IMPROVING THE RECOGNITION SYSTEM OF DEGREES AND STUDY CREDIT POINTS IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

'Bologna' Seminar on Recognition,
University of Latvia, Riga, Latvia 3-4th December 2004

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FINAL REPORT AND
RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE CONFERENCE

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IZM

Bologna seminar on improving the recognition system of degrees and study credit points in the European Higher Education Area, Riga, Latvia, 3-4th December 2004

Introduction

International conferences can lead to great progress or end in disappointing platitudes. The trick is to achieve the former and avoid the latter but this is no easy task. It is difficult to say exactly what ingredients go to make a Bologna conference a success or failure. Obviously, careful planning and good logistical organisation are important components yet despite these it is never possible to predict what precisely will emerge from any event. The most successful Bologna conferences are essentially dynamic events that reflect the interactions and opinions of those attending. They combine meticulous preparation with plenty of discussion time. The best conferences are where the practical arrangements appear smooth and non-intrusive and delegates do not feel they are being manipulated towards pre-determined recommendations.

The Riga conference *'improving the recognition of qualifications and study credit points'* organised by the Latvian Ministry of Education and Science with the help of the Council of Europe and support of EU Socrates programme, stands out as a model example of a successful event. It combined superb organisation, well-prepared questions for discussion groups, a detailed background report and lively speakers. This conference is a positive example of what can be achieved – it generated a clear sense of progress linked with a strong agreement about the way forward embedded in a set of practical recommendations.

The main theme of the conference is a familiar one - recognition. Recognition is acknowledged to be at the heart of the Bologna Process.

> *'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 establishment of the European Higher Education Area.'* [1]

Many of the Bologna Action lines have a direct and obvious links to recognition notably: the adoption of easily readable and comparable degrees; adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles; promotion of mobility; promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance; promotion of the European dimension in higher education; lifelong learning; and the promotion of the attractiveness of European higher education. Without effective processes for recognition these objectives could not be achieved. This was acknowledged in the Berlin Communiqué 2003 where education ministers committed themselves to intermediate priorities for the next two years with the pledge

> *'…to improve the recognition of degrees and periods of study.'* [2]

In recent years, and certainly since the groundbreaking 1997 *Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education* (Lisbon Recognition Convention), there has been steady progress in the recognition field. Various international codes of practice (subsidary texts) have served to supplement the Lisbon Recognition Convention, strengthen existing good practice, and cope with new recognition issues. Notable examples include the Council of Europe/UNESCO *Recommendations on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications Recognition* (adopted 2001), *Recommendations for the Recognition of*

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[1] Andrejs Rauhvargers, Background report for the Riga seminar, conclusion section, page 20.
[2] Berlin Communiqué: http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de

International Access Qualifications (adopted 1999), the *Code of Practice for the Provision of Transnational Education* (adopted 2001), and the *Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees* (adopted 2004). To these advances can be added the effective work of the two European recognition networks, ENIC and NARIC, which operate in close cooperation almost as merged networks.[3] There are also the EU Directives on recognition for professional purposes. To these initiatives and organisations can be added transparency instruments such as the Diploma Supplement and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).

Collectively these initiatives are destined to play an increasingly central role in the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Already there is evidence that synergies are emerging between the existing recognition tools that form the legal and practical recognition framework in Europe. However, we are faced with a big problem - the reality gap between having systems and process and using them. This is borne out by the Trends 2003 survey.[4] Academic and professional recognition is important as it goes to the heart of realising the free movement of citizens who are currently deterred when their qualifications are undervalued or not recognised at all. Recognition is concerned with assessing and making judgements about foreign qualifications in terms of what we are familiar with domestically. It can be reduced to the simple assessment and subsequent acknowledgement of a claim. The problem is that there is still widespread ignorance, poor practice, xenophobia and reluctance to move from viewing recognition of qualifications as a process of simply looking for exact equivalence rather than 'fair recognition'.

The Bologna Process has given a sharp boost to every aspect of the recognition field. This positive progress needs to be developed by making existing tools work better, fully implementing the Lisbon Recognition Convention and widening knowledge of good practice at all levels – local, regional, national and international. The recognition field can be likened to an iceberg. The visible parts and procedures are effective and proven to work. The problem lies with the submerged nine-tenths.

