The Benefits of Mutual Recognition of Accreditation and Quality Assurance Decisions

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chapter 1: Introduction

Rolf Heusser (Chairman of ECA; Director of OAQ)

Comparability of the quality of study programmes is a prerequisite for the implementation of the Bologna process and for the mobility of students and staff. The need for close co-operation of quality assurance agencies and acceptance of national quality assurance systems has been emphasised by the ministers responsible for higher education in Europe since 2001. In the Bergen Communiqué of 2005 the Ministers underlined "the importance of co-operation between nationally recognised agencies with a view to enhancing the mutual recognition of accreditation or quality assurance decisions". Against this background, 15 national accreditation organisations from 10 European countries worked together in the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) with the aim to achieve mutual recognition of accreditation decisions among members by the end of 2007. The participating countries in this accreditation project were: Austria, Flanders, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, and Switzerland. ECA is an affiliated body of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

The objectives and activities of the ECA project are in line with the ministerial communiqués of the Bologna process[1] and with the recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union[2]. ECA members believe that mutual recognition of accreditation or quality assurance decisions can substantially reduce existing barriers in the recognition of qualifications and thereby enhance academic and profes-sional mobility in Europe. Moreover, mutual recognition of accreditation decisions would prevent that joint programmes and joint degrees need to be accredited in each of the participating countries.

The goals of the ECA project have been reached; twelve mutual recognition agreements were signed in December 2007 during an international conference in Barcelona. This conference brought together representatives from governments, institutions, students, recognition authorities and European and international QA-agencies to discuss the benefits of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. The conference showed that various stakeholders in higher education can benefit from mutual recognition agreements and that methods and tools of ECA can also be useful for other accreditation and QA-agencies in Europe or abroad. This report resumes the ECA project and summarizes the speeches and discussion of the dissemination conference in Barcelona. The presentations can be downloaded from:
http://www.ecaconsortium.net/conference/documents.php.

[1] *The European Higher Education Area - achieving the goals: communiqués of the conference of European ministers responsible for higher education, Bergen, May 2005 and London, May 2007*

[2] *European Parliament and Council: Recommendation of 15 February 2006 on further European co-operation in quality assurance in higher education*

ECA – Methodology and results

2.1. The ECA road map towards mutual recognition

Rolf Heusser (Chairman of ECA; Director of OAQ)

Mutual trust among accreditation organisations is an indispensable element and the basis for mutual recognition agreements. ECA members decided that the envisioned trust should be built up step by step and should be based on information exchange, commonly agreed tools and instruments, co-operation projects and external reviews of members. This confidence shall enable the participating agencies to accept the accreditation results and decisions of other ECA members as equivalent to their own.

Following the approach of mutual recognition, the ECA members established a road map towards mutual recognition with concrete activities, milestones and deadlines. The road map encompasses the following steps:

1 mutual understanding of accreditation organisation
2 mutual recognition of accreditation procedures
3 mutual recognition of accreditation results/decisions

During the time period 2004-2007, the following main results have been achieved:

- In 2004: publication of an inventory of the different national accreditation systems, based on a comparative survey among ECA members.
- In 2004: signing of a common "Code of Good Practice". This code guarantees comparability of accreditation procedures and defines the internal quality assurance measures of accreditation organisations.
- In 2005: signing of commonly agreed "Principles for the Selection of Experts". The Principles state the criteria that should be used for selecting independent experts in accreditation panels.
- In 2005: signing of a Joint declaration between ECA members and ENIC/NARICs. In 2006, six countries were signatories of this agreement which

promotes an almost "automatic" recognition of qualifications based on mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.

- In 2006: ECA members agreed to consider the respective accreditation tools and instruments as compatible and free of substantial differences.
- In 2007: Principles for the accreditation of joint programmes were adopted.
- In 2007: External peer reviews confirmed that ECA members fulfil the Code.
- In 2007: Successful pilot test of an on-line Information tool for accreditation decisions and preliminary launch of Qrossroads.eu.
- In 2007: Many co-operation activities between ECA members (mutual observations, joint accreditations, in depth comparisons of accreditation systems, etc.) prove that accreditation procedures, standards and results are free of significant differences.
- In 2007: formal achievement of the ECA goals. Signing of first waves of mutual recognition agreements among ECA member organisations in Barcelona.

Most of these results have been elaborated on in the ECA publication "Advancing mutual recognition of accreditation decisions". The contents of the Code of Good Practice, the Principles for the selection of experts, the Joint Declaration, the Principles regarding accreditation procedures of joint programmes, and the bilateral mutual recognition agreement are included in the Annexes of the current publication.

Chapter 2 focuses particularly on the two latter points mentioned in the list above: the mutual recognition agreements, and the bilateral co-operation projects between ECA members comprising of in-depth comparisons, mutual observations and, in some cases, joint accreditation procedures. This chapter includes

experiences with these bilateral projects as presented at the dissemination conference in Barcelona. All in-depth comparisons carried out between ECA members in the context of ECA's TEAM project are to be found in the on-line publication "Accreditation frameworks compared". The mutual observations in the context of ECA's TEAM project are to be found in the on-line publication "Reports of observer missions". Both on-line publications can be downloaded from: http://www.ecaconsortium.net/team/achievements.php.

As next step, the involvement of Ministers and stakeholders is needed to fully implement, advance, and expand mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. The ECA approach towards mutual recognition supplements existing initiatives and instruments (e.g. Lisbon Recognition Convention) to facilitate recognition of foreign qualifications by providing transparent and reliable information on the quality of higher education institutions and programmes. European and international stakeholders and networks have been involved in the work of ECA towards mutual recognition. Because of the potential benefits to European and global student mobility it is important to intensify this co-operation within and outside of Europe.

2.2. In-depth comparison: the experiences of NOKUT (Norway), FHR and AAC (Austria)

Michael G. Kraft (FHR)

Introduction

In their seminal book „A Thousand Plateaus" the two French postmodernist philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari state in the chapter "1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible" that "every Animal has its Anomalous"[3]. They introduce the term "anomal" in contrast to "anormal", which refers to "that which is outside rules or goes against the rules, whereas an-omalie […] designates the unequal, the coarse, the rough, the cutting edge of deterritorialization."[4] Hence, "the abnormal can be defined only in terms of characteristics, specific or generic; but the anomalous is a position or set of positions in relation to a multiplicity."[5] Thus, one might legitimately ask what this particular philosophical concept has to do with external quality assurance and mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. We suggest applying the adjective "anormal" to the workings of external quality assurance agencies and the ECA mutual recognition project in a first step and subsequently will have a look at the "sorcerer's" position by appraising the concept of "anomalous" and see how these two different concepts interact in relation to mutual recognition.

