

International recognition and quality assurance

- two priorities of Bologna -

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Background

The national and international trends and developments in education which form the background to the Bologna process are plain enough. Study programmes are becoming more diversified, not just as a result of the demand from students and society, but also because of the flexibility of supply on the side of the providers.

The qualifications and learning pathways are becoming increasingly individualised due to a trend amongst providers towards more tailor-made approaches. Education is entering the virtual world, varying from the use of ICT to the creation of virtual universities. And whether you regard it as a part of the general trend towards globalisation or as a consequence of globalisation in the form of a conscious reply ('internationalisation'), there is no doubt that education is also going global

There are many national and international responses to these trends and developments that go beyond the scope of this paper. Yet in a way, the culmination of these international responses is the Bologna process. This process represents the endeavours of more than 40 European countries to cope with the current international reality in the field of education. The Bologna process is considered to be self-sustaining, with several actors providing the driving force. On the international level, the European Commission has both the means and instruments to support the process, as well as an ambition to make the process part of its economic strategy. Another body that supports the process is the Council of Europe, with its various networks and perspectives on higher education.

The main reason for the success of the Bologna process so far is that the various parties at the national and international levels work together in a unique way. With the support of the various organisations, the basic principle is that what the national authorities agree upon at the international level will find fertile soil at the national level, and that the higher education institutions, students and other stakeholders will all play their role in implementing those principles. It goes without saying that both the rate of implementation and the level of enthusiasm do vary from country to country. Yet there is a general feeling that the process represents an unprecedented reform of education on a huge scale, and one that most countries want to actively participate in.

The scope of this paper does not include a discussion of the general objectives and specific action lines that have already been detailed in the official documents: the Bologna Declaration itself (1999), and the Prague (2001) and Berlin (2003) Communiqués. I would instead like to focus on two action lines: recognition and quality assurance.

One further issue that should be mentioned here, though, is the external dimension of the process. In the first stage, the focus was very much on the "Bologna area" itself. In the Berlin Communiqué, the outer world was rediscovered. Bologna would not only foster the appeal of European higher education, but it would also make Europe more open to cooperation.

Especially from the point of view of the outside world, the issues of diploma recognition and quality assurance are of paramount importance.

Even in the Bologna Declaration, quality assurance was one of the main issues to be dealt with. The aim was that the relevant authorities in the field of quality assurance in Europe should cooperate closely in order to guarantee that the European Higher Education Area would be synonymous with high quality – or even excellent – education. The main actor at the international level is the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). But ENQA is certainly not alone. Other organisations should also participate in the effort, in particular the European University Association (EUA) and the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB). Europe should enhance the culture of quality in its higher education institutions and endeavour to make its national systems as transparent as possible, so as to make the acceptance of other country's quality judgements or accreditation statements a feasible reality. The smooth recognition of diplomas and qualifications has become another objective of quality assurance in the international arena.

Although recognition was hardly even mentioned in the Bologna Declaration, the Prague Communiqué was already describing it as an important aspect of the Bologna process and calling on the ENIC and NARIC networks¹ not only to get to work on matters of recognition, but also to establish contacts with the world of quality assurance, in other words, with ENQA. The Berlin Communiqué of September 2003 went even further, making both recognition and quality assurance two of the three top priorities for the coming period (2003-2005). '*Ministers charge the Follow-up Group with organising a stocktaking process in time for their summit in 2005 and undertaking to prepare detailed reports on the progress and implementation of the intermediate priorities set for the next two years: quality assurance, two-cycle system, recognition of degrees and periods of studies.*'

International recognition and quality assurance: where do they meet?

In general terms, quality assurance and accreditation have been set up for reasons of accountability, public protection and quality improvement. These are the objectives in the *national* setting. But safeguarding the quality of higher education qualifications is, of course, also a major concern of the system. In that respect, we might assume that the cross-border recognition of higher education qualifications is actually the most important objective of quality assurance in the *international* setting. And, for that matter, it is the judgement about quality (at least basic quality) or an accreditation decision which are the first concern for international recognition in assessing a credential, whether for academic or for professional purposes.

It should be noted that the international recognition of qualifications is impossible without knowledge about the quality of the particular programme and the institution behind the qualification. Nor it can be granted based on quality indicators alone. To assess a qualification fairly means to adequately position it in the grid of qualifications of the receiving country, and that requires a profound knowledge of the HE system from which the qualification in question originates: apart from different quality of provision, qualifications with similar names coming from different countries may differ in their function in the national HE system, admission and

¹ NARIC: network of National Academic Recognition Information Centres of the European Commission, ENIC: network of European National Information Centers on Recognition and Mobility of the Council of Europe & UNESCO/CEPES

graduation requirements, planned learning outcomes as well as the professional status (and title) they give to the holder. But, again, the quality issue is of paramount importance from the perspective of recognition.