Nature and structure of the report

The purpose of the seminar was well expressed by the Latvian Minister of Education and Science, Ina Druviete, when she indicated in her opening address:

> *'The goals of the Bologna process can only be achieved, if we will manage to ensure that qualifications awarded in each part of the European Higher Education Area will be recognized for both further studies and employment in the entire European Higher Education Area.'*

This conference was important as it marked a significant and practical step forward in achieving this. When it was planned the rationale for the conference emphasised that improving recognition of degrees and periods of studies is set as a priority for the 2003-2005 period and that recognition is set as one of the three issues for the stocktaking exercise to be undertaken for the Bergen ministerial meeting. The Berlin Communiqué recognised as a priority 'furthering implementation of the Lisbon convention', 'fostering recognition for further studies' and 'recognition of prior learning'. The conference made progress in all these areas.

This report is designed to focus on how the conference tackled these themes and what specific contributions were made over the two days of the event. Readers will be relieved that it does not seek to reproduce all the written or oral contributions made by every presenter – this is just not possible or useful. Indeed, the written texts are already available from the conference website.[5]

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[3] ENIC, Council of Europe/UNESCO European Network of Information Centres for Recognition and Mobility. NARIC, European Union Network of national Academic Information Centres Further information can be obtained at: http://www.enic-naric.net/ .

[4] Reichert S and Tauch C, *Trends 3 Progress Towards the European Higher Education Area*.

[5] The seven main themes (in order of presentation) were: Jindra Divis (NUFFIC) *Recognition and quality assurance* ; Julia Gonzales (University of Deusto, Bilbao) *Developments along subject lines and their impact on recognition,* Dirk Haaksman (NUFFIC) *Recognition and the labour market*; Norman Sharp (UK QAA) *Recognising learning outcomes*; Stephen Adam (University of Westminster) *Qualifications frameworks and recognition;* Volker Gehmlich (Fachhochschule Osnabrück) *Recognition of credit points – achievements and problems;* Jane Knight (University of Toronto) *Programmes, providers and accreditors on the move: implications for recognition.* Presentation papers can be downloaded from: http://www.aic.lv/rigaseminar/documents/index.htm.

What this report seeks to do is to highlight the main arguments and issues that led to a remarkable level of agreement at the end of the second day. It explores the current state of recognition and justifies where there needs to be further development in the context of the Bologna reforms.

This report closely follows the sequence of sessions in the original programme except that it integrates its comments on the various individual presentations on the main themes with the working group discussions on the same topics. This is sensible in that there is a logical progression to the conference that moved from exploration of the background situation, through themed presentations, working group discussions and reports, stakeholder panels, and views on recognition in 2010. It was this rich diet of presentation, discussion and debate that led to the positive set of conclusions and recommendations. Above all, this report seeks to explore the development of the main argument and issues that surfaced during the event.

The Conference background report (Andrejs Rauhvargers)

The conference immeasurably benefited from a purpose-written background report by Andrejs Rauhvargers. His report, with a similar title to the conference, *'Improving the Recognition of Qualifications and Study Credit Points'* provided a comprehensive overview of not only the current state of recognition matters, but also the key issues and problems to be faced now.

Both in his report and particularly in his subsequent presentation at the conference he gave us a timely reminder of the multiple facets to recognition. It is worth repeating key parts of his message:

- recognition is important for higher education institutions (HEIs) in terms of the institution securing recognition for itself both nationally and internationally;
- the recognition of actual higher education programmes is another dimension as institutional recognition does not necessarily imply that all a recognised institution's qualifications are nationally or internationally recognised;
- recognition of an individual qualification nationally and internationally as valid for further studies and employment purposes raises the crucial dimension of the level of recognition given – whether full, partial or no recognition is forthcoming.

The background conference report also details the international legal framework for recognition, the work of the European recognition networks (ENIC and NARIC), and the necessary links between quality assurance, learning outcomes, transnational education and recognition. It is not the place or purpose of this conference report to repeat these aspects – suffice it to say that they came up directly and indirectly throughout the conference.