Methodology, framework and background of the project

The comparative analyses of the accreditation frameworks of the Austrian Accreditation Council ("Österreichischer Akkreditierungsrat", hereinafter referred to as AAC), the Austrian FH Council ("Fachhochschulrat", hereinafter referred to as FHR) and the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (hereinafter referred to as NOKUT)[6] were carried out – among others[7] - within the ECA TEAM project of advancing mutual recognition in spring 2007. The aim of the project was to deepen mutual understanding in addition to the ECA Code of Good Practice among accreditation agencies and to make common features and differences in accreditation standards and procedures transparent. The underlying rationale was that a systematic and bilateral comparison would provide deeper insights and enhance mutual understanding. Thus, the comparative analyses focused on the comparison of the Higher Education Systems from an accreditation perspective, the comparison of the accreditation procedures, the accreditation standards and the publication policies. By comparing these different topics the aim was to identify if there are differences, which can be considered as substantial differences in a sense that they cause concern regarding the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.

In order to reach this goal, background information on the different agencies was

[3] *Deleuze / Guattari, 2004, p. 269.*

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *The following persons were involved: Vibeke Narverud Nyborg (NOKUT), Elisabeth Fiorioli, Andrea Bernhard (AAC), Michael G. Kraft, Herwig Patscheider, Kurt Sohm (FHR).*

[7] *Within the ECA TEAM project ("Transparent European Accreditation decisions and Mutual recognition agreements") eight comparative analyses among quality assurance agencies across Europe were carried out.*

exchanged, the ECA templates (structured according to the topics mentioned above) were filled in by each organisation and after an exchange of the drafts of the comparative analyses a joint meeting was organised in Vienna on March 28, 2007.

The meeting proved to be very important, since in the course of the discussion of and work on the drafts of the comparative analyses, open issues and questions could be clarified and national differences could be made transparent and discussed in more detail, thus appreciating the "anomalous" element in the workings of European quality assurance agencies.

Building up trust - lessons learned

As one can see, the aim of this venture was to identify the most striking common features and most surprising differences in the frameworks of European quality assurance agencies in order to assess whether the respective standards meet a level of quality assurance, which allows mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. If no substantial differences were identified (i.e., neither the accreditation standards used nor the procedures applied caused concern regarding mutual recognition of accreditation decisions) the outcome was clear. In the case of substantial differences there was the need to propose a way forward, in order to reach the goal of mutual recognition. In any way, the systematic comparisons carried out within the TEAM project provided deeper insights and an understanding of different external quality assurance systems and served as an engine for promoting mutual trust, since national differences could be made transparent and discussed in more detail. Thus, the joint meeting was helpful to discuss open questions and clarify crucial points and should therefore constitute an integral part of the procedure. On the other hand, it was also important to advance internal communication (within your own agency) and get feedback in order to assure broad acceptance of the outcomes of the comparative analyses. Moreover, the methodology of systematically comparing different accreditation frameworks also helped to identify own strengths and weaknesses and can thus serve as an engine for improving your own external quality assurance framework.

All in all, the methodology of comparative analyses can best be seen as an enriching endeavour, which enhances your understanding of different as well as your own framework and helps you get to know national peculiarities. Conceived in such a way and carried out with the perspective in mind that there is always room for improving your own system and not sticking too slavishly to the underlying measure (representing the standard of comparison, which defines the deviation, the "anormal"), such procedures are definitely worth being carried out and have the potential of fostering mutual trust, since it provides you with insights into different accreditation frameworks and helps you to re-adjust, if sensible, your own framework by learning from other agencies.

So let us conclude with another citation from the book we have mentioned in our introduction: "We sorcerers know quite well that the contradictions are real but that real contradictions are not just for laughs."[8] Thus, regarding the work of quality assurance agencies it can be said that in order to fully comprehend their workings and advance mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions, one has to, apart from identifying common grounds and similarities, appreciate the differences of national education systems and policies, which are reflected in the workings of quality assurance agencies across Europe. When adopting an approach that puts too much strain on and gives priority to formal procedures and standards, we are in danger of gradually minimising the role of trust and professional judgement.[9] Because one has to keep in mind that "trust […] is a necessary component of any form of assessment and can only be developed over time through regular collaboration between peers"[10] and that "over-specification […] can lead only to the trivialisation of outcomes and a lowering of standards." [11]

Without doubt, it represents a difficult and sensitive undertaking, but it lives up to the different cultural environments and national contexts in which different types of higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies operate. Thus, apart from identifying positions, which can be perceived as "anormal" in the sense that they are "outside rules"[12], one has to appreciate that "there is still room for something else"[13] and

8 *Deleuze / Guattari, 2004, p. 269.*

9 *See Young / Gordon, 2007, p. 440.*

10 *Young, 2007. p. 454.*
11 *Ibid.*

12 *Of course the author is quite aware of the fact that the ECA Code of Good Practice can not be seen as (enforcing) rules, but rather as guidelines. Nevertheless, they are in a way closer to the term "anormal" in the dichotomy brought forward by Deleuze / Guattari (2004).*

13 *Deleuze / Guattari, 2004, p. 262.*

not to reject something fundamental which can be named as the anomalous, but to highlight the set of positions in an ever changing multiplicity. Perceived in such a way, comparative analyses constitute an important step in enhancing mutual recognition and are part and parcel of reaching the aim of a common but diversified European Higher Education Area.

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2.3. Mutual observations

2.3.1. Mutual observations: the experiences of PKA and NVAO

Guy Aelterman (NVAO)

In the context of the mutual recognition (of accreditation decisions) project of ECA, a delegation of the NVAO, undertook in the spring of 2007 a site visit to Poland, visiting the Polish State Accreditation Committee PKA and the University of Warsaw. From a methodological perspective, attention was paid to the evaluation system as such and to the applied procedures and methods. At the University of Warsaw the NVAO delegation observed the peer review of the ''Informatics and Economics'' master programme.

The system
Contradictory to what NVAO is doing, the evaluation panel is immediately appointed by PKA self, specifically by the Secretary-General on proposition of the ''Section Council''.

Observation Of the System

Model	NVAO	PKA
Ministerial desicion	No	Ministerial desicion
Accreditation desicion	Board NVAO	Presidium PKA + Section Committee
Peer review	Independent panel appointed by Independent QAA	Independent panel appointed by SG/ Section Committee
Self evaluation	In university On programm level	In university On programm level
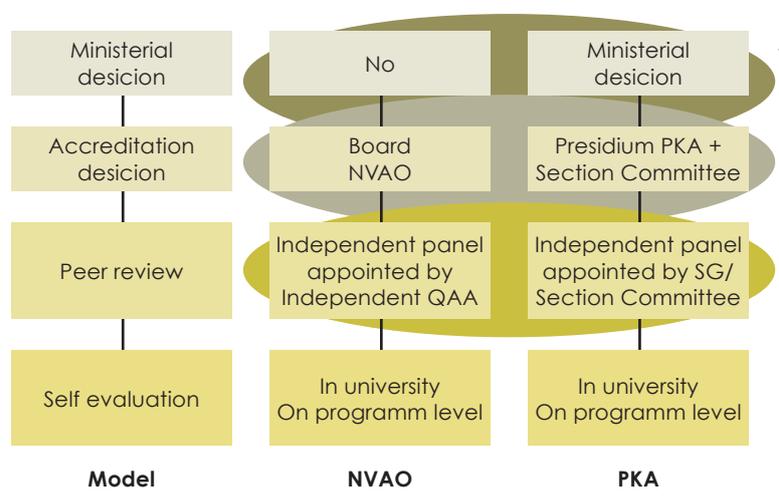
The panel report gives factual descriptions of the site visit observations and does not include judgements. On basis of this report, the corresponding Section Council formulates an assessment proposal and its justification. This proposal is presented to the Presidium which considers the Section Council's proposal and its substantiation. The Presidium votes on the final resolution of the assessment. The decision is taken by a majority vote. The final decision on accreditation's consequences is made by the Minister of Science and Higher Education but the Minister does not have the right to change or influence the content of resolutions adopted by the PKA.