It is well known that quality assurance and quality accreditation are two different concepts in the approach to quality. However, in this paper they will be treated as one concept. The reason for this is that what is relevant from the point of view of international recognition is the *actual or final statement* about the quality of a programme or the institution teaching that programme, as stated by the competent authority of the national educational system. The concrete methodology, the specific infrastructure and the entire scope of objectives of the quality assurance and accreditation system are less important from this perspective.

At this juncture, one remark should be made about the notion or term ‘national’. The assumption, as stated above, is that we deal with *national* systems of quality assurance or accreditation. The term refers to the authorities competent in this field in a country, without necessarily referring to the state, or the involvement thereof.

If there are no nationally sanctioned quality assurance or accreditation systems, the actors of international recognition have a problem. The admissions officers or credential evaluators of the official recognising agencies – e.g. in the field of regulated professions – base their evaluations on national laws and regulations, and on international agreements: in Europe, the Lisbon Recognition Convention² or the Directives of the EU³. These legal instruments base their methodology on the existence of such national systems of quality assurance or accreditation. For example, the Lisbon Recognition Convention is applicable to qualifications awarded by institutions “belonging to a national education system”. Quality assurance and accreditation, if they exist in the country involved, are considered to be part of that national education system.

Students or employers outside the realm of the regulated professions may be less strict, but they too should strive for guaranteed quality. Alternative systems and mechanisms of quality assurance might be useful, especially in a field where national systems are not available, such as in the field of non-degree programs in most countries. But any quality assurance system which is not backed by the competent authorities is very difficult to assess for any outsider. Would-be students in particular should be very careful when making a deliberate choice to study at an institution which does not take part in some sort of national system of quality assurance or accreditation.

Coming back to the outputs of the national systems of quality assurance and accreditation, we can observe that defining and explaining such a quality statement within the national setting might be easy. To explore this subject in the cross-border context is a much more intricate matter. In the first place, the information and the channels carrying that information are not always available and sufficiently transparent to the public. Furthermore, in many cases the information and the information channels available are not ‘designed’ to answer questions from a variety of stakeholders. Especially in the area of professional recognition – i.e.

² The *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, Lisbon 1997*, may be found on: http://www.enic-naric.net/instruments.asp?display=legal_framework.

³ The Directives for professional recognition of the EU may be found on: http://europa.eu.int/comm/internal_market/qualifications/regprof/directives/dsp_directives.cfm.

recognition for the labour market – experience tells us that providing information about quality and quality assurance systems across borders does need an intermediary.

Problems in assessing foreign credentials arise due to a lack of clarity on whether quality has been observed and/or guaranteed. And, if it has, how? Transnational or cross-border education falls within this area. With this, I mean education that cannot be traced back to a single national system. A similar problem arises with the so-called joint curricula or joint degrees offered by higher education institutions in different countries, some of which belong to the national system of education, while others may not. In any case, even when institutions do belong to the national system of education, the matter is still not necessarily clear-cut. Many national quality assurance and accreditation systems are not accessible to these initiatives, and so joint curricula and joint degrees fall outside these systems. Recognition across borders of joint degrees is an intricate matter, although these very initiatives should be considered prototypes of academic recognition in practice!

Similar problems arise in the field of distance learning and virtual education when these types of education do not belong to any national quality assurance and accreditation system.

The same applies for the concept of lifelong learning. The question of guaranteeing the quality of learning within the concept of LLL is a fundamental issue for the international recognition of the credentials concerned. Issues like learning outcomes and competencies, embedded in qualification frameworks, and guaranteed through quality assurance provisions, are on the agenda of both recognition and quality assurance.

In general, both the fields of quality assurance and international recognition are being confronted with the same trends and developments in education and are having to deal with new education providers *and* new forms of education (and learning!). The Bologna process “only” reinforces these developments and makes the finding of solutions more urgent, in particular thanks to its emphasis on *international employability*.

Certain issues with relevance for both concepts can be addressed in the traditional forms of higher education systems. The tendency to describe educational courses more and more in terms of ‘learning outcomes’, or even in terms of competencies or competency profiles, and the increased cooperation in matching these profiles with those used by professional organisations or even industry, might be a field of common interests for quality assurance and recognition.