In his conference presentation Andrejs Rauhvargers provided an entertaining 'master class' detailing the links between recognition and such diverse elements as transnational education, learning outcomes, legal frameworks, quality assurance, new/old degrees, the Tuning project, lifelong learning, joint degrees and transparency tools. Few, who were fortunate to attend the conference, will forget the complex PowerPoint 'spider diagram' he created that charted the numerous interactions between the different elements of higher education and recognition.

The main messages of Andrejs Rauhvargers' report and presentation were that:

- ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention was not enough if the principles of the convention were not transposed to national legislation and institutional practice;
- one of the biggest challenges was to raise institutional awareness (a recurring theme of the conference) and knowledge of their responsibilities under the convention;
- bottlenecks exist between the proper recognition of lifelong learning and inflexible national education structures;
- we need to improve recognition practice on the ground. There are sufficient legal and practical recognition tools in existence - the problem lies in ensuring their use;

- those involved in recognition must adopt a forgiving attitude - reflecting the progression from seeking absolute equivalence to 'fair recognition'.

An 'outside' view of recognition - stakeholder panel

It is difficult adequately to do justice to the rich set of contributions made by the stakeholder panel. The panel were asked to reflect upon and provide an 'outside' view of recognition.[6] In so doing a number of interesting dimensions and insights were identified including:

- we must not forget 'periods of study' when we consider recognition matters. This aspect can become lost in the effort to concentrate on qualifications;
- all those involved in higher education are experiencing a (painful?) transition period as the waves of Bologna-inspired reforms combine with other domestic educational reforms. Periods of change do cause uncertainty and even a backlash effect. We all need to be sensitive to such issues and need to persuade stakeholders of the positive benefits to citizens and employers;
- it is important that the tendency to over-regulation is avoided. There are sufficient legal and practical tools already in existence. It must not be forgotten that reform, particularly for HEI, comes at a cost;
- institutional autonomy is very important and furthermore is implied by many new Bologna developments. In terms of recognition we must not forget that most recognition decisions are taken by institutions. Furthermore, in many states new relationships between competent authorities and newly autonomous HEIs are being developed. This building of new relationships is a sensitive and difficult area that has not sufficiently been explored;
- there are serious 'information overload' problems facing citizens who are often confronted by complex, unfiltered information that makes decision making difficult. A solution to this is the 'empowerment' of learners where they are given guidance on what sort of critical questions they need to ask about institutional providers, their qualifications and the subsequent national and international academic and professional recognition;
- it is increasingly vital that those concerned with the Bologna Process reforms give more thought to how the 'new Bologna degrees' are regarded outside the EHEA. Timothy Thompson gave a salutary reminder of the importance of how others (non-Bologna countries) regard us. There are dangers if Bologna degrees erroneously become associated with reduced standards and the worth of our degrees is questioned.

Furthering implementation of the Lisbon Convention at national level

Working group one had the task of exploring 'furthering implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention at national level.[7] Perhaps the most significant point to arise was the strong conviction that when the Lisbon Recognition Convention is ratified the job is not done but just started! Too often, following ratification, there is little practical change in the behaviour of credential evaluators. The convention is commonly regarded as 'soft law' even when enacted into national legislation as there is no effective appeals mechanism. The reality is that, in practice, the 'burden of proof' is not switched from the student to the assessing institution. There is no change in mentality, procedure or outcome. Despite some good progress much remains to be done in order to reverse attitudes from looking for reasons to deny recognition to positively seeking to give recognition.

The real challenge that faces us is to achieve the long term goal - to encourage the mutual trust that exists between HEIs within a state and to replicate this trust at the level of the European Higher

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[6] The stakeholder panel included: *Students:* Predrag Lazetic, ESIB, Brussels; *Credential evaluators working at HEI:* Hans Knutell – University of Uppsala, Sweden; *HEI leadership* – Jānis Vētra, Rīga Stradiņa University, Latvia; Ministries of Education - Marie-Anne Persoons, Flemish Ministry of Education, Belgium; reflection from outside Europe – Timothy Thompson, University of Pittsburgh, USA. It was chaired by Sjur Bergan, Council of Europe.
[7] *Chair:* Rolf Lofstad, Norwegian ENIC/NARIC, Oslo; *Rapporteur:* Erwin Malfroy, Flemish ENIC/NARIC, Brussels *Resource persons*: Štepanka Skuhrová Czech ENIC/NARIC, Darius Tamošiunas, Lithuanian ENIC/NARIC.

