

Official Bologna process conference

## **IMPROVING THE RECOGNITION SYSTEM**

of degrees and study credit points in the European Higher Education Area

Riga, University of Latvia, December 3-4, 2004

# **IMPROVING THE RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS AND STUDY CREDIT POINTS**

## **BACKGROUND REPORT**

**Written by:**

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President of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee.

Riga, 2004



towards the European higher education area  
**bologna process**

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# I SETTING THE SCENE

## RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS WITH A VIEW TO THE CREATION OF A EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

Recognition of qualifications<sup>1</sup> is an important component of the whole development towards the European Higher Education Area. One can argue that improving recognition of qualifications earned in one of the Bologna process countries across all other Bologna process countries is a necessary precondition for establishing of the European Higher Education Area.

There are several goals of that can only be reached if proper recognition of qualifications between states and education systems is ensured. Recognition of qualifications is a precondition to ensure practical possibilities for free movement of persons including free flow of labour force. As well, the goal to increase competitiveness of European higher education on the world scale can only be reached if qualifications awarded by European higher education institutions are recognized outside Europe – and it can hardly be the case if they are not recognized in other European countries.

Adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention [1], as acknowledged in the Sorbonne declaration [2] of 1998, was an achievement on which to build on: „The [Lisbon Recognition] Convention set a number of basic requirements and acknowledged that individual countries could engage in an even more constructive scheme. Standing by these conclusions, one can build on them and go further “.

The overall relevance of recognition to the main action lines of the Bologna declaration “On the European Higher Education Area”[3] can be summarized as follows [4]:

- 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;

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<sup>1</sup> Author has chosen to use „qualifications” as the generic term used in the Lisbon Recognition convention in order to cover all kinds of educational credentials: degrees, diplomas, certificates, etc.

- Promotion of the European dimension in higher education. The fair recognition of qualifications 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.

In their Berlin Communiqué of 19 September 2003 „Realizing the European higher Education Area” [5] the European Ministers responsible for higher education “committed themselves to intermediate priorities for the next two years: to promote effective quality assurance systems, to step up effective use of the system based on two cycles and to improve the recognition system of degrees and periods of studies”. To ensure that these priority issues are accordingly addressed, the ministers charged the intergovernmental Bologna Follow-up Group with organising a stocktaking process and to preparing reports on the progress in these three priority areas for their summit in 2005.

Ministers also underlined the importance of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which should be ratified by all countries participating in the Bologna Process, and called on the ENIC<sup>2</sup> and NARIC<sup>3</sup> networks and the competent national authorities to further the implementation of the Convention.

Acknowledging that more transparency and relevant information is needed, they also set the objective that every student graduating as from 2005 should receive the Joint European Diploma Supplement automatically and free of charge.

Berlin Communiqué also addresses two more specific recognition issues. Firstly, they agreed to engage at the national level to remove legal obstacles to the establishment and recognition of joint degrees and to support adequate quality assurance of curricula leading to joint degrees. Secondly, when addressing the need to make lifelong learning reality, ministers urged higher education institutions and all concerned to enhance the possibilities for lifelong learning at higher education level including the recognition of prior learning.

## **Definitions regarding recognition**

Recognition issues have come into focus of the Bologna process discussions and this discussion has been ongoing in a wide range of stakeholders: policy makers, higher education staff, students, employers, different higher education related institutions, and society at large. These discussions sometimes have been confusing because different discussion partners had in mind a different meaning of what is “recognition”.

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<sup>2</sup> ENIC = Council of Europe /UNESCO European Network of Information Centres for recognition and mobility

<sup>3</sup> NARIC = EU network of National Academic Recognition Information Centres

While there can be more meanings in which the term “recognition” is used<sup>4</sup>, for the purposes of this article the most important ones are the following.

**Recognition of a higher education institution.** As a precondition to international recognition, an institution should first be recognized nationally. In a rather recent past, the national systems for quality assurance were just emerging. Thus, when countries were asked to supply information regarding the nationally recognized institutions, compiling such lists could be a rather arbitrary procedure. Appearance of new types of higher education provision has changed the situation. Nowadays lists of nationally recognized institutions are more and more often compiled on the basis of (at least some kind of) quality assessment, ranging from relatively “soft” procedures to national accreditation.

**Recognition of a higher education programme** – with a consequence that the credential issued is nationally recognized. National recognition of the institution alone does not automatically imply national recognition of all its programmes and, as a consequence, qualifications awarded. In a number of European countries Europe, some of the programmes run by recognized institutions may not lead to nationally recognized qualifications. In such cases institutions often issue credentials “in their own name” and these qualifications usually have a different status from the “national” qualifications that, no doubt, makes international recognition more difficult.

**Recognition of an individual qualification - nationally.** If both institution and programme in question are recognized nationally, it normally follows that the qualification awarded is nationally recognized, i.e. that the qualification normally is valid for all administrative purposes, and that other higher education institutions will consider the holder for admission to the next stage of studies. It will also mean eligibility for jobs in non-regulated professions or to such jobs for which there is a general requirement of holding qualification of a certain level.