International initiatives

In the *national* setting, Bologna has strengthened the position of the institutions involved in recognition in many countries. Although the authorities came to realise the role of recognition in the whole process, this happened only after some hesitation. The idea was that comparable degrees and cooperation in quality assurance would result in the automatic recognition of credentials. No more recognition centres and networks! No more official structures and bodies for recognition! However, everyone soon realised that this was not going to happen. In the first place, it takes a long time to achieve the desired level of coordination between the various systems of quality assurance. And, paradoxically, having comparable national degree structures is leading to an even greater diversification in the qualifications being awarded by competing education providers. We will continue to have a considerable diversity of profiles,

but this diversity will be within a more clearly defined overall qualifications framework which, while not doing away with the need to assess individual qualifications, should make assessment easier and more transparent.

In most countries, the topic of quality assurance and accreditation received even more attention than it had in the previous decade, when this theme had already been identified as a priority. However, it is not possible within the scope of this paper to elaborate on this issue.

In the *international* setting, the themes mentioned in the previous paragraph provide the joint agenda of the initiative of ENQA and the NARIC and ENIC networks to work together. In more concrete terms, this is about developing a common language (e.g. a joint glossary), about the question of how to deal with joint curricula and joint degrees, and about cross-border education. It is also about the development of a joint information provision system on quality assurance and accreditation to foreign target groups by the co-operating national recognition and quality assurance/accreditation institutions.

As already referred to, with the European University Association and ESIB, two key promoters of the culture of quality assurance in institutions in Europe, the ENIC and NARIC networks will have to develop more intense contacts. It should be said, however, that representatives of both organisations already attend the annual meetings of the networks. The EUA⁴, the largest European association of higher education institutions, is also concerning itself with the recognition of qualifications, evidenced for instance by its coordinating role in ECTS and the Diploma Supplement in the recent past. It also coordinated research, such as the studies on the introduction of bachelor's and master's degrees in Europe and the problem of joint degrees. This organization's work most certainly straddles the boundary between recognition and quality assurance.

Another relative quality assurance project from the perspective of recognition is the Joint Quality Initiative. This is an informal network, consisting mainly of representatives of quality assurance organisations and ministries, that aims to increase the transparency of collaboration between quality assurance systems, and to clarify the bachelor's/master's structures in Europe.⁵ Its most important output is probably the 'Shared descriptors for bachelor's and master's degrees' (the so-called 'Dublin descriptors'), whereby generic learning objectives or competencies are set out for bachelor's and master's programme.

We should also mention at this point UNESCO's European education organisation, CEPES, in Bucharest.⁶ This organization, which acts as co-secretary of the ENIC network alongside the Council of Europe, is also active in the field of accreditation with its 'Indicators for Institutional and Programme Accreditation in Higher/Tertiary Education' project, part of 'Strategic Indicators for Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century'. A working group has analysed the quality indicators recently used in accreditation, searching for a set of core standards and corresponding performance indicators for both programme and institutional accreditation.

Three other ventures should be mentioned which, although they cross the boundaries of the Bologna-zone, are still very important in bringing quality assurance and recognition together.

⁴ <http://www.unige.ch/eua/>

⁵ <http://www.jointquality.org>

⁶ <http://www.cepes.ro/>

An initiative launched by UNESCO in October 2002 – the Global Forum for Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Diplomas – is also an important development in bringing quality assurance and recognition together. Its aim is to place and maintain issues concerning quality assurance and the accreditation of programmes (or institutions) and the international recognition of diplomas on the agenda of the higher education sector and national and international policymakers.

Cross-border education receives particular attention from UNESCO. In 2004, UNESCO and the OECD initiated a new project entitled *Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education*. Its objective is to provide guidelines for all the relevant national stakeholders on how to deal with the issue of cross-border education provision. Part of this initiative involves setting up a database to connect the various national information channels on recognized higher education. This initiative was launched in the beginning 2004 and will be finalised in the course of 2005.

Another international initiative is the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE).⁷ The main aim of this network is to gather and disseminate information on existing and forthcoming quality assurance methodologies and practices in higher education. The idea behind this is to promote best practice in quality assurance and quality improvement. Its network function is very important, as it provides a place where quality assurance and accreditation organisations can meet, in both the literal and figurative sense of the word. INQAAHE also aims to foster the use of credit transfer systems and encourage institutions to provide material to facilitate the international recognition of diplomas. The network also intends to sound the alarm on any dubious accreditation processes and organizations, an activity which will be highly important for recognition.

Conclusion

Quality assurance and accreditation, and the international recognition of diplomas and qualifications have been seen to be two sides of the same coin. This idea, for some time promoted by the experts from both fields, was endorsed by the European policymakers in the Berlin Communiqué.

The international educational community realises that both fields will promote the basic objectives of the Bologna process, creating a true Educational Area with a strong mobility of students and professionals. They will do this not just in their own right, but increasingly in combination with each other. It is up to the experts in both the fields to live up to the expectations and to make their contribution to the Bologna process.

⁷ <http://www.inqaahe.nl>