Education Area. This would obviously involve the thorough embedding of the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention within national law and subsequently in the processes of all European HEIs. It must not be overlooked that most recognition decisions are taken at the level of institutions. It is good practice to decentralise the recognition decision power at the level of HEIs and to centralise the recognition decision power for academic recognition of final degrees for professional purposes.

The implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention is too often confined to a top-down exercise that has left it isolated and extraneous. Steps must be taken to secure its practical implementation at a local level, along with the other Bologna Process innovations.

Development in the recognition of degrees and study credit points

Working group two examined the 'development in the recognition of degrees and study credit points'.[8] In this session concerns were voiced again about potential misunderstandings of Bologna reforms associated with 'outside' perceptions of new first cycle degrees of three years' duration. Timothy Thompson (University of Pittsburgh) and Stephen Hunt (US Network of Education Information, US Department of Education) raised this issue – the latter making his intervention by transatlantic phone call. Part of the problem is that countries outside the Bologna Process perceive Europe as a set of piecemeal individual education systems and not a single entity. This is not surprising; Europe will not be regarded as a linked set of integrated educational frameworks until the EHEA becomes a reality. It is important that, in the interim period, negative preconceptions about 'Bologna degrees' are not allowed to develop. This danger is compounded by the fact that different countries are naturally at different stages of progress with their Bologna reforms. Furthermore, it needs to be explained that European education systems will remain diverse in the sense of the content, style, detailed features and regulation of their education systems. The commonality between them will come through shared understanding of standards and the use of common ways to express levels and describe qualifications. It is clear the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation Systems (ECTS) will play an important role in the development of the EHEA. This will entail European HEIs expressing their qualifications, courses and modules in terms of learning outcomes and levels – such a transformation in approach will take much time and a huge staff development effort.

Recognition of learning outcomes

Working group three focused on the 'recognition of learning outcomes'.[9] There was unanimous agreement about significant advantages of adopting 'learning outcomes' as an integral part of a modern approach to formulate and implement higher education policy. Such an approach has implications at the local, national and international levels.[10] Learning outcomes are precise statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or do as a result of a learning experience. Learning outcomes need to be clearly stated and are intimately linked to the construction and expression of the curricula, the process of learning, the learning delivery mode and the assessment of learning. The introduction and expression of modules and qualifications in terms of learning outcomes will certainly require enormous staff development at all levels (including the Bologna Promoters).

The adoption of a learning outcomes approach has obvious advantages for those involved with credential evaluation. The focus of credential evaluation is shifting from an emphasis on input characteristics (workload, level of resources, etc.) towards more precise output-focused learning

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[8] *Chair:* Gunnar Vaht, Estonian ENIC/NARIC, Tallinn, President of the ENIC Network *Rapporteur:* Gabriel Vignoli, Italian Erasmus Mundus Agency, Rome *Resource persons*: Timothy Thompson, University of Pittsburgh, USA, Volker Gehmlich Fachhochschule Osnabrück, Germany.
[9] *Chair:* Norman Sharp, Quality Assurance Agency, Glasgow, Scotland *Rapporteur:* Sjur Bergan, Council of Europe, Strasbourg *Resource persons:* Dirk Haaksman NUFFIC, The Netherlands; Tatjana Koķe, University of Latvia, Riga, Jane Knight, University of Toronto, Canada.
[10] Explored at the UK 'Bologna' Conference on '*Using learning outcomes'*, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, 1-2 July 2004.

outcome (what a successful student can do). This output focus also has benefits for the recognition of transnational education, joint degrees and lifelong learning. The new emphasis on what the holder of a qualification can do is beneficial for learners and employers who get more information on what skills and competences qualifications provide. When modules or course units are expressed in learning outcomes it is much easier to make accurate judgements because there is more transparency to help the evaluation process. Learning outcomes improve the transparency of qualifications and make credential evaluation easier and judgements more accurate. In effect they provide a common language/methodological approach. They also facilitate the recognition of work-based learning (WBL) (through the use of APEL techniques) and lifelong learning. Perhaps their strongest merit is that they simplify our understanding of the curriculum as well as the development of common subject reference points (typified by the Tuning project). ECTS based on learning outcomes becomes more effective.