This is different as to what NVAO is doing. In the case of NVAO, the external assessments are carried out by assessment panels set up by separate quality assessment agencies (QAAs). These QAAs operate according to the NVAO's accreditation framework and the QAA protocol. The assessment process is carried independently of NVAO. Finally, the NVAO board decides on base of the assessment report of the independent panel.

Both systems, the Polish and the Dutch-Flemish, are different but the main principles of self-evaluation, assessment by an independent panel and a final, independent decision are in line with the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance.

Procedures and methods

Looking at the self-evaluation, a special point of attention is the description of the domain specificity of the programme, in the case of Poland the subject profiles. In the Polish system the core of each programme is defined by law, as all diplomas awarded are state diplomas. Part of this definition is the educational profile of a graduate, which indirectly refers to the Dublin descriptors. PKA has to take into account the fact that the Polish government has drawn up education profiles (in 118 subjects). In the Netherlands and Flanders, higher education institutions can draw up the intended learning outcomes autonomously. As such, this difference is not so surprising and exceptional. Important is that the aims and objectives of a programme are in line with the expectation of stakeholders, industrial and scientific world and that the relation between those objectives and the curricula or the intended learning outcomes is clear and realistic.

The Dutch-Flemish accreditation framework consists of one comprehensive document set up by the NVAO. The Polish accreditation framework consists of two separate parts: a set of state laws setting legal standards and a set of PKA resolutions, defining quality standards. The PKA can elaborate these standards.

Supported by a self-evaluation report, including the subject profile, a site visit by an expert panel is organised.
In this Polish system the panel is appointed by the Secretary-General of the PKA on proposal of the Section Council (SC). The PKA has 11 Sector Councils , each linked to a specific domain or subject. The chair of the review panel is member of a SC. The panel includes a student and academic peers but no stakeholders from the professional field. Between the panel members , there is a task division and each member makes an individual report that at the end of the review is integrated in one, non public paper.
The site visit includes:
1. A class observation.
2. An inspection of the teaching resources (classes, laboratories, other facilities).
3. An inspection of a library and reading room.
4. An examination of the syllabi, curricula as well as documentation related to studies.
5. Teachers allocated to teach specific classes and courses, teaching load and personal files of academic teachers.
6. Files of students and graduates.
7. An examination of diploma thesis and end-of-term papers.
8. An inspection of social facilities, a meeting with academic teachers, who provide courses at the field of study.
9. A meeting with students of a given field of study.
10. A meeting with the higher education institution administrative staff responsible for maintaining documentation concerning studies and human resources.
11. A meeting with the higher education institution authorities as well as the authorities of the basic organisational unit responsible for the provision of the assessed field of study in order to present the results of the site visit.

The final paper or panel report gives factual descriptions and does not include judgements. The corresponding Section formu-

lates the final assessment proposal and its justification. This proposal is presented to the Presidium. As the NVAO delegation could see, the discussion in the Sector Council is open and objective and emphasises the consistence of the proposal. The PKA Presidium considers the Section's proposal and its substantiation and votes on the final resolution on the assessment. The decision is taken by a majority vote. The discussion in the Presidium emphasises the necessity of consistent, comparable and comprehensive assessment and accreditation decisions. Accreditation cannot be granted if the assessment decision is negative. The Presidium of PKA adopts the final resolution which is presented to the Minister. The final decision on accreditation's consequences is made by the Minister of Science and Higher Education but the Minister does not have the right to change or influence the content of resolutions adopted by the PKA. Only accredited programmes are allowed by law. The consequences of non-accreditation are severe: it influences the public funding (but there are additional public funds in the case of outstanding accreditation); can lead to the suspension of enrolment in a given field of study; or to the revoking of the right to offer a given field of study.

To conclude and having in mind that:
- there is mutual trust;
- both partners accept a certain diversity of criteria and procedures;
- both partners accept mutual verification of data and results.

And having passed through the different steps in the ECA procedures for mutual recognition, the NVAO came to the conclusion that there were no substantial differences between the accreditation process of both agencies. The procedures and methods of both agencies were transparent and carefully designed. Moreover, the accreditation consequences and decisions were comparable. This led finally to an agreement of mutual recognition between PKA and NVAO, signed at the Barcelona conference in December 2007.

2.3.2. Observation on NVAO's initial accreditation procedure
Mieczyslaw W. Socha (PKA)

The reflections stated below were based on my participation as an observer in an initial accreditation done by NVAO experts' panel on 4th September 2007 in the Universiteit van Amsterdam. The subject of the assessment was the Master European Private Law in English, a one year programme offered by The Faculty of Law. This programme aims at training students in European private law in such a way that they are attractive to both commercial practice, public institutions and legal academia. The proposed programme has been tested as an (English spoken) European private Law track within the registered Master's programme "Private Law" (privaatrechtelijke rechtspraktijk).

The NVAO (Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie) as the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders is responsible for accreditation, initial accreditation, assessment of research, recognition of private institutions and the higher education register. The framework for the accreditation of new programmes is based on NVAO published principles of the accreditation procedure which is called Initial Accreditation. NVAO set a special accreditation procedure for new higher education programmes, that consists of three stages: self-evaluation (information file), external assessment and site visit, and finally the decision. This procedure covers NVAO's standards and criteria organised into six themes and has been described in the "Initial Accreditation Framework" (14 February 2003). The NVAO takes an initial accreditation decision based on an external assessment, which is commissioned by the NVAO. The external assessment focuses on the learning outcomes. The site visit at the higher education institution is a part of this assessment and results in a panel report. All programmes which demand to be financed from public funds have to receive the NVAO accreditation.

The assessment panel was composed in line with NVAO requirements and with respect to four aspects: independence, expertise, comprehensiveness, authority. The independence of the assessment panel is monitored by the NVAO prior to the assessment procedure. The panel members and secretaries signed a prescribed statement of independence. The expert panel consisted of five members, including an external secretary and a NVAO policy advisor. In the observed case the experts' panel was truly international. Members of the experts' panel are well known in the field of European private law. The selected experts have an excellent record of academic and policy advising and consulting achievements. They have been involved in NVAO accreditation practices, and have an international experience in teaching in Belgium, Germany and the UK. Because of the peculiarity of the initial accreditation procedure (the establishing of a new programme), the representative of students and employers was not included in the experts' panel, however, they were present in the group of HEI representatives.