**Recognition of an individual qualification abroad.** It is this meaning of the term “recognition” that is relevant and crucial for the European cooperation, and to the goals of Bologna process – ensuring that qualifications earned in one part of the European Higher Education Area are valid for further studies and, also for employment in other parts of the area.

Taking into account the wide European diversity and encompassing the aim of cross-border mobility for both study and employment purposes, just a formal acknowledgement of a foreign credential is not sufficient. The real task of credential evaluators has become to assess the foreign qualification with a view of finding the right path for further studies or employment in the host country.

Because of the reasons discussed “recognition” in this article will be understood as *the assessment of a foreign qualification with a view of finding ways for its application for further studies and/or employment in the host country*.

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<sup>4</sup> e.g. recognition of a programme by a national or international professional association leading to admission of graduates to pursuit of particular profession(s), recognition of an institution or programme by a kind of international body/association of a certain type of institutions or programmes, etc.

## II THE INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK

According to the purpose recognition is divided into two types – academic recognition for further studies and professional recognition for employment purposes.

That part of professional recognition, which deals with regulated professions, has its specific legislation in the EU and EEA – the directives for professional recognition. Starting of EU enlargement on May 1, 2004, the EU directives for professional recognition will cover 29 out of 40 countries involved in the Bologna process. Until now, the EU system for professional recognition consists of: sectoral directives dealing specifically with the recognition in particular professions - those of medical doctor, dentist, and nurse for general care, midwife, pharmacist, veterinary surgeon, architect and lawyer; and of General systems' directives, dealing with all other regulated professions. Sectoral directives stipulate harmonization of education for the particular profession across EU/EEA and further automatic recognition between the Member States. Principle of the General system is that a qualification of a professional<sup>5</sup> from another Member State is recognized unless there are *substantial differences* in the education and training. A proposal for a new directive that will join both systems in one and merge all the existing professional recognition directives into a single text, but it will not change the basic principles is currently in the phase of adoption by the European Parliament.

The main legal instrument for academic recognition in the European Region is the ETS No 165 Council of Europe/UNESCO *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education* [1] adopted in Lisbon on April 11, 1997 (further referred to as the Lisbon Recognition Convention).

Although the , main field of application of the Lisbon Recognition Convention is academic recognition, the convention can be and increasingly is of use also for the cases of recognition for the non-regulated part of labour market. In these cases no official recognition is formally required. However, when considering a candidate with a foreign qualification, the employers often wish to know, to which of the qualifications of their country the foreign one can be compared. In these cases the applicants look for a statement of academic recognition. Situation is similar in those cases when access to a profession requires a certain level of education without specifying the field.

The Explanatory memorandum to Article VI.3 says, among other things “..this Article concerns the recognition, for employment purposes, of the knowledge and skills certified by a higher education qualification issued in another Party. The recognition of other components of a qualification, such as practice periods...are not covered by this Article, nor does this Article in any way affect national laws and regulations on the exercise of professional activities or gainful employment, as the case may be”.

The most important principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention are the following.

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<sup>5</sup> While the term „recognition of diplomas” is used in the directives, definition of “diploma” also includes all the additional training, practical placements and other requirements that a holder of educational credential has to fulfil before granting the right for independent practicing of the profession, cf. directive 89/48/EEC, art. 1,

[http://europa.eu.int/smartapi/cgi/sga\\_doc?smartapi!celexapi!prod!CELEXnumdoc&lg=EN&numdoc=31989L0048&model=guichett](http://europa.eu.int/smartapi/cgi/sga_doc?smartapi!celexapi!prod!CELEXnumdoc&lg=EN&numdoc=31989L0048&model=guichett)

*Right to a fair assessment of foreign qualifications.* Lisbon Convention was the first international legal act where this right is stipulated. Such a right could sound a very basic issue. However, before adoption of the Lisbon convention holders of foreign qualifications sometimes experienced that their credentials were simply not accepted for evaluation, thus possibly hiding unwillingness to recognize a foreign credential or lack of knowledge of the educational system from which the foreign credential originated.

*Recognition if no substantial differences are evident.* The Lisbon Recognition Convention replaced seeking of a full equivalence of the foreign qualification to the host countries one by recognition of the foreign qualification if there are no substantial differences with the host country's qualification to which the foreign qualification is compared.

The Convention also established that should the host country authorities consider non-recognition, it is their duty to demonstrate that the differences are substantial.

*Mutual trust and information provision.* Recognition under the Lisbon Convention is based upon mutual trust and provision of information between the higher education systems of the States parties to the Convention. For this reason the Parties have an obligation to both compile and publish lists of their recognized institutions and programmes; and to provide information regarding the qualifications, programmes and institutions. While the term quality assurance is not used in this context in the Convention, it would seem difficult to argue, in today's context, that information on institutions, and programmes that make up a national higher education system, could be provided without reference to quality assurance.