Despite these considerable advantages it must be acknowledged that there are problems associated with the design, definition and assessment of learning outcomes. Academic staff can easily resent such innovations. Learning outcomes must be written with great subtlety and sensitivity to avoid the reduction of learning to training. These are issues that the all stakeholders in the education systems must engage with as a matter of importance.

Using the results of quality assurance for improving recognition

Working group four explored 'using the results of quality assurance for improving recognition.'[11] The direct link between quality assurance and recognition is obvious. There needs to be confidence between countries despite them having different quality assurance arrangements. Without such confidence international judgements about qualifications and the institutions from which they originate, become suspect as the qualifications may not be of an appropriate standard or even fit for their stated purposes.

The cross-border recognition of higher education qualifications/institutions is the most important objective of quality assurance in the international setting. Reciprocal confidence in each other's quality assurance systems contributes to the culture of mutual trust in the European Higher Education Area. The development of qualifications frameworks will aid international recognition and lessen concerns about quality by placing qualifications in a clear national and international context.

A strong concern was expressed about the insufficient level of cooperation between the recognition and quality assurance sectors. It is clear that without closer cooperation between these bodies international recognition suffers. The Bologna Process must involve the full exploitation of national and international expertise and all stakeholders should be consulted. It is regrettable if ENIC and NARIC networks are not fully consulted at the international level regarding quality assurance matters. The development of closer links between those responsible for quality assurance and recognition is paramount but it must not be imagined that effective quality assurance systems will ever abolish the need for recognition. Recognition is an issue that concerns the individual. The gaining of effective recognition in a host country's educational or employment system is not just about general declarations but the provision of advice, support and practical results.

A further concern was voiced associated with the dangers of non-traditional providers being left outside the remit of quality assurance agencies. Transnational education providers should have the possibility of gaining recognition within national frameworks. This is important for several reasons. In many cases such providers remain outside national education systems, often subject to little or no quality assurance. If transnational education providers are not given the opportunity to apply for official recognition for themselves and their qualifications they will remain unregulated and 'consumer protection' is absent. Transnational education, both imported and exported education, is a significant feature of international education and should not be ignored. Obviously, any official recognition process by a competent authority must be rigorous and ongoing. There is a need to encourage good transnational providers and discourage 'degree mills'.

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[11] *Chair:* Séamus Puirséil, Higher Education and Training Awards Council, Dublin *Rapporteur:* Carita Blomqvist, Finnish ENIC/NARIC, Helsinki *Resource persons:* Marlies Leegwater, Dutch Ministry of Education, The Hague, Julia Gonzales, University of Deusto, Bilbao.

Impact of emerging qualifications frameworks on recognition

Working group five looked at 'the impact of emerging qualifications frameworks on recognition'.[12] The discussions centred on the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) qualifications frameworks working group outline proposals contained in the report for the Bologna seminar on '*A framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*.'[13] There was a clear agreement of the vital importance of 'new style' national qualifications frameworks and the need for an overarching European framework for qualifications.

'New style' output- focused national frameworks employ '*workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile*' plus credits – and are very different to traditional input-focused approaches used to place and explain qualifications. Furthermore, frameworks provide more explicit and precise information in their qualifications descriptors and their reference to other external reference points. It is these features that will impact most on the recognition field.

It is no coincidence that in the recognition area there is a trend towards emphasising the fair recognition of qualifications based on what a person knows and is able to do rather than on the formal procedures that have led to qualifications. Furthermore, in an effort to promote more accurate judgements of qualifications, it is apparent that detailed comparisons of the formal aspects of individual qualifications (curriculum content, status of institution, recommended textbooks, duration/contact hours, access requirements, etc.) give a less accurate basis for evaluation. It is more helpful when qualifications are situated within national qualifications frameworks that are characterised by a clear description of learning outcomes, supplemented by a consideration of level, workload and profile. A strong advantage of qualifications frameworks is that they can, for the purposes of comparison, provide a more accurate basis and explanation of qualifications.