Before the pre site-visit meeting, each expert sent to NVAO's policy advisor comments and remarks concerning the self-documentation material (called "Information file"). During the preparatory meeting the experts panel discussed a long (8 pages) list of questions - ordered by assessment themes, standards and criteria - to be asked during the site visit. As a result of the meeting the institution was asked to provide some additional materials at the time of the site visit. Each member of the panel perfectly knew his tasks and the work was well organised. The external secretary was asked to write the assessment report. The first draft of the panel report was to be ready for further comments and additions from the panel experts within one week (!).

During the site visit the experts met the rector, dean, programme management and faculty members involved in realisation of the programme. All questions asked by the experts were formulated in a rigorous and clear way and focused on the elimination of some inconsistencies in the proposed programme, or on identification of missing points. Improvement of the relationship between the intended learning objectives and

the designed curricula was also an important topic for discussion. The answers provided by the management and academic staff were clear and exhaustive. Exchange of opinions between the experts and the faculty representatives sometimes was converting into a scientific seminar on the conceptions of teaching of the current European law. The very interesting point of the visit – as one could expect - was the meeting with the students who honestly and spontaneously pointed out strong and weak points of the assessed programme .

A very impressive part of the accreditation was how the experts assessed the correspondence between the aims and objectives and the intended learning outcomes (exit skills) and the curriculum and courses. In particular experts were very sensitive to what extent the courses are relevant to the current European private law practices and the extent to which the programme differs from other similar programmes offered in Europe. Also, they very carefully assessed labour demand driven aspects of the proposed programme (an important part of the procedure was the meeting with labour market representatives from the Ministry of Justice, law company and the university research institute). The typical questions were: how does the profile of the programme fit to the labour market? What kinds of employers are you targeting; why do you think the programme is appealing to Dutch students? Where do you presume most alumni will end up; why would non-EU students participate in this study? Is this one-year-master's programme suitable to train researchers (to develop research skills)? What kind of competencies do law companies expect from graduates of this programme? Naturally other standards concerning the quality of teaching staff, internal quality assurance system, teaching infrastructure, students assessment, diploma thesis, tutoring, condition of continuity (graduation guarantee, investments, financial provisions) were deeply examined. During the on-site visit experts had sometimes different perspectives on the contents of the European Private Law program or its particular components. However, they fully respected the provided explanations of the proposed structure and contents of the programme. Although the experts' panel did not formulate any direct recommendations to the

programme, nevertheless some comments were made. One of the examples of this was the suggestion to employ foreign professors providing different perspectives on current issues in European private law.

After each meeting the experts summarised and assessed answers and modified their strategy for the next meeting. The panel formulated its preliminary assessments per theme and standard immediately after the site visit (voting on each standard and criteria and theme). The standards need to be assessed by the panel on a two-points scale: 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory'. According to the Initial Accreditation Framework the programme must score satisfactory on all six themes.

From the observer's point of view the quality standards and criteria used for the initial accreditation procedure correspond to European good practices, i.e. ECA Code of Good Practice, ENQA Standards and Guidelines, Dublin descriptors etc. They are published and all important stakeholders are involved in the process of their formulation. The responsibility for quality improvement rests primarily with the institution that offers the programme and is achieved jointly by professors, employers and managers in developing quality awareness. NVAO plays a role in this,

stimulating the debate on quality enhancement and assurance.

This experience compared with the Polish procedure of initial accreditation reveals some differences like: another structure of assessment criteria and standards and, above all, a higher level of operationalisation of the final qualifications in the programme curriculum, also taking more frequently advantage of the foreign experts knowledge and employees' experience in the accreditation process. On the other hand, the standards and criteria, methods and procedures, steps of accreditation, experts' selection rules, and focus on the programme accreditation are very similar to those applied by PKA. Furthermore, in my opinion, the practice of the accreditation proceedings of NVAO and PKA is even more similar than the formal solutions are. Participation in such ventures promotes convergence of both accreditation systems as some of the Dutch solutions (first of all the analysis of the intended qualifications in the curricula and courses) were incorporated in the new PKA's guidelines concerning preparations of the self-assessment report, site-visit report, role of the foreign experts' and employers' in the assessment of the quality of education. As a result there is a solid basis for mutual recognition of accreditation decisions issued by both agencies.

2.4. Joint accreditation procedures

Laura Beccari (OAQ) and Bernard Remaud (CTI)

Both intergovernmental and supranational political processes in Europe highlight the importance of the promotion of cooperation between agencies in order to build up mutual trust in view of the recognition of quality assurance and accreditation assessments. This would contribute to the recognition of qualifications for the purpose of study or work in another country.
It is in this context that two ECA member agencies, namely the OAQ (the Center of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities) and the CTI (Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur, France) underwent a pilot project representing the most advanced degree of cooperation and common understanding between agencies, resulting in

the joint accreditation of 14 Masters courses offered by the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology of Lausanne, Switzerland.
As a precondition for pioneering in the first joint accreditation, the compliance by the two agencies with the European Standards and Guidelines, the ECA Code of Good Practice and the ECA Principles for the Selection of Experts has been of crucial relevance.
A comparative analysis of the procedures and criteria for the assessment applied by the two agencies has been carried out in a first phase, as 'feasibility instrument'. The common features of the accreditation procedures of OAQ and the habilitation procedure of CTI can be summarised as follows:
• Both CTI and OAQ are public authorities

created by law and operate in full independence.

- Assessment may concern a degree course/programme. It is granted at the end of a three-step process: self-evaluation, on-site visit, decision-making. It is valid for a finite period of time and has to be renewed periodically.
- Both the CTI and the OAQ can assess the integrated 5-year course leading to the title 'ingénieur diplômé' (CTI) or "Master of Science" or "Master of Arts" (OAQ).
- Both CTI habilitation and OAQ accreditation are based on a positive quality assessment of the degree course/programme, which itself requires a self-evaluation report of the degree course by the institution, and an on-site visit by an external panel of experts.
- The assessment uses a set of predetermined and publicly available quality criteria. These sets are defined by the CTI/OAQ.
- Both agencies have own developed and publicly available instruments.
- Both agencies provide the HEI with a guide for the self-evaluation. Emphasis is placed on the measures taken in order to foster continuous improvement.
- Both agencies signed the ECA Principles for the Selection of Experts, thus assuring the competence and impartiality of the team and applying strict rules for the selection and independence of experts.