**Council of Europe/UNESCO Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for Recognition** was adopted by the Intergovernmental Committee of the Lisbon Recognition Convention on June 4, 2001. Recommendation is a step forward from the Lisbon Convention itself. It was originally planned to help ensuring that similar recognition cases will be considered in reasonably similar ways throughout the European region. Drafting of the Recommendation was in progress when the Bologna declaration was signed, which allowed to also draw on the analysis of the recognition issues brought by the Bologna process [6, 7] and to adapt the implementation of the Convention accordingly:

- Recommendation demonstrates that the principles of the Convention can also be applied in the cases of recognition for the non-regulated part of the labour market;
- Recommendation extends the recognition to qualifications awarded after completion of transnational education that complies with the Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education<sup>6</sup>;
- Recommendation shifts the focus of credential evaluation from input characteristics of the programmes: curriculum contents, course programmes, duration, textbooks covered, etc., to the learning outcomes and competencies;
- it is underlined that, when analyzing the differences, the purpose for which recognition of the foreign qualification is sought should be kept in mind. Taken the wide diversity of programmes and qualifications in Europe, any foreign qualification will always have differences with the one it is compared to. Recommendation calls for a positive attitude towards foreign qualifications, always asking the question of whether the differences actually are so great that it is

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<sup>6</sup> The issue of recognition of transnational education qualifications is discussed more in detail below.

impossible to use it for the purpose, for which recognition is sought, and if they are, whether it is possible to grant at least an alternative or partial recognition.

- through shifting focus from input characteristics to learning outcomes, Recommendation also facilitates recognition of lifelong learning or other non-traditional qualifications.
- The Recommendation underlines that if a competent authority finds it cannot grant full recognition for a foreign qualification, it should consider granting partial recognition.

The Recommendation neither brings something revolutionary or totally remote to the recognition community, nor is it telling that recognition should always be granted. It rather codifies the established best practice among credential evaluators and builds on this practice in suggesting further improvements.

*Recommendation for the Recognition of International Access Qualifications* [8] was adopted in 1999. This document addresses specifically the international secondary school leaving certificates such as International baccalaureate, European Baccalaureate and others.

*The Code of Good Practice for the Provision of Transnational education* was adopted in 2001. It addresses one of the important relatively new recognition issues and is therefore discussed separately below).

Another document to supplement the Convention framework is submitted for adoption (discussed more in detail below).

### **III IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR RECOGNITION**

Existence of a relevant legal framework for recognition is a necessary precondition for solution of the recognition problems across European Higher Education area, but another precondition is its proper implementation – both nationally and internationally.

#### **III.1 THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL**

##### **III.1.1 Signatures and ratifications of the Convention.**

The first step of improving recognition in the European Higher Education Area is signature and ratification of the Convention by all the countries concerned. This need was specifically underlined in the Berlin communiqué of ministers [5]. The ministerial call has been heard – although the number of signatures and ratifications of the Lisbon Convention was quite impressive already before the Berlin conference, five more Bologna process countries have ratified the Convention between after September 2003. The total number of ratifications as of October 26, 2004 is 39 countries, out of which 31 countries are participating in the Bologna process. The two countries that have so far applied for accession to the Bologna Process prior to the Bergen Ministerial conference (19 – 20 May 2005) – Moldova and Ukraine – have both ratified the Convention.

The covering of the Lisbon Recognition Convention is wider than the “Bologna” group of countries and also wider than the geographical Europe. Belonging to the European region as defined by UNESCO, Australia, Canada, USA, Israel and some other countries have

also signed the Convention. The latter is of a high importance to the external dimension of the European Higher Education Area, as it stimulates the recognition between European countries and other parts of the world.

Four out of forty “Bologna” countries: Germany, Italy, Malta, and The Netherlands have signed the Convention and are in the process of ratification, but another five countries: Andorra, Belgium, Greece, Spain and Turkey have so far neither signed nor ratified it. Some of these countries are meanwhile trying to follow its principles in practice. As recognition is set as a priority issue of the Bologna process for the next period until May 2005, it is likely that some more signatures and ratifications may follow before the time of stocktaking exercise for Bergen ministerial conference.

### **III.1.2 European recognition networks**

As stated on p. 62 of the Trends 2003 report, recognition networks ENIC and NARIC serve as the main agent for the implementation of the Lisbon Convention and, more generally, for improved recognition within Europe [9]. The Lisbon Recognition Convention stipulates that each State Party to the convention shall establish an information centre for academic recognition and that the national centres together shall form the ENIC network.

A narrower group of national centres in the framework of EU/EEA form the NARIC network which covers the specific tasks within EU, including function of contact points in the framework of professional recognition in the EU and EEA. Thus, the national centres of the enlarged EU plus EEA countries participate in both networks.

**Analyzing recognition issues and preparing new international legislation.** The ENIC and NARIC networks have established a number of ad-hoc working groups, which studied urgent recognition issues and suggested measures to develop recognition system in Europe, e.g. the working group that developed the format of the joint European Diploma supplement, the one on Transnational Education, Recognition criteria and procedures and the group on Recognition issues in Bologna process. The latter came up with a report *Recognition Issues in the Bologna Process* [6] that serves as a guideline for further improvement of the recognition system.

The networks have drafted international legal documents supplementing the Lisbon Convention: the *Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications* [10] and the *Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education* [11] (both adopted June, 2001). Following the need to improve recognition of joint degrees, the networks prepared a draft of *Recommendation for the Recognition of Joint Degrees* [12] that has been submitted for adoption in June, 2004.