It was emphasised that the overarching framework for qualifications is not regulatory. It is not about creating convergence but understanding and clearly expressing the differences between qualifications and different European higher education systems. There was a strong opinion that qualification frameworks represent a powerful boost for the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Henceforth, it would be natural to express "substantial differences" with reference to qualifications frameworks and in particular learning outcomes.

The international recognition of qualifications builds on transparency. A framework, which provides a common understanding of the outcomes represented by a qualification rather than a mere assertion of comparability, will greatly enhance the usefulness of qualifications across the European Higher Education Area. A variety of purposes are associated with the international recognition of qualifications including employment, access to further qualifications, exemption from parts of studies, access to continuing education, enhancing mobility, etc. The development of a common overarching framework through the collaborative efforts of stakeholders across Europe will enhance the other actions being made to improve recognition for these purposes.

The international mobility of learners depends on the recognition of their prior learning and qualifications gained. Learners moving between qualifications or cycles require recognition in order to access more advanced programmes. Students moving within their studies, and their advisors, can benefit from the clarity that may be provided through the specification of the level and nature of the study programmes. Learners can have greater confidence that the outcomes of study abroad will contribute to the qualification sought in their home country. A framework will be of particular help in supporting the development and recognition of joint degrees from more than one country.

It is clear that qualifications frameworks are being promoted in order to have a beneficial effect on transparency, recognition and mobility. They are likely to have a large impact on existing recognition tools and practices. If they do not, the very rationale for their existence is undermined. A useful way to identify their precise potential benefits is to explore them in terms of a number of key questions associated with their use:

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[12] Impact of the emerging qualifications frameworks on recognition *Chair:* Mogens Berg, Danish Ministry of Education, Copenhagen *Rapporteur*: Eva Gönczi, Hungarian Ministry of Education, Budapest *Resource persons*; Anne-Katherine Mandrup, Danish ENIC/NARIC, Copenhagen, Gerard Madill, Universities Scotland, Edinburgh.
[13] Danish Bologna Seminar, Copenhagen Business School, 13-14 January 2005. The background conference report is available at http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/.

The potential benefits to recognition from qualifications frameworks can be summarised as follows. Qualifications frameworks:

- improve the transparency of qualifications, make credential evaluation easier (for HEIs and other stakeholders) and judgements more accurate;
- act as a common language/methodological approach that internationally can improve recognition and understanding between educational systems;
- facilitate the recognition of APEL and lifelong learning between states;
- simplify our understanding and improve the expression of the curriculum between countries through the use of common reference points;
- facilitate the application of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the code for transitional education providers;
- ease the pressure of work on the ENIC-NARIC network;
- make ECTS based on learning outcomes and levels more effective;
- allow HEIs and credential evaluators to move away from imprecise measurement indicators that focus on formal procedures (admissions criteria, length of studies, qualification titles, years/hours of study undertaken) to focus on the results of student learning. Move from input measurements to output/outcome measurements.

The introduction of qualifications frameworks represents both a challenge and the opportunity to improve recognition. In theory, they have the potential to improve the clarity, accuracy and fairness of the recognition process. They can provide reference points against which clear decisions can be made. Increased transparency between national systems can lead to more trust and confidence. However, it will also provide real evidence of major differences in outcomes that may cause 'zones of distrust'. This is not necessarily a negative point as substantial differences between qualifications need to be acknowledged. There are a number of long-standing recognition problems that appear to defy resolution; frameworks and their associated methodological tools may help. The application of the Lisbon Recognition Convention should be made more effective. Qualifications frameworks could help to support a more constructive approach towards transnational education providers.

Finally, a number of interesting questions were raised. Firstly, about the impact of non-recognition when it takes place where a qualifications framework exists – what will be the process of arbitration and appeal? The second area of concern was the relationship of the EHEA qualifications frameworks developments in relation to the European Commission's plans to develop a credit-based European framework for lifelong learning.