However, a few differences have been identified:

- Accreditation of OAQ concerns all higher education degree programmes/institutions, whereas habilitation of CTI concerns only engineering degree courses. The main consequence of this difference is the way the 'discipline specific requirements' are dealt with. For the CTI the discipline specific criteria are an integrated part of its general assessment framework, for the OAQ the discipline specific criteria are operationalised at the level of the evaluation agency and the assessment panel.
- In the CTI procedures, the assessment panel consists primarily of CTI members, whereas in the OAQ procedure the assessment panel consists of external experts, who are accompanied by an OAQ scientific collaborator.
- In the CTI procedure, the habilitation is granted for 6 years in case of a positive

assessment; a negative assessment or the detection of serious shortcomings leads to a shorter habilitation period of 1, 2 or 3 years, depending on the seriousness of the shortcomings; only after this period habilitation can be withdrawn. In the OAQ procedure the accreditation is granted for 7 years if it is unconditional. The same applies to conditional accreditation, provided the conditions are met within the stipulated period.

- In the CTI procedure, only the decision itself is made public, not the assessment report. The experts write a 'rapport de mission'. It is summarized in a document, which is given and commented orally at the plenary session of a CTI meeting, where the final decision is made. The decision and the recommendations are communicated to the institution through a letter from the Ministry[14]. In the OAQ procedure, the expert assessment report and the OAQ final report (leading to the accreditation decision taken by the Swiss University Conference) are public documents, unless the institution expresses its opposition.

The comparison enlightened the high degree of compatibility of the procedures and criteria for the assessment applied by the two agencies, thus allowing to combine an OAQ accreditation procedure with a CTI habilitation procedure in the assessment of engineering degree courses. In other words, no substantial differences were found, preventing to carry out the procedure together, with separate final decisions.

In the implementation phase, a main instrument has been developed: an ad hoc grid with equivalency of CTI/OAQ qualitative standards ordered by common themes. Such model served as a structure for both the self-evaluation report and the external evaluation report. A mixed panel of experts was created, with some members recruited by the OAQ and some identified by the CTI. A jointly coordinated site-visit of five days took place, resulting in a common external evaluation report. This resource-saving procedure ended by parallel and simultaneous decision-making processes, however separate. Based on the same documents, decisions were fully compatible although not strictly identical. In this way, CTI and OAQ found the preconditions for the signing of a mutual recognition agreement.

2.5. **Mutual recognition agreements**

Mark Frederiks (ECA Coordinator; NVAO)

In June 2003, twelve accreditation organisations from eight European countries met in The Hague. They agreed to co-operate in a new European consortium of accreditation organisations. Their ultimate aim would be to strive for the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions by the end of 2007. There were not many experts in the field of quality assurance who thought this would be possible. It was at a time when European Ministers had just started the groundwork for a European dimension to quality assurance. The work on the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance and the European Register for quality assurance agencies had not commenced, it was not even mentioned by Ministers at that time. There had been calls in the Prague Communique (2001) for "mutual trust in and acceptance of national quality assurance systems", but no one knew how to achieve this.

Frankly, the members that formed the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) did not know how to achieve it either when they started formally by signing an Agreement of Cooperation in Cordóba in November 2003. The approach how to come to mutual recognition had to be invented from scratch. It involved many working papers and discussions in ECA working groups and workshops. It started with surveys of the structure of the accreditation organisations, the procedures ECA members were carrying out, and a broad outline of the standards and criteria they employed. This led to the conviction that, in spite of the differences, the organisations had enough in common to continue their journey. Gradually, a road map towards mutual recognition was carved out. As an evaluation by the end of 2004 showed, it was this clear time table with expected results, as well as the benefits of a not too large and not too diverse group of agencies, that was crucial for success.

A first milestone on the road map was the Code of Good Practice that set 17 standards which ECA members agreed to implement in 2006 and to be externally reviewed against in 2007. This Code of Good Practice was signed in December 2004, before the finalisation of the ENQA European Standards and Guidelines, and its subsequent adoption by the Ministers in Bergen in May 2005. It was no coincidence that the Code of Good Practice mostly overlapped with the European Standards and Guidelines for external quality assurance agencies. In September 2005, the ENQA Board acknowledged the correspondence between the European standards for external quality assurance agencies and the ECA code of good practice. The implication was that the external reviews could combine evaluations against both set of standards.

A second milestone was the agreement on Principles for the selection of experts in June 2005. These Principles still constitute an unique European agreement on selection procedures and composition of expert panels. It may well pave the way for possible future developments like a European training programme and a pool of experts.

In 2005, representatives of ENIC/NARICs in the ECA countries started to join ECA meetings. This co-operation was quite important because it brought the connection between the recognition of accreditation decisions and the recognition of qualifications to the fore. It resulted in a new milestone, namely a Joint Declaration which was signed by both accreditation organisations and ENIC/NARICs. In 2006, six countries were signatories of this agreement which promotes an almost "automatic" recognition of qualifications based on mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.

An intermediate step towards mutual recognition was taken in 2006, when ECA members agreed to consider the respective accreditation tools and instruments as compatible and free of substantial differences. This was put to the test in 2005, 2006 and especially in 2007, when many co-operation activities between ECA members proved that accreditation procedures, standards and results were free of significant differences. A few experiences with these in-depth comparisons, mutual observations, and joint accreditations were highlighted in the previ-

ous sections in this Chapter. The reports of these comparisons and mutual observations were accessible to everyone in ECA, and they were also discussed in several ECA meetings. It goes without saying that these practical experiences made a large contribution to the eventual signing of mutual recognition agreements. Many agencies took the availability of a positive experience with an in-depth comparison and observation as prerequisites for signing a mutual recognition agreement.

From the start of ECA there had been, apart from the benefits the co-operation in ECA would bring to the agencies themselves, two important "external" reasons to strive for mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. One was to facilitate the European mobility of students and graduates by recognising the accreditation, and therefore the quality of the obtained or to be obtained foreign qualification. A second reason was the increasing number of joint programmes. These joint programmes are subject to the national quality assurance procedures of the participating institutions. By mutually recognising accreditation decisions one would be able to overcome obstacles concerning multiple accreditation procedures. Mutual recognition would make it a lot easier for institutions to set up joint programmes, and for students to move freely between institutions, without having to worry about the quality of the programme or the recognition of the resulting qualification (particularly if the Joint declaration would apply). ECA members quickly agreed that, in spite of the complexities of joint programmes, these should be part of mutual recognition agreements. In order to increase trust and transparency, however, it was important to come to a set of Principles for accreditation procedures regarding joint programmes. These principles were agreed in June 2007, and the expectation is that these principles can also be useful for the accreditation of joint programmes when there is no mutual recognition agreement between the agencies involved.

By the end of 2007, the dissemination conference in Barcelona brought two major achievements. One was the development of an on-line information tool for accreditation decisions, resulting in the demonstration of the website Qrossroads.eu (see Chapter 6). The other was the actual signing of the mutual

recognition agreements, thereby fulfilling the bold promise made in the ECA Agreement of Cooperation. The agreements can be downloaded from: http://www.ecaconsortium. net/conference/documents2.php.