**International information exchange.** Fulfilling the stipulated task of information provision on their own higher education systems, the networks' member centres supply recognition-related information upon the request of other centres in their everyday work. ENIC/NARIC centres efficiently supply each other with information on a particular qualification or status of a higher education institution/ programme through the ENIC/NARIC listserver. Also, using the ENIC/NARIC website<sup>7</sup> one can easily find the path to the national ENIC/NARIC centres, most of which contain descriptions of their countries' higher education systems and other relevant information for recognition.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.enic-naric.net>

## **III.2 THE NATIONAL LEVEL**

One very positive aspect to this regard is that as shown in Trends 2003 report, (p.66) [9], more and more countries introduce Diploma Supplement. The requirement of the European ministers that Diploma Supplement should by 2005 be issued to automatically every graduate will speed this aspect up even more. However, let us note that issuing Diploma Supplements is helping own qualifications to be recognized abroad. The development is not equally quick when it comes to amending national legislation with view to ensure fair recognition of foreign qualifications.

### **III.2.1 National legal issues**

Ratification of Lisbon Convention is not enough, if principles of the Lisbon convention are not transposed to the national legislation and national procedures remain unchanged. There are several countries in Europe that, while having signed and ratified the Lisbon Convention, use a national procedure of “nostrification”. Analysis of the results of a Council of Europe survey on implementation of the Lisbon recognition convention [13] shows that (op.cit.): “...answers deal with recognition practice and attitudes toward recognition. They reveal a difference between those [countries] who primarily consider formal recognition criteria and seek to establish as close a resemblance as possible between foreign qualifications and those of the home country and those that move in the direction of seeking to assess learning outcomes. In shorthand, and at the risk of oversimplification, these different approaches may be termed “equivalence” vs. “recognition” (end of citation)”. It also leads to a conclusion that “some countries have yet to implement the main principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which point in the direction of an overall assessment of the level and profile of a qualification rather than a detailed comparison of contents” [13].

### **III.2.2 National setting and procedures for recognition**

At national level, the recognition decision is usually taken either by higher education institutions (for academic purposes), by employers (for employment purposes in the non-regulated part of labour market) – and by professional bodies or other nationally appointed competent authorities (for pursuit of regulated professions). The above survey also showed that the national situation of the ENIC/NARIC centre can be different. In most countries the main expertise and the knowledge of foreign educational systems is concentrated at the ENIC/NARIC centres. These centres evaluate the credentials and give advice to the different types of decision-making bodies. Cooperation may be organized in different ways – in some countries the higher education institutions only apply to the ENIC/NARIC centres for advise in more complicated cases, in some others every holder of a foreign qualification has to receive a statement from an ENIC/NARIC centre. It is a quite common practice that the decision making bodies trust the expertise of the ENIC/NARIC centre and follow its advice, i.e. in practice the statement by the recognition centre is the decision.

While this is the practical setting in a good number of European countries, in which the ENIC/NARIC centres are well equipped and reasonably staffed bodies, capable to fulfil all the tasks (international and national information exchange, evaluation of individual credentials, consultancy to all stakeholders etc.), in some others the „recognition information centre” may be just a single ministry employee appointed as a national

contact point, and this person may have several other duties in parallel. In the latter case, the ENIC/NARIC usually serves just as information provider and network member (in many cases giving a valuable input into the international developments), but it does not deal with recognition of individual qualifications or individual information requests at all – which would also mean that in these countries the not only the assessment of foreign qualifications by numerous individual higher education institutions takes place in an uncoordinated way, hence, there is a little chance that the procedures and criteria are similar across the country.

### **III.2.3 Institutional recognition procedures – are they sufficiently developed?**

Taken that higher education institutions are the final instances who decide upon recognition for further studies, the awareness of institutions about the principles of international legislation for recognition and existence of institutional policies and procedures for recognition are of crucial importance for practical implementation of the international legal framework. What is the situation in practice? To quote Trends 2003 report „it is clear that there is room for improvement, in particular in certain countries” [9].

According to Trends 2003 report, when asked about the awareness of the provisions of the Lisbon Convention within their countries, almost 60%<sup>8</sup> heads of higher education institutions thought that their staff was either *not very aware* or *almost completely unaware*. About half of student organizations thought the same about their institutions.

As regards institutional procedures for recognition, according to Trends 2003 report (op.cit.) "The answers to the questionnaire demonstrated, that the weakest point seems to be institutional procedures for recognition of foreign degrees: only 58% of higher education institutions declared they had an institution-wide procedure for this issue, ranging from as many as 83% down to 13% in different countries. As for the students, more than a third thought their institutions had no institution-wide recognition policy but were taking decisions on a case-by-case basis.

As for the recognition of study periods taken abroad, the situation is better - around 82% institutions have procedures for study abroad recognition, which is probably is related to the use of ECTS in the exchanges in terms of Socrates-Erasmus programme. Still, there seems to be evidence of cases where even after a study period of a pre-agreed learning abroad in terms of Erasmus programme, the credits earned abroad are scrupulously assessed looking for full coincidence with the home courses to be replaced by these credits.

