations, student bodies and the recognition networks. It should ensure a correct balance in order to take account of the varied intended purposes of learning, as chosen by the student, and to ensure the interests of the various groups of stakeholders. Such a framework could then be used by the higher education institutions themselves when ensuring the supply of teaching and learning.

A number of tools for documenting learning outcomes already exist, such as the diploma supplement, the “computer driving licence”, the European language portfolio, the “EuroCV”, and others. However, few of these are widely known. If these are to be used as reference tools across Europe on a systematic basis, much greater awareness is needed of their existence and their potential use and benefits.

The idea was launched of developing a “European competencies book”, as a further tool to help citizens gauge their own levels of skills based on their own various learning experiences. Such a tool might be useful in helping people to return to education and lifelong learning or to the labour market.

Standard setting mechanisms

The future will certainly bring more cases of foreign providers (European and others) operating in individual countries of Europe, or supplying education services across Europe, without necessarily having any physical presence in those countries. There will therefore be a continued need for norms and frameworks for setting and maintaining standards. The UNESCO / Council of Europe Code of Good Practice on transnational education should be given greater prominence in this respect.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention as a legal framework could prove a key mechanism to ensure the fair recognition for students wishing to use such programmes, while also maintaining the same quality assurance procedures and standards as for domestic providers.

There is also however a need for the informal development of a common understanding in addressing such issues. The advantages of the current discussions surrounding the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) negotiations is that this informal co-operation is developing very quickly between a variety of actors.

External dimensions

The current developments towards a European Higher Education Area also have external dimensions which we sometimes ignore. In fact, many of the key issues of the Bologna Process are also of direct relevance for other regions of the world. The UNESCO Global Forum is an excellent venue for developing such inter-regional dialogue. Recent EU initiatives with third countries and plans to extend the Tempus programme to the Mediterranean region also provide scope for action.

The progress achieved in five years towards the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention was cited during the seminar as an example of good practice for other regions which also have their regional agreements on recognition issues. In the context of the GATS discussions and negotiations, the Lisbon Recognition Convention also has the potential to serve as a positive way to promote mobility and exchange while maintaining the transparency and quality of higher education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below were addressed to specific actors, but it should be noted that these may be linked to recommendations addressed to other actors. Thus the recommendations addressed to higher education institutions are clearly linked to the recommendations that governments ensure adequate resources to meet the new challenges of recognition.

□ **To the higher education institutions**

- Develop discussion on learning outcomes and competencies, in order to help move recognition procedures away from formal issues such as length of study and names of courses, and towards procedures based on the results of student learning
- Continue to develop co-operation between institutions leading to joint degrees and other forms of automatic recognition, as confidence building measures leading to more widespread acceptance of mutual recognition
- Examine what information is provided regarding recognition procedures at the institution, to ensure students and other stakeholders are correctly informed
- Examine how this information is provided, to ensure that it is easily accessible in a transparent and effective way
- Ensure adequate internal structures, to ensure that recognition procedures are carried out in an efficient and transparent manner
- Develop appropriate human resources and staff policies to meet the challenges, especially to ensure that all staff (academic and administrative) are fully aware of European best practice in the field
- Include recognition issues and procedures in your internal quality assurance procedures, to continue to develop these fields for the benefit of the institution, its staff and students.

□ **To academic networks, including student organisations:**

- Ensure your members are fully aware of recognition issues and practices, in order to develop a more coherent approach to these issues across Europe
- Monitor recognition issues affecting your members, in order to take action where necessary and to provide feedback to the European higher education community on areas of best practice or concern
- Develop consensus on learning outcomes and competencies, in order to promote a European approach in these fields.

□ **To ENIC and NARIC networks**

- Examine ways in which a European recognition platform could be developed, making accumulated existing knowledge and experience more visible and accessible, in order to promote existing good practice and to ensure widespread European visibility and awareness

- Develop co-operation and exchange with national and European quality assurance bodies, to ensure that recognition issues are also covered by quality assurance procedures
- Examine the feasibility of supplying standard guidance to prospective students (e.g. in the form of a fact sheet on recognition issues and a list of basic questions which they should take into consideration), to assist students regarding what to look for and which questions to ask when choosing institutions and dealing with recognition issues
- Assist the relevant academic and other partners in developing frameworks for the description of learning outcomes
- Examine the feasibility of creating an international working group to develop a European code of good practice for the provision of recognition information

□ **To governments**

- Provide incentives for the reform of institutional management practice in the field of recognition, to encourage higher education institutions to develop effective and efficient institutional procedures when dealing with recognition issues
- Ensure legislation is adequate and forward looking, to ensure that higher education institutions and recognition bodies are in a position to apply best European practice
- Ensure adequate human and financial resources at Ministry, ENIC/NARIC and institutional level to meet the new challenges of recognition
- Ensure an integrated national system for recognition is available via the ENIC/NARIC, to provide a clearly visible one-stop-shop for students and other stakeholders in each country
- Include recognition issues in the remit of appropriate quality assurance bodies.

□ **To the Council of Europe, possibly in partnership with UNESCO, the European Commission and other international governmental and non-governmental organisations**

- Monitor the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and how measures are applied in individual countries, including any gaps between implementation and the legal provisions, in order to provide feedback to the Bologna Process, national governments, the European academic community, including students and other stakeholders
- Examine the feasibility of developing a tool for use by citizens to gauge their own competencies, as a contribution to the discussion on learning outcomes and competencies, and as a way to encourage access to higher education and/or the labour market

- **To Ministers responsible for Higher Education, who will meet in Berlin in 2003**
- In response to concerns expressed by a part of the higher education community, including some students, make clear that new degree structures should continue to ensure that higher education promotes three main qualities in its graduates:
 - Preparation for the labour market
 - Preparation for active citizenship
 - Preparation for continued personal development
- Encourage further work at national and European levels on the issue of learning outcomes
- Encourage the development of a stronger European awareness of recognition issues, by strengthening existing networks and promoting more open access to relevant information
- Invite all European States of the Bologna Process to ratify the Lisbon Recognition Convention, as a major element to facilitate the creation of the European Higher Education Area.