At the conference in Barcelona, the following twelve mutual recognition agreements involving eight ECA member countries were signed:
- AAC (Austria) - NOKUT (Norway)*
- AAC (Austria) - NVAO (Netherlands and Flanders)*
- AAC (Austria) - OAQ (Switzerland)*
- AAC (Austria) - PKA (Poland)*
- FHR (Austria) - NOKUT (Norway)*
- FHR (Austria) - NVAO (Netherlands and Flanders)*
- CTI (France) - NVAO (Netherlands and Flanders)
- CTI (France) - OAQ (Switzerland)
- NOKUT (Norway) - NVAO (Netherlands and Flanders)*
- NVAO (Netherlands and Flanders)- OAQ (Switzerland)*
- NVAO (Netherlands and Flanders) - PKA (Poland)*
- OAQ (Switzerland) - ANECA (Spain).

These agreements have been signed by accreditation organizations that are signatories to the "Joint declaration concerning the automatic recognition of qualifications". Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions is one of the preconditions for "automatic" recognition of qualifications between these countries.

In addition, the following four letter of intents were signed:
- CTI (France) - ANECA (Spain)
- NOKUT (Norway) - OAQ (Switzerland)
- NVAO (Netherlands and Flanders) - ANECA (Spain)
- PKA (Poland) - OAQ (Switzerland).

These letter of intents include the intention to sign a mutual recognition agreement once a comparison of the frameworks of the agencies (and mutual observations) has been made. So the lack of such a comparison (or observation) was the main reason for not signing an agreement at the time of the conference.

The core of the mutual recognition agreements is that "the signing accreditation or-

ganisations agree to regard their accreditation procedures, standards and decisions or results as free of significant differences; and confirm that within their competences they accept the decisions or results of the accreditation procedures of the other signing organisation." There are some conditions attached to the agreements. One concerns a continuous information exchange, especially about changes in the accreditation system. In the other it is agreed to give each other access to all relevant documents relating to the accreditation decisions. The agreement is valid for 3 years and can be extended.

This first wave of mutual recognition agreements is not meant to be the last. In 2008 ECA has renewed itself to work, in addition to new goals, towards expanding mutual recognition and fully implementing the existing agreements. Many challenges lay ahead: changes in several accreditation systems put the firmness of the agreements to the test; institutions and students need to experience the benefits of mutual recognition, particu-larly with regard to joint programmes which requires an extension of agencies involved. Several questions arise: is it possible to streamline the ECA methodology so that it takes less time for newcomers to enter into mutual recognition? Can bilateral agreements be replaced with multilateral agreements? Can the co-operation with ENIC/NARICS be intensified and the Joint Declaration be expanded? Is Qrossroads.eu capable to fulfil its promise as the on-line search tool for both accreditation decisions and qualifications, thereby crossing the roads of accreditation and recognition of qualifications?

And further ahead in time: can ECA's approach to mutual recognition be transferred to other quality assurance agencies, perhaps even to the whole of the European Higher Education Area? Could ECA's work serve as a bridge to other continents that are working on mutual recognition as well (see Chapter 5)? Is there a bright future for mutual recognition agreements across continents?

One thing is certain: the work on mutual recognition is not finished. It has just begun.

chapter 3:

Stakeholders perspectives on mutual recognition

3.1. Bridging accreditation and recognition: can mutual recognition facilitate the work of recognition bodies?

Marianne Cox (Nuffic) and Erwin Malfroy (NARIC Flanders)

The recognition of higher education qualifications in Europe has undergone significant changes of perspective over the last 50 years and this has quite naturally affected the work of the recognition bodies. In the 'early' days, recognition was based upon an approach in terms of equality. Mobility was not yet a hot topic and there were relatively small scale actors in the recognition field. Nowadays the scope has shifted to other modes of thinking, instruments and bodies in a response to a highly diversified field of education and a growing focus on individualized learning paths and consumer needs.
Therefore, actors in the field of recognition now face a diverse and more complex set of demands, both at the level of policy and in practice. The need to shape the diversity now on offer and organize the transparency required to convince and guarantee trust, calls for new approaches and methodologies to safeguard the integrity of the system.

Essential questions also relate to the shift of focus from the system to the consumer: How do we meet the diversified consumer needs and how do we protect these consumer-oriented needs?

Within the climate of increasing international competitiveness and mobility in higher education the greatest challenges are posed by the need to safeguard standards and quality - and thus the integrity - of the system. Where national legislation and governmental regulations once provided comforting guarantees, a change of perspective has affected the assessment of qualification and programs.
There is greater call for (individual) account-

ability, international accepted standards, now often laid down in codes of good practice, benchmarking and most importantly: transparency of information, procedures and decisions.

An notable response to the complex problem of diversity is manifest in the shift away from thinking in terms of education to that of learning, and instruments are developed accordingly. The most explicit feature here is undoubtedly the shift in thinking from input to output, expressed in terms of competencies and learning outcomes rather that educational program building blocks and integrated programs.

Traditionally, important instruments in the field of recognition have always been the bilateral or multilateral agreements which served as the basis for the recognition and acceptance of qualifications amongst countries. These agreements, originally based upon course to course matching and specification of qualifications, have now become flexible frameworks that provide tools to manage the process rather than prescribe the decisions. The most important international agreement in the field of academic[15] recognition is the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) of the Council of Europe and UNESCO. It is now signed by 52 countries and ratified by 48 countries.[16]

In the field of professional recognition the most important agreements are laid down in the European Directives on the recognition of qualifications in view of access to the labor market. The most recent one - which encom-

15 *Academic recognition is geared to the recognition of qualification (mostly) in view of further study.*

16 *Including 7 countries who are not members of the Council of Europe.*

passes all previous directives on professional recognition - is the EC directive 2005/36/EC.

The first agreements date back to the 1950s and the 1960s and were based upon course by course matching following a harmonization model. It was known as the procedure to establish equivalence. Examples are agreements like the European Convention on access qualifications (1953) and the Sectoral directives for the medical professions, veterinary doctors, pharmacists and architects, and others.

In the course of time the notion of 'equivalence' shifted to the notion of 'recognition' of a qualification fit for purpose. Credential evaluators focus on five elements that define a qualification: level, workload, quality, profile and learning outcomes and this approach implies that an assessment may vary in cases where purposes are different.

The formal agreements both in academic and professional recognition have led to flexible formal frameworks based upon shared principles:

1. mutual trust in each others educational systems
2. case-by-case evaluation
3. the finished product meets minimum requirements
4. the burden of proof is reversed: not the applicant but the receiver must provide evidence for recognition or non-recognition. Recognition is granted unless a substantial difference is shown.
5. recognition is given respecting differences: not any difference should be considered 'substantial'

Substantial differences can still be identified and lead to non-recognition or non-acceptance of a qualification. Yet, 'substantial' has to be in relation to the function of the qualification and the purpose for which recognition is sought. Not any difference will be considered a 'substantial' difference. Credential evaluators nowadays accept differences and even the existence of a substantial difference does not mean the qualification may still not be recognized.