In vast majority of counties higher education institutions can receive qualified consultancy and assistance in recognition matters from their national ENIC/NARIC centres - but are the higher education institutions seeking that assistance? Trends 2003 survey results show that "only 20% of the higher education institutions (27.5 % of universities) report a *close* cooperation with their NARIC/ENIC. 24% regard their cooperation as *limited* and almost one quarter indicated that there is *no cooperation at all*."

It should be naïve to say that it is impossible to find information on recognition networks and national ENIC/NARIC centres. Typing "academic recognition" in Google™ search window reveals more than 10 pages of useful links with the homepage of ENIC/NARIC

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<sup>8</sup> Here and further in this chapter data from Trends 2003 report.

networks on the top of the first page. But it seems that such kind of information is traditionally considered as "not interesting" by the academic community.

## **IV RECOGNITION ISSUES AND SOLUTIONS IN BOLOGNA PROCESS**

A study carried out by an ENIC/NARIC working group sought to identify the recognition issues essential for Bologna process and the steps to be taken to resolve these issues [5]. Progress in Bologna process over the last couple of years has further clarified some of the issues, some achievements are visible and some new problems have been identified.

### **IV.1 RECOGNITION AND THE REFORM OF DEGREE STRUCTURES**

The ongoing reform of degree structures and the movement towards a two-tier structure across the whole European higher education area, no doubt, has an impact on recognition. The harmonization of degree structures will benefit transparency and comparability. But the introduction of a flexible bachelor/master structure will also lead to more diversity [14]. In January 2001 the Bologna seminar on bachelor degrees established a common framework for workload and level of bachelor degrees. But it also concluded that „programmes leading to the [bachelor] degree may, and indeed should have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs” [15].

As regards the master degrees, already the Trends II report [16] (page 28-29) indicated that master degrees in Europe had at least seven different purposes and that introduction of two-tier structures in the non-university/professional stream of higher education were further increasing the diversity. The European University Association (EUA) report on Master degrees in Europe [17] confirmed the diversity at the master phase. The Helsinki seminar on master degrees in March 2003, among other conclusions, acknowledged the diversity at master level and concluded that „diversification of contents and profile of degree programmes calls for a common framework of reference of European higher education qualifications in order to increase transparency” [18].

The above means that there might be huge differences between degrees bearing the same name, in terms of admission requirements, content, learning objectives and function, as well as in the rights they confer. Thus, harmonization of degree structures will lead to a greater transparency, but not to “automatic recognition” [14]. The need for individual recognition will still be there: while, in an idealized case, the *level* of the foreign qualification could possibly be recognized more or less “automatically”, the main accent in the credential evaluation will be on interpretation of the foreign qualification in the context of host country’ higher education system and/or labour market.

## **IV.2 QUALITY ASSURANCE – A NECESSARY PRECONDITION FOR RECOGNITION**

The increased importance of quality assurance as well as the acceptance of close link between the quality assurance and recognition of institutions and study programmes on the one hand and individual qualifications on the other hand has a major importance in improving recognition of qualifications across the European Higher Education Area. At the time of adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 1997. the discussion was still ongoing in Europe of *whether* quality assurance was needed as general norm. Far not all countries parties to the Convention had established quality assurance systems at that time. Thus, while the notion of the importance of quality and quality assurance in the recognition of qualifications appears several times in the Convention text, it was not yet possible to link recognition of individual qualifications to quality assurance of the awarding institutions/ programme as a necessary precondition.

Politically, the close link between quality assurance and recognition was underlined in the Prague communiqué of ministers (May 2001) [19]. Since spring 2002 common issues of recognition and quality assurance are analyzed by a joint working group of ENIC and NARIC recognition networks and ENQA<sup>9</sup>.

The ENIC and NARIC networks fully support the principle that the recognition of qualifications be made contingent on the provider of education having been subjected to transparent quality assessment [20].

It is important to admit that, should the recognition of individual qualifications be made directly linked to quality assurance of the institutions/ programmes in question, it must also be ensured that the education providers have adequate access to quality assessment, regardless of whether the providers are public or private, a part of a national higher education system or not, leading to a full qualification or not. The issue of getting access to assessment is especially important to e.g. serious transnational education providers, “international” institutions that do not belong to any of the educational systems of the countries in which they operate. Here one should also consider the providers of “non-degree programmes” or modules for the needs of lifelong learners, i.e. the learning that does not lead to higher education final qualification, but which is of a level and quality that allows claiming credits for higher education. In all these cases the access to quality assurance is not trivial at the moment. Another issue still awaiting solution is the issue of non-accredited/non-quality assessed programmes provided (in many cases fully legally) by recognized higher education institutions. The above means that accredited/ non-accredited does not necessarily identify with good/bad [14]. There are too many students in Europe today who study in valuable but non-accredited programs to simply declare them “outlaws” when it comes to recognition.

It should also be reminded that in the sake of recognition of individual qualifications abroad, it is necessary that the outcomes of quality assessments are made public, whenever possible, in a widely spoken European language so that international credential evaluators can easily access and use them.

