

THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR MARKET: PROFESSIONAL RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS

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1. Background

On 19 June 1999, 29 European ministers of education, meeting to sign the Bologna Declaration, called for the “adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees... in order to promote European citizens’ employability...”. One feature of the proposed new degree structure was that the “degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification”.

Does a European or even international labour market exist? Or is it more appropriate to talk about national labour markets that are having to cope with the growing mobility of capital and people? To defend the latter viewpoint, we would have to disregard the growing importance of globalization in both labour and education, which is discernible everywhere. And certainly in the EU the “internal market” is an international one. In any case, in this article we shall go along with the generally accepted assumption that there is an international labour market. And this labour market has to take into account education in all its forms and locations. We shall be discussing human resource development and employability in the international context.

An international labour market requires a fair and effective mechanism to assess qualifications awarded in various countries and continents. In this article we will focus on the European situation, to outline relevant methodologies and procedures for recognition.

2. International recognition of diplomas and qualifications

Terminology

There are two types of international recognition of diplomas and qualifications, which require two types of credential evaluation: academic recognition and professional recognition.

Academic recognition refers to recognition decisions that allow a person to pursue or continue a course of study or confer the right to use a national title or degree from the host country on the basis of a title or degree acquired in the country of origin. One example would be using the Dutch doctorandus (drs.) title on the basis of a Master’s degree obtained in the US.

Professional recognition relates to the methodologies and procedures for evaluating credentials for work purposes and is a more intricate matter. The system of professional qualifications reflects both the national system of education and the organization of professions, industries and professionals themselves. In some countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, most academic qualifications also serve as professional qualifications without additional requirements. In other countries, like the UK, professional qualifications are usually acquired upon completion of specific professional training that takes place outside and after university. Professional requirements can be set under national law, or by professional organizations. Academic recognition and professional recognition are different objectives, and may require different approaches and instruments. However, they do share a methodology for evaluating the educational component of the credential or qualification.

In the context of the international labour market we will concentrate on professional recognition. However, the recognition methodology originated in the framework of academic recognition, so it is important to look briefly at the development of this methodology.

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Academic and professional recognition

From the early 1950s to the mid-1970s the purpose of credential evaluation was to establish *equivalence*. Diplomas were evaluated on a course-by-course basis and every component of the foreign programme had to be matched with every component in the receiving country's programme. In many countries, in the 1980s the concept of equivalence was replaced by that of recognition: the *recognition* of a diploma, qualification or course of study for a specific purpose. In this sense, recognition means that a qualification which is not completely equivalent is recognized for a certain purpose (for instance entry to a doctoral programme) if it fits that purpose. A foreign degree need not be identical or even almost identical in order to be recognized. It is enough if the foreign degree is of a comparable level and has a comparable function and status, even though it differs in terms of details. So if, for example, a historian has graduated in country A without completing exactly the same number of courses in medieval history as is usual in country B, then he can still be admitted to a PhD course in the host country, as long as the 'gap' does not hamper his participation in the PhD programme concerned, assuming that this was the purpose of the evaluation.

Within the concept of recognition, the phenomenon of *acceptance* has gained some ground in Europe in the past decade. Acceptance means that a foreign qualification that is of a slightly *inferior* level, content and/or function to the nearest comparable degree in the receiving country, will be accepted at that level if the differences are small enough to be overlooked. Differences might even be highlighted and accepted because of the enrichment that a different educational approach can bring to the host society. The principle is acceptance with respect for the differences. A course from country X which has a lower entrance level from a similar course in country Y might still be accepted, because it is generally similar in content and function. The differences are not disregarded, but accepted. Only when the differences are too substantial recognition is denied.

The Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention of Lisbon (1997) adopts the idea of acceptance. The core of this Convention is to emphasize the principle of fair and transparent recognition procedures, and the acknowledgement of differences which should be accepted unless they are found to be substantial. The burden of proof has been laid upon the host country. Transparency regarding the criteria used and procedures followed are the backbone of the Convention. Each party must provide appropriate information on their education system, qualifications and institutions.

Mutual trust in each others' education system, as a result of growing mobility and the increase of information on the different systems, makes such a change of attitude possible. Although some signatory countries specifically underlined that this legal instrument should be seen purely in the framework of academic recognition, the Convention is also very useful for professional recognition. The reason, as pointed out already, is that in principle the methodology in academic recognition is no different from professional recognition *as regards the evaluation of the educational component of the professional qualification*. Of course, what is decisive in the end is the objective of the evaluation: further study or work. In the latter case, the employer might have specific questions for the credential evaluator.

The principle of acceptance is also reflected in the European Union's *General Directives* for professional recognition (see 2.3).