In the substantial difference discussion the different general attitudes to recognition come to the fore. On the one hand there is the protective attitude, generally very legalistic in nature that reflects a standpoint to uphold one's own national educational system and standards. Basically, this is still the 'equivalence' attitude. On the other hand, there is what is known as the more 'common sensical' attitude which reflects an approach geared to the consumer. This 'acceptance' attitude reflects the intention to provide as much opportunity as possible for the applicant to attain the purpose for which the recognition is sought. The attitude is flexible yet cautious, particularly in the case of professional recognition. For in the latter the protection of the general public may be at stake, for instance in the acceptance of qualifications in the (para) medical fields.

In all the changes that have been taking place the role of the quality granting authority also changed. Whereas in the 'early days' quality of qualification ('accreditation' if you will) was guaranteed by law in many countries in Europe, accreditation bodies are becoming part of the spectrum to an increasing extent. It has lead not only to
different approaches in the assessment of quality but also to the widening of the field for programsme and institutions which before remained 'outside the system'.

The discussion on substantial differences is still very much on the agenda. In this discussion the issue of accreditation and quality assessment play a pivotal role.
If we accept that accreditation reflects the public accountability for the provision of quality, agreements among accreditation organizations could play a role in the acceptance and recognition of qualifications, because it guarantees the minimum level of quality of a given degree.
For the recognition bodies these developments have not only further professionalized the field but also furthered the call for new instruments and approaches. If programmes are considered of good quality but this is not reflected in the award of a national degree but by a guarantee of an (independent) accreditation body a new question arises: who vouches for the quality of this body?

International cooperation and agreement on accreditation decisions amongst accreditation bodies, could provide important information and tools for the recognition bodies to

include in their work.

The members of ECA believe that mutual recognition of accreditation decisions will contribute to the recognition of qualifications in higher education and the mobility of students and graduates in Europe.

This cooperation and these agreements should, however, operate and be legitimated at a national level to be useful. The nature of the agreements would need to be far reaching linking directly to (the levels described) in the national qualification frameworks.

For recognition bodies this might lead to new ways of dealing with qualifications which are not directly part of a state system and at the same time, provide a better response to privately funded programmes in higher education. If the agreements on accreditation deci-sions become a nationally accepted guarantee for the provisions of quality, this will imply that in the process of recognition of a foreign qualification quality and level is assured. The credential evaluators will in those cases only need to concern themselves with the possible substantial differences in workload, profile and the learning outcomes.

Mutual acceptance of accreditation decisions evolves as one of the new instruments to face the challenge of retreating governmental top-down influence in the field of recognition and a new and more open market with more autonomous (private) institutions. It faces the challenge in the quality discussion in the growing diversity of provisions and providers in higher education and provides a response to the changing regulating framework across the borders of educational systems in Europe.

3.2. How can mutual recognition enhance joint programmes and international co-operation between HEIs?

Nick Harris (QAA – UK) and Josep Grifoll Sauri (AQU – Catalunya)

Summary

This paper summarises the presentation to, and discussions of, a workshop held at the ECA Barcelona Conference (December 2007). Some examples of the quality assurance of joint (international) programmes were presented, and the subsequent development of the ECA principles, and their complimentary relationship with the EUA guidelines for the quality enhancement of European Joint Masters programmes, outlined. An overview of the discussions, and the issues and questions that arose, is included. Some additional perspectives made during discussions are also included covering current barriers to the accreditation of joint programmes, possible future work to overcome these, and the potential of ECA as a consortium to 'add value' to the work of its members involved individually or collaboratively in the evaluation of (international) joint programmes, are also included.

Introduction

Amongst the developments made by the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) for its members are a Code of Good Practice[17], Principles for the selection of experts[18] and, because of an increasing interest in and development of joint programmes particularly within a European trans-national framework, some Principles for the accreditation procedures regarding joint programmes[19]. The last were developed to assist members where joint programmes are being delivered by two or more HEIs in different 'quality assurance jurisdictions'. The different legal arrangements and complexities in different European members states, and the different conditions and rights associated with HE awards leads to the inevitable conclusion that it is only possible at this stage to consider shared approaches to the quality assurance of joint programmes irrespective of the type of award (dual, joint, multiple) that ensues. But ECA members were agreed that it would be helpful to set out

a statement of shared principles irrespective of an particular approach and methodology used for accreditation.

The ECA Principles for the accreditation of joint programmes (2007) are intended to be applicable to all types of accreditation. The Principles cover:

- Information sharing and transparency
- The composition of expert panels
- The assessment process
- The accreditation decision

with specific contents to cover accreditation at programme and at institutional levels. The principles for accreditation at institutional level include the important additional perspective of the introduction of new joint programmes by an already accredited institution.

As background to their discussions, delegates at the ECA Barcelona (December 2007) conference workshop were given an overview of experiences from the second Trans-European Evaluation Project (TEEP II) which looked at three Erasmus Mundus joint masters programmes, and the accreditation procedures undertaken for a joint masters delivered in the Netherlands and the UK. TEEP II was initiated in 2004 and a concluding report was published in 2006[20].

Focussing on two of the three programmes looked at in TEEP II (EuroAqae on hydro-informatics, and CoMundus on media) the main 'messages' that came from this TEEP pilot project on evaluation of trans-national joint masters were that:

1) The start-up period of a new programme, in particular, in the case of a joint master programme needs to be treated carefully in terms of QA and enhancement.
2) There is an important role for IC Technologies in education but also when developing internal and external QA mechanisms.
3) The partnership coordination in a joint master programme is fundamental and crucial.
4) The international and local students can play an important role concerning QA enhancement and international reviews.
5) International stakeholders (for example, employers) can contribute significantly in the development of QA mechanisms for and enhancement of joint programmes.

The parallel use of the TEEP evaluation for the required accreditation of the delivery of the CoMundus programme at a German university (undertaken by ZEvA[21]) was a further interesting feature.

The main conclusion from the brief description of the experiences of an accreditation of a joint masters delivered in the Netherlands (where external programme accreditation is required) and the UK (where programme validation is an internal institutional procedure – that includes some externality) was that, whilst institutional procedures were thorough and in line with relevant national / institutional requirements, and also met the ECA principles although these were not a requisite, the duplication of effort – and paperwork – was very substantial. All too often essentially the same information was being provided for each of the local evaluation systems but in subtly different forms.

Having considered the accreditation of joint programmes from 'an agency perspective', the presentation briefly covered 'an institutional perspective' through the European University Association's guidelines (2006)[22] for quality enhancement in European Joint Masters programmes. These cover:

1. co-operation and co-ordination
2. co-ordination on different levels
3. identifying key preconditions
4. curiosity and trust in what is different
5. transparency and honesty
6. trustworthy communication – between all partners
7. sense of common ownership
8. shared academic values – agreed quality principles
9. involvement of all relevant stakeholders
10. quality assurance is a shared and integrated responsibility of the network as well as a responsibility to be taken by each participating institution

So, is it possible to find ways to make quality assurance of joint programmes more efficient whilst still retaining effective rigour? What strategies might be developed? And how might they be implemented? Delegates were asked to consider the ECA principles from the perspective of applicability within their own jurisdictions and experiences trying to focus not, in the first instance, on the detail of the individual terms but on the concepts and expectations that the principles were aiming

20 http://www.enqa.eu/ files/TEEP%20II%20Metho dological%20report.pdf

21 See: http://www.zeva. org/

22 See: http://www.eua. be/index.php?id=62

to cover, and through this identify :
- is there anything that does not really 'work'?
- is there anything missing ? – that would be applicable to all?