There is also some evidence that information on quality assurance outcomes is provided in a structured way, especially for the needs of recognition for the labour market, “information on quality from other countries needs to be properly channelled or ‘translated’ ” [14].

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<sup>9</sup> ENQA = European network of national Quality assurance agencies, <http://www.enqa.net>

Knowledge about the standard of institutions and the programmes they offer is of utmost importance for credential evaluation. Yet, to escape a common confusion, one must bear in mind that, while quality assurance is a *necessary* precondition for recognition of individual qualification, it is *not enough* in itself [14]. Knowledge of quality (and accreditation) alone is not an adequate basis for evaluating a credential. To position it correctly in the education system or labour market of the receiving country, one needs a thorough knowledge of the system that conferred the qualification [21]. As shown in the previous chapter, this will not essentially change with the introduction of the two-cycle system throughout Europe.

#### **IV.3 PROGRESS IN LESS TRADITIONAL RECOGNITION CASES: TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION, JOINT DEGREES, LIFELONG LEARNING**

##### **Transnational education**

The growing phenomenon of transnational education globally and in Europe has raised a number of issues and among them – recognition of the qualifications earned transnationally. To address recognition issues of transnational education, the ENIC and NARIC networks organized a working party that came up with the analysis of this phenomenon. Recognition problems of transnational education qualifications are often caused by the fact that transnational education programmes as “foreign” ones are not quality-checked by the receiving country, but, as programmes provided abroad, they are also hidden from the quality assurance system of the sending country. The main concerns reported by the receiving countries are the following: doubts about the proficiency of the staff involved in the provision of transnational education, evidence that sometimes the transnational programmes are very different from those provided in the awarding institution itself as well as evidence that transnational education qualifications are sometimes “easy” – i.e. either the study time is shorter or the admission/ graduation requirements are lower [22]. A detailed study on transnational education as a whole was funded by the EU and administered by the EUA [23].

All outcomes confirmed that the main recognition problems of transnational education qualifications were rooted in lack of transparency and lack of proper quality assurance, especially that of the actual education provision in the receiving country, often obscured by the unclarity of the division of responsibilities between the mother institution, the actual providers abroad and agents acting between both above parties and the officials of the receiving country.

The UNESCO/Council of Europe Working party elaborated a Code of Good Practice for the Provision of Transnational Education [11] that was adopted in June, 2001.

The Code established that the awarding institution is responsible for the whole provision of transnational education, including the quality of programme delivery at the providing institution, the requirements for admission and graduation as well as actions of the agents and the information they give to the students or receiving country’s officials.

The provision of transnational education should comply with the national legislation in both receiving and sending countries. Academic quality and standards of transnational education programmes as well as requirements regarding staff proficiency should be at least comparable to those of the awarding institution as well as to those of the receiving country. The admission of students, the teaching/learning activities, the examination and assessment

requirements, academic workload for transnational study programmes should be equivalent to those of the same or comparable programmes delivered by the awarding institution. Special attention is paid to transparency of the delivery of transnational education and provision of full and reliable information upon request of the receiving country's authorities. The qualifications issued through transnational programmes, complying with the provisions of the Code, should be assessed in accordance with the stipulations of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

Thus, the international legislation allowing recognizing transnational higher education qualifications from bona fide providers is in place. However, it is just part of the solution of the issue. Several problems remain. The transnational education providers, as well as those who receive transnational education qualifications for assessment (especially the credential evaluators based in higher education institutions), are not always aware of the existence of the Code. Also, reluctance is observed from both the side of transnational education providers to submit information about the education they provide<sup>10</sup> and from the side of national authorities who sometimes still attempt – directly or indirectly - to outlaw the transnational education phenomenon as such, or who simply avoid a dialogue with transnational education providers active in their countries. While some transnational education providers deliberately stay in the “grey zone” and are not willing to undergo quality assurance of the receiving country, it is not sure that a transnational education provider, who seeks to be legally established in the receiving country, will easily get access to quality assurance.

A joint activity of OECD and UNESCO started in spring 2004 in order to establish guidelines for Quality provision in cross-border higher education that will move the progress in the issue further. A final drafting meeting is scheduled for January 2005.

### **Joint degrees**

Establishing programmes leading to joint degrees is seen as a useful tool on the way towards reaching the European higher Education Area [19]. A Bologna process seminar on joint degrees was held in Stockholm in May 2002. The seminar indicated some problems pointing at need to amend national legislations in order to make joint degrees a reality [24]. As demonstrated by EUA Joint degrees survey published in September 2002 [25], work at joint degree programmes stimulates implementation of practically all the Bologna declaration action lines, starting with establishing joint quality assurance, improving recognition, stimulating employability of graduates across Europe, mobility of students and teachers, etc.