Transparency instruments

There is another instrument, developed mainly in the field of academic recognition, which is very useful for professional recognition: the international Diploma Supplement. The Diploma Supplement, developed in 1999 by a joint working group of the European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNESCO, explains the qualification and the course involved in terms understandable and useful for both academic admissions officers and employers or their HRD departments.

The Diploma Supplement contains the following categories of information:

- information regarding the level of the qualification, the type and status of the awarding institution and the programme followed by the applicant; this information is given in such a way that it does not contain any value judgments or indications regarding possible recognition or equivalence in other countries;
- information regarding workload, content and results, together with important additional information, such as the grading scale applied;
- the function of the qualification within the national framework, in terms both of admission to further studies and of the professional status of the holder;
- a short description of the education system of the home country in order to locate the qualification in question within the framework of the national education system of that country.

At this juncture we should also mention the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), launched in 1989 for the transfer of credits in the framework of regulated student mobility. The main components of the ECTS system are:

- the credit point system: 60 credits for one academic year;
- the Information Package, a guide for potential partners and students describing courses, curricula, academic and administrative arrangements;
- the Learning Agreement, a contract between student, home institution and host institution describing the courses the student plans to take at the host institution;
- the Transcript of Record, describing the subjects studied, number of credits and grades obtained.

ECTS is going through a transitional phase, and might ultimately become a credit transfer *and accumulation* system. Although credits might be informative for employers, in our view this tool is mainly useful for academic recognition.

International networks

Last but not least, two very important and active networks are involved in academic recognition. Since the 1980s, the Council of Europe, UNESCO and the Commission of the European Union have been encouraging the development of international networks in the area of academic recognition. EU legislation does not provide any specific regulations governing academic recognition, in contrast to its regulations concerning professional recognition. In 1984 a network of national centres for academic recognition, the *National Academic Recognition Information Centres*, or NARICs, were established. NARICs meet regularly to exchange information and to discuss any recognition problems that may have arisen and, if possible, solve them.

In 1994 the Council of Europe and CEPES, the higher education department of UNESCO, joined their networks to form the *European Network of Information Centres on Recognition and Mobility* (ENIC). Just as with the NARICs, the most important function of ENIC is to identify recognition problems or issues, and put them on the relevant agendas.

Both networks remain independent. However, given the fact that they are actually staffed by the same national organizations, the NARICs and ENIC do collaborate and even have a joint annual meeting. In the past many ENIC and NARIC members have been active in several Council of Europe and UNESCO/CEPES Working Parties on different issues. Relevant examples include Working Parties on:

- transnational education, which resulted in a *Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education*;
- the methodology of credential evaluation in the light of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which resulted in *Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and Periods of Study*;
- the Russian education system, which resulted in *Mutual Recognition of Qualifications: The Russian Federation and the Other European Countries*;
- the creation of the international *Diploma Supplement*;

- the consequences of the Bologna process for international recognition, which resulted in the publication of *Recognition Issues In The Bologna Process – Final Report*.

Several research projects conducted by the NARIC network are also relevant:

- *Accreditation Mechanisms in Central and Eastern Europe*
- *Recognition of Virtual Higher Education*
- *Professional Recognition: A Diversity of Methods*.

It is important to note that in many countries the NARICs also function as the information point on EU legislation for professional recognition. At their joint annual meeting in Riga in June 2001, both networks also acknowledged the crucial importance of professional recognition as put forward by the Bologna process.

Professional recognition

The European Union started to tackle professional recognition back in the 1960s and 1970s. The first target was *de jure* professional recognition, which refers to recognition of *regulated* professions, ranging from physicians and architects to teachers and physiotherapists.

The initial strategy was the *harmonization* of the educational curricula of these regulated professions. This resulted in *Sectoral Directives*, providing for direct recognition. The sectoral directives could be applied only after the majority of the educational programmes leading to a specific professional qualification had been harmonized. However, the growth of the European Union and the fact that harmonization of education courses was extremely time-consuming, forced the policymakers to change strategy. The result was the system of *General Directives*. The General Directive for professions requiring tertiary-level education of 1989 stipulates that qualifications obtained after completion of at least three years of higher education leading to regulated professions in one member state should be recognized in other member states, unless substantial differences can be proved by the competent authorities of the host state². The principle of acceptance, as outlined in section 2.2, is reflected in this Directive. Coming back to our example of the historian in section 2.2, we might assume that he or she is a secondary school teacher, which is a regulated profession. In the concept of acceptance, the differences are in fact welcomed because they have the potential to enrich the profession of history teaching in the receiving country. Less emphasis on medieval history might be compensated for by a greater focus on contemporary history, or on ancient history. However, a possible or even probable gap in knowledge of the national history of the receiving country might be considered too substantial for the qualification to be recognized right away.

This was a big leap forward, although the debate as to the precise meaning of the term ‘substantial differences’ will always be a lively one. And if substantial differences are discovered between the qualifications, this might result in non-recognition and under-utilization of the skills of the professionals involved.