For the reason identified above it was suggested that there is a need for an intensive national and international dialogue should be encouraged to share good practice associated with the introduction of qualifications frameworks and their impact on recognition processes and issues.

Recognition 2010 – vision of the future

The panel who considered what recognition might be like in 2010 faced a difficult task attempting to peer like clairvoyants into the future.[14] It was emphasised that recognition would be firmly based on the expression and evaluation of learning outcomes. It was suggested that that qualifications will become more diverse and earned through a process of lifelong learning and offered via multiple learning pathways and modes. Credit will play a major part in developments. In the future no legal obstacles should exist in the recognition of transnational education which will be regulated, and learners will be clearly informed about the quality and worth of such providers through the substantial developments in information provision and strategies. Students and citizens will be more empowered so they have clear information before making choices about study programmes and

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[14] Sjur Bergan, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, Germain Dondelinger, Ministry of Education, Luxembourg and incoming Chair of the Bologna Follow Up Group (spring 2005); Ruard Wallis de Vries, European Commission, Brussels; Gunnar Vaht, President of the ENIC Network, Estonia.

institutions.[15] There is likely to be more focus on recognition for the purpose of employment, in particular for the non-regulated part of the labour market.

Finally, it was suggested that we are at a crossroads and need to decide how to negotiate our future direction with care.

Conclusions

It can be seen from the snapshot of the debates and contributions described in this report that a number of recurring themes emerge, notably that many good tools for recognition already exist; the real question concerns their practical implementation. New elements to be added to the existing tools are qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes. The conference engendered a robust sense of purpose and a clear call for some practical action. Recognition is not an area where we can rest on our laurels and complacently regard it as substantially resolved. Amongst the conference delegates were some of the foremost European experts in the recognition field and they identified the need for further action. There is always a danger for any conference that it might produce few ideas, simply reprise familiar comments and lead to marginal changes. In the event nothing was further from the truth. The Riga event has unequivocally identified what must be done to complete the contribution of recognition to the creation of the EHEA. The conference marked an important step forward and this can be seen from the overall conclusions summarised below:

- There is no reason for complacency. Existing recognition tools, improvements in quality assurance and the development of qualifications frameworks will not alone solve all recognition problems. They must be fully implemented but even then the dream of automatic recognition is only obtainable in very limited circumstances;
- The conference delegates highlighted the intimate links between the work of quality assurance and recognition experts. This needs to be acknowledged by all concerned and lead to better cooperation between the two areas;
- The development of national qualifications frameworks and the overarching framework for qualifications for the EHEA can immeasurably strengthen existing recognition tools. However, the latter must not be viewed (or implemented) as a device to limit diversity or restrict innovation. They involve a convergence in methodological approach but <u>not</u> qualification content, delivery or learning outcomes;

- We need to recognise the huge importance, and potential contribution to recognition, of learning outcomes, but enthusiasm for them must be tempered with some understanding of the enormity of the task of introducing them;
- More efforts need to be made to eradicate false expectations created through meaningless declarations of formal recognition that fail to lead to employment or admission to/exemption from study.
- We must find ways to make the Lisbon Recognition Convention more effective. It needs to be fully plugged into national legislation, institutional practice and national quality assurance systems.
- We need to tackle some of the recognition bottlenecks. This will involve modernisation of existing educational systems so that they can seamlessly integrate all forms of education, including lifelong learning, in the award of domestic higher education qualifications.
- ECTS credits 'in the real world' must be expressed in terms of learning outcomes and levels. Credits must be the subject of 'fair recognition' giving proper recognition based on learning outcomes, particularly as they are important for the recognition of work-based learning and the use of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) techniques.
- Delegates supported the adoption of a mature approach toward good transnational education (TNE) provision by making it eligible for official recognition (both TNE providers and qualifications). There also needs to be a more coordinated effort to marginalise degree mills and 'illegal' institutions. Qualifications frameworks should help solve some of the problems in devising effective ways to accredit/recognise TNE providers.

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[15] The new ENIC-NARIC information strategy, adopted in 2004, will play a major role in student empowerment.