The main obstacles for establishing joint degrees are lack of appropriate provisions in the national legislation, as well as the fact that current international legal framework for recognition applies only to national qualifications, while joint degrees in the strict legal sense are not belonging to a national higher education system, at least not to a single one [26]. As regards amending the national legislations, in their Berlin communiqué of September 19, 2003 the European ministers agreed to engage at the national level to remove legal obstacles to the establishment and recognition of joint degrees [5]. The EUA conference on Joint degrees in Cluj, Romania in October 2003 led to a set of practical

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<sup>10</sup> An ongoing UNESCO working party on transnational education had major difficulties to receive information from transnational education providers even when addressing individual transnational education providers directly (The Working party will report on its results at the ENIC/NARIC Joint meeting in Strasbourg, June 2004).

recommendations with regard to cooperation among partners in establishing joint degrees [27].

A major development under the EU SOCRATES programme is the Erasmus Mundus programme<sup>11</sup> is designed to assist establishing joint degrees an that also contains some specific provisions for improving recognition of joint degrees, first of all, between the partner institutions and countries<sup>12</sup>.

In order to improve the international recognition of joint degrees, ENIC and NARIC networks drafted a Recommendation on the recognition of Joint degrees that is submitted for adoption by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Intergovernmental Committee in June 2004 [12]. The Recommendation is supposed to extend the main principles of the Convention to joint degrees, stipulating that the holder of a joint degree has a right to a fair assessment of his/her joint degree, establishing that a joint degree is recognized unless substantial differences can be clearly demonstrated between the joint degree in question and the according host country's qualification. Recommendation also sets requirements that should be fulfilled as precondition for applying the Lisbon convention principles to a joint degree: each part of the joint curriculum has to be quality assessed or to be a part of a recognized national qualification, if the joint degree in question is awarded in the name of a larger consortium, care should be taken that each consortium partner is a trustworthy institution, Diploma supplement and ECTS should be used as the transparency tools, and the joint character of the award should be clearly indicated and described.

### **Lifelong learning**

Lifelong learning has been addressed in all the Bologna process political documents starting from the Bologna declaration itself. Indeed, lifelong learning activities as such are very widespread and growing; many higher education institutions provide courses for lifelong learners. However, a full integration of lifelong learning into regular higher education activities with a view of defining alternative study paths for lifelong learners that would allow them to reach regular higher education qualifications is an issue yet to be solved. A Bologna Seminar on recognition and credit systems in the context of lifelong learning [28], held in Prague in June 2003 addressed the issues of integration LLL into higher education activities and defining learning paths. The seminar recommendations also encourage higher education institutions to adopt internal policies to promote the recognition of prior formal, non-formal and informal learning for access and study exemption; reconsider skills content in courses and the nature of their study programs, while the national authorities should ensure the right to fair recognition of qualifications acquired in different learning environments.

In the terms of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, lifelong learning paths would then be a part of the higher education systems of States party, which also means that the qualifications thus earned would be considered for recognition on a par with the same qualifications earned through more traditional higher education learning paths. A second issue is how these learning paths could then be adequately described through transparency instruments like the Diploma Supplement, the ECTS and possibly a lifelong learning portfolio [29].

The seminar in Prague concluded that on the international scale it could be feasible to seek to develop international good practice to promote the recognition of qualifications

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<sup>11</sup> In terms of Socrates programme activities

<sup>12</sup> see [http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/mundus/index\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/mundus/index_en.html)

earned through lifelong learning paths, using the provisions and principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention; if feasible, to develop international instruments to facilitate such recognition; bring together existing experience with national qualifications frameworks with a view to facilitating the development of further national frameworks as well as a qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area that would encompass lifelong learning paths [28].

A major development in the integration of LLL into the regular higher education activities should be expected together with the establishing of the national qualifications frameworks (see below), that, according to the request of ministers in their Berlin communiqué, should seek to describe the qualifications in terms of their level, workload, learning outcomes and profile, and "encompass the wide range of flexible learning paths, opportunities and techniques and to make appropriate use of the ECTS credits" [6].

## **V FOCUSING ON LEARNING OUTCOMES – HIGH EXPECTATIONS FROM QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS**

To properly place a foreign qualification in another country's system, the focus of credential evaluation should be shifted from input characteristics, which may vary in different countries and higher education institutions, towards learning outcomes and competencies earned. Assessing learning outcomes becomes even more important in the less traditional cases – evaluation of transnational education qualifications, joint degrees, and (parts of) studies pursued in terms of lifelong learning. Moreover, when assessing qualifications for the needs of employers, "what the holder of the qualification can do" is highly important, while the information on the number of study hours in each course or which textbooks have been covered may appear of a very limited importance.

However, "assessing learning outcomes" is easier said than done. The two main existing transparency tools – the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), and the Diploma Supplement are highly useful and facilitate recognition, still; they do not provide description of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes. ECTS allows for a shift from study time to actual student workload. According to the conclusions of the Zurich seminar on Credit transfer and accumulation, October 2002 [30], "when used as an accumulation system, ECTS credits are used to describe entire study programmes" and "the basis for the allocation of credits is the official length of the study programme. Credits can be obtained only after completion of the work required and appropriate assessment". The Diploma supplement, among other useful information the qualification, contains indication of the purposes for which the qualification be used in holder's further studies or employment in the country where the qualification has been issued – it is a highly useful information for credential evaluators abroad, yet, it is a very general indication of learning outcomes.