One objection to these procedures is, of course, that they do not tackle the problem of foreigners coming from outside the European Union. There is a trend, in the Netherlands at any rate, towards applying the spirit and methodology of the General Directives to non-EU nationals. But this is certainly not general policy.

The European Union preference for legal solutions is less applicable, however, in the field of *de facto* professional recognition, i.e. recognition of non-regulated professions on the labour market. In this field especially there is a tremendous need for reliable information on the foreign qualification, the educational course leading to it and possible additional requirements. The fact that the labour market is increasingly international only emphasizes the urgency of this issue. Governments have to take up this

² The competent authorities for professional recognition in Europe are either ministries/government-linked agencies or professional organizations.

challenge. The national recognition and information centres and their networks are working on it already.

The importance of tackling professional recognition is also visible in the tendency to integrate recognition into trade agreements, by considering education and, therefore, qualifications as *services*. Such initiatives are being undertaken in the framework of the General Agreements on Trade And Services (GATS), and also of regional agreements (NAFTA for North America).

3. New trends and developments

In the very near future credential evaluators, especially when engaged in professional recognition, will be confronted with an increasing number of applications for the recognition or assessment of qualifications resulting from *non-traditional learning*. This refers to all sorts of qualifications obtained through learning outside the 'regular' classroom. Traditional classroom teaching will give way to other, non-formal, forms of delivery and types of education offered by various educational providers. More and more education will be delivered through the Internet, transnational arrangements and a combination of traditional and non-traditional learning, including work-based learning.

This brings us to the core of the concept of *Lifelong Learning*. In the framework of this concept non-traditional learning will be developed for and provided to *all generations* of students. One major target group is graduate *professionals*, who need to upgrade, deepen or broaden their competencies in a specific field. The concept of *Lifelong Learning* is likely to become an important part of the strategy and mission of higher education. This requires a substantial rethink of the way in which qualifications are earned and recognized. More importantly, it entails *a shift from education to learning*. The focus is shifting from the educational process itself to the output; to the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the graduates; in other words, to their *competencies*.

In this process the dialogue between higher education institutions, professional organizations and employers will be decisive. These stakeholders will together have to draw up *qualifications structures and competencies systems*, with government authorities at least monitoring the process. Educational institutions will have to express their learning outcomes in clear and understandable qualifications structures and sets of competencies, which correspond to those used by professional organizations or employers.

The national authorities could go even further than merely monitoring and facilitating the process. They could install (and guarantee) the right of citizens, nationals and foreigners to have their competencies assessed at any moment in their professional lives - as indeed some European government already have. This requires a system of qualifications and competencies recognized on a national scale. Within this system every citizen can ask for an assessment against the background of a certain qualification or set of competencies.

Obviously, in the realm of international recognition, the developments mentioned lead to a focus on the *assessment of competencies* rather than formal qualifications and the way they have been earned. In order to safeguard the fair recognition of all the possible skills of migrant professionals, it is of the utmost importance to take into account *all competencies* acquired, *regardless of the learning paths*.

At the moment, the methodology of traditional credential evaluation is not up to assessing competencies. The criteria used focus on the educational process, such as the entrance level of the course, content and structure, rights attached to the qualifications, etc. This process does suffice well for formal qualifications. But, in the light of the developments and trends foreseen, new forms of assessments will have to be added to the traditional forms of credential evaluation. Accreditation of prior certificated or experiential learning - or recognition of informal and non-formal learning, to use another term - is a necessary supplement to traditional credential evaluation for *de facto* recognition. In this way even work-based learning and work experience can be assessed sufficiently.

The ENIC/NARIC networks have acknowledged this need. At their annual meeting in Riga in 2001, the international networks of recognition centres therefore proclaimed the development of “other forms of assessment” *in addition to traditional credential evaluation or recognition* to be one of their top priorities. This has been confirmed at their meetings in Malta (2002) and Vaduz (2003). It is very important that these initiatives be conducted in close cooperation with the other actors in the field: the educational providers, quality assurance agencies, professional organizations, employers and national authorities.

More concrete, projects have been implemented to explore integrating traditional international credential evaluation (ICE) and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), a term borrowed from the Canadian colleagues. Relevant to mention here is the construction of a NARIC-website on ICE and PLAR: <http://www.nuffic.nl/ice-plar/>.

4. Conclusion

The globalization of both the labour market and education, in all its forms, is gathering pace. It is of crucial importance to all parties involved that human resources be used as efficiently as possible in the international context. The traditional methodologies and procedures for assessing qualifications across borders are still indispensable. However, to be able to cope with the new trends and developments in the light of Lifelong Learning, it is necessary to modernize the traditional tools used by credential evaluators for both academic and professional purposes. An intensive dialogue between all relevant actors in the field is vital in the search for successful solutions.

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