- The stakeholder panel reminded us that there are dangers associated with the Bologna Process. In particular, how Bologna degrees are viewed globally is of vital importance. The reduction in the length of European first cycle degrees <u>must</u> be accompanied by the creation of suitable qualifications frameworks based on explicit external reference points (qualification descriptors, level, level indicators, workload, quality, learning outcomes, profile, etc.). It is imperative that the nature, purpose and quality of the Bologna reforms are communicated to the rest of the world.
- Existing recognition tools alone (Lisbon Recognition Convention, Diploma Supplement, Codes of practice, ECTS, etc.) will not solve all recognition problems. There will always be a major role for individual recognition in order to position the foreign qualification properly in the host country's educational or employment system.

A sense of optimism and purpose developed during the conference. The end product of the event is the set of recommendations outlined below. Earlier there was mention of the 'recognition iceberg' which represents the hidden expanses of recognition problems we still need to resolve. It may be deeply unfashionable, in this age of concerns about global warming, but we really do have to melt the 'recognition iceberg' and resolve the prejudice, ignorance, xenophobia, inertia, poor practice, confusing qualification titles, unclear educational systems, imprecise terminology, etc. The collective set of existing recognition tools aided by new qualifications frameworks, learning outcomes and a fully implemented Lisbon Recognition Convention - are collectively capable of dissolving those problems previously regarded as insoluble.

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

**'Bologna' Seminar on Recognition,
University of Latvia, Riga, Latvia 3-4th December 2004**

Organised by Latvian authorities and Council of Europe,
supported by the EU Socrates programme

CONFERENCE RECOMMENDATIONS

Ministers in Bergen are urged to:

1. Amend national legislation to incorporate the principles of the Council of Europe/UNESCO *Convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education in the European Region* (1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention) and adopt effective measures to ensure their practical implementation at all appropriate levels.

2. Recognise that reaching the ambitious goals of the Bologna Process and the European Council's Lisbon Strategy requires defining 'recognition' as positioning a holder of a foreign qualification in the host country's education or employment system rather than a formal act of acknowledging his or her qualification, and therefore to:
   - emphasize the benefits of 'new-style' national qualifications frameworks and endorse the creation of the overarching framework of qualifications for the EHEA on the grounds of their positive contribution to international recognition, mobility and transparency;
   - promote an intensive national and international dialogue, informed by ENICs and NARICS, to exchange good practice.

3. As a matter of urgency, launch a campaign to convey accurate and pertinent information on the Bologna Process to other parts of the world.

At the level of ENIC and NARIC networks it is recommended that:

4. The existing cooperation between recognition and quality assurance networks should be further strengthened. It needs to be acknowledged that recognition and quality assurance are intimately related.

5. The networks further explore ways in which the emerging national and European overarching qualifications frameworks and usage of learning outcomes can be applied for improving recognition practices, including the recognition of lifelong learning and other non-

traditional qualifications, and how they relate to the legal framework of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

6. The networks take an active part in the information campaign on the Bologna Process in the wider world, using their long-standing contacts and information exchange channels.

At the national level it is recommended that:

7. Effective measures are taken in respect of non-traditional providers of education to offer them access to state recognition procedures and ongoing quality assurance monitoring.

8. The vital contribution of learning outcomes to recognition in higher education and lifelong learning is acknowledged and a strategy for their implementation is developed. The development of learning outcomes should take into account the four main purposes of higher education:
    - preparation for the labour market;
    - preparation for life as an active citizen;
    - personal development;
    - the development and maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base.
9. Steps are taken to monitor the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, with a view to encouraging fair and equal treatment of applicants within countries.

At the level of higher education institutions it is recommended that:

10. HEIs draw more on the experience and knowledge of ENICS and NARICS to support and inform recognition decisions taken at institutional level.

11. HEsI take steps to develop institutional recognition policies and practices and to disseminate information on the legal framework for recognition and best practice at the level of faculties and individual study programmes.

12. HEI leaderships, together with EUA, EURASHE, ENICS and NARICS, develop a coordinated strategy in order to play an effective role in implementing the principles of fair recognition embodied in the Lisbon Recognition Convention and reflected in the Bologna Process.