Thus, while the main accent at learning outcomes rather than duration of studies and other input characteristics was fully acknowledged already in the Lisbon Recognition Convention and especially in its subsidiary texts, until recently there were very few attempts in Europe to start describing qualifications in terms of learning outcomes. For this reason, so far credential evaluators could only attempt to estimate the learning outcomes knowing the contents and duration of programme.

One newer activity – the Joint Quality Initiative - is a very useful attempt to assign general learning outcomes to first and second cycle qualifications [31]. From the recognition point of view the bachelor and master descriptions can be useful as a very general guide, yet, much more detailed descriptions of outcomes of are still needed for assessment of individual qualifications. Another recent and highly valuable initiative - the Tuning project [32] seeks to establish learning outcomes along subject lines.

The most important initiative with a view of overall improving of recognition across the European Higher Education Area, however, is the emergence of the national qualifications frameworks. A national qualifications framework is nothing more than a precise description of the structure of national qualifications system, indicating the workload, level and learning outcomes of each qualification and the sequence in which the qualifications follow each other [33]. Although one could argue that each country has some kind of a national qualifications' framework already, the first systematic attempts to describe qualifications in terms of level, workload, profile and learning outcomes are just emerging. A satisfactory definition of learning outcomes is one of the major challenges the Bologna Process will face, and it is an area in which the concerns of policy makers, recognition specialists, quality assurance agencies and other stakeholders come together.

The discussions at the Copenhagen seminar on qualifications frameworks on March 27-28, 2003 demonstrated [33-36] that the introduction of qualifications frameworks should substantially help recognition of qualifications across the European Higher Education Area – because the “new type” description of qualifications through level, workload, learning outcomes, and profile, provides exactly that information about qualifications that was missing so far and that allows to find out how a foreign qualification can be used in the context of the host country. Following the Copenhagen seminar recommendations, the ministers in their Berlin communiqué „encourage the member States to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile. They also undertake to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area” [6].

The group discussing the impact of the emerging qualifications frameworks on recognition formulated a little idealized future vision: the national qualifications frameworks will describe qualifications in terms of learning outcomes, the quality assurance mechanisms will assure that the stipulated outcomes can really be reached when studying in the programme in question. Thus, the task of credentials evaluators will be to use the European qualifications framework to interpret the orientation, profile and main learning outcomes of the foreign qualification in their own system and will thus be able to find the correct place of the foreign qualification in their country's education and/or employment system [36].

## CONCLUSIONS

Improving recognition of qualifications earned in one of the Bologna process countries across all other Bologna process countries is a necessary precondition for the successful establishing of the European Higher Education Area. The international legal framework for the recognition in the European Higher Education Area is established and developing. The international „recognition community” follows the new developments and elaborates new international legal tools to cover the emerging needs.

For the recognition of qualifications in the European Higher Education Area it is essential that, first of all, the core legal document for recognition - the Lisbon Recognition Convention - is ratified in all the *Bologna* countries – and this process is progressing notably. However, the further national and institutional implementation of the legal framework for recognition seems to be a much weaker point. Like in several other Bologna process aspects, we are approaching the limits of what can be done at European or international level. The further success requires involvement of national authorities, and, what is much more difficult to achieve – all levels of higher education staff. A major effort and intensive information campaigns should be made in all Bologna countries with a view to:

- actually embed the principles of the Convention into both national legislation and institutional policies,
- substantially raise institutional awareness at all levels regarding recognition issues and the international legal framework,
- create and implement institutional recognition practices,
- last but not least, create a positive attitude towards foreign qualifications and willingness to find the way how they can be used it in the host countries.

Introduction of the two-tier degree structure across Europe will benefit transparency and comparability, but it will also create a greater diversity, which means that it will not lead to automatic recognition between different parts of the European Higher Education area.

Linking recognition of individual qualifications to the information on quality is widely accepted - but it is also an indication that such information should be available and it should be in a form useful for assessment of individual qualifications. However, knowledge of quality (and accreditation) alone is not an adequate basis for evaluating a credential - a thorough knowledge of the system that conferred the qualification is necessary to position it correctly in the education system or labour market of the receiving country.

As regards recognition of lifelong learning, the main accent should be put on establishing learning paths that allow reaching higher education qualifications in an alternative way. Once the lifelong learning studies have resulted in a regular national higher education, the international recognition is not the most complex issue.

The importance to assess learning outcomes and not input parameters at recognition of qualifications has been stressed already in the framework of the Lisbon Convention. Bologna process and emerging of various types of non-traditional qualifications strengthens the need. At the same time, while the transparency of qualifications in general is growing, the qualifications at the current practice are not described in terms of learning outcomes. The commitment to establish national qualifications frameworks describing qualifications in terms of level, workload, learning outcomes and profile, - and one overarching for European Higher Education Area at large – is an opportunity for substantial improvements in understanding between the European higher education systems and, as a consequence, recognition of qualifications.

The most important conclusion of this article is that the international preconditions for improving recognition across the European Higher Education Area have largely been created. The next challenge is to make the major effort and bring it all “down to institutional reality” - or to fail.

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