It was taken as a given that 'local requirements' might need the principles to be specifically supplemented but where such local 'supplements' were not generic requirements for all they were not 'principles'.

Discussion

Workshop discussions were structured around a series of tests and questions. The first was to test, in the experience of the delegates from a wide range of European agencies, the hypothesis that :
mutual recognition is a 'good thing' for joint programmes (especially in trans-national education) and in the discussion of this address the following questions:
1. how does / can mutual recognition help:
   • improve trans-national QA? from:
     – an agency perspective
     – an institutional perspective
2. do the ECA principles 'work' for you? [the concepts!]
3. is there a further role for ECA re joint programmes? in for example:
   • rationalising / reducing regulation
   • promoting quality in joint programmes
   • promoting information about quality of joint programmes

There was general agreement that mutual recognition is, or at least should be, 'a good thing' with the potential to improve efficiency and effectiveness in the accreditation of joint programmes that span different 'accreditation jurisdictions', but there were some important hurdles to be overcome. Importantly, discussions illustrated a recognition that working agreements could and should reduce 'the bureaucratic burden' both for evaluation agencies and particularly for consortia of HE institutions.

On the 'plus' side was an acknowledgement that the ECA principles do, in terms of their contexts, provide for all of the key shared requirements and expectations, and that there was not anything that was missed by all. Of course, some identified additional details but these were perhaps best regarded as 'refinements on a theme'. But there was

uncertainty about the precise texts of the principles and it became clear that whilst the principles themselves covered the important aspects some form of additional explanation would be valuable. Should this take the form of a glossary? Probably not since glossaries often led to further uncertainty – particularly when translated. Probably better to provide a series of exemplars that demonstrate the practical application of the principles in different contexts.

Discussion inevitably also centred around the EUA guideline:

10. "quality assurance is a shared and integrated responsibility of the network as well as a responsibility to be taken by each participating institution" and how this could be most effectively be met through the various different accreditation procedures being applied by ECA members. The EUA guidelines and the ECA principles were regarded as compatible – the task was to find practical ways to implement them within national / regional legal expectations whilst seeking to avoid duplication or repetition.

The discussions were held in light of the impending signing of a wide range of bilateral mutual recognition agreements between ECA members. In signing such agreements members were also signing up to the principles on the accreditation of joint programmes. It was regarded as desirable that, in the implementation of such agreements, agencies should note their experiences and the benefits and difficulties of working jointly on the accreditation of trans-national joint programmes. There was hope that an evidence base of such experiences could be accumulated, better done if possible in a coordinated way – perhaps through ECA, and that this would provide a background for better understanding and improved implementation of accreditation procedures for joint programmes. It was of course noted that most joint programmes involve more than two partners, and may often include institutions in 'jurisdictions' not covered by ECA members. But an increasing portfolio of experiences should provide a basis for identifying the keys points to ensure that trust be reliably placed in ways that assist ECA members in their work together. It was also important

to ensure that those holding responsibilities for joint programmes (either directly or in a properly delegated manner) are clearly identifiable to key stakeholders (including their students) and that those holding responsibilities are clear about just what these entail and how they should be properly discharged. It was through such actions that ECA could promote quality, quality assurance and quality improvement in European trans-national joint programmes.

Discussion of the role of ECA in promoting information about the quality (assurance) of joint programmes drew various views. All were agreed that information about quality ('transparency') is essential in the promotion of European higher education and that both ECA and its members have an important contribution to make. But how best to make this? Views about the role / value of 'quality labels' in general, never mind about whether ECA should consider specific initiatives were mixed – and firmly held .. and it was at this point that time for discussion ran out.

Conclusion
The workshop ranged over a lot of 'ground'. The ECA principles cover all of the key aspects in the accreditation of European joint programmes; and from a rather short

discussion appear compatible with the EUA guidelines on joint programmes.

In some instances the ECA principles do need to be supplemented by specific local requirements, and there are some hurdles to be overcome in maximising efficiency in the accreditation of joint programmes by agencies working together, particularly with regard to the different ways in which accreditation decisions are 'signed off', and their consequences.

The signing of the numerous bilateral agreements between ECA members offers the opportunity for the collection of 'experiences' in the accreditation of joint programmes, and such a resource should prove valuable in identifying where benefits and gains can be achieved and how increasing levels of trust can be built.

Whilst a reduction in the bureaucratic burden of multiple accreditations for a single programme must be sought, it is important that students and others can be assured that this does not mean that 'the buck' can be passed in uncertain ways. Responsibilities for the coherence, the standards and the quality of joint programmes and their quality assurance must be clearly located and accepted.

3.3. How can mutual recognition validate the work of accreditation and quality assurance agencies?

Laura Beccari (OAQ) and Gemma Rauret (ANECA)

ECA member organisations set 'mutual recognition of assessment results' as ultimate common goal to be reached after the first phase of the project in 2007.

Several concrete actions have been undertaken in the trust-building process aiming at reaching that goal: ECA member organisations established a common 'road map', signed a "Code of good practice" and defined a number of joint instruments promoting mutual trust, such as comparative analysis of procedures and standards, exchange of experts and staff, observation reports, surveys and workshops. They also signed common "principles for the selection of experts" and

"principles for the assessment of joint programmes".

Despite these common goals and instruments, the process resulted in an unexpected variety of positive national and international outcomes even if, paradoxically, the ultimate goal remained sometimes not reached. Therefore, for the purpose of the workshop, mutual recognition was intended in terms of goal reached and/or the process to reach it. Before the working session took place, the three quality assurance agencies leading the workshop shared their experiences regarding their participation in the European Consortium of Accreditation:

The OAQ (Center of accreditation and quality assurance of the Swiss universities) benefited largely from the commonly signed tools and the cooperation projects emanating from them.

Fulfilling the ECA Code of good practice was crucial for its eligibility as member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), due to the Code's similarity with the ENQA membership criteria. At the same time, ECA Principles for the selection of experts gave positive concrete outcomes in the OAQ daily work, enabling it to recruit valuable international experts for its assessment procedures in all fields. Not only, students are now integrated in the expert panels for all OAQ procedures, following the last revision of the national accreditation directives, which was largely influenced by the outcomes of the OAQ cooperation with other QA agencies in the frame of the ECA project. A significant positive national spill over effect concerns the New Swiss Framework Law on Higher Education[23] since its chapter concerning accreditation takes into account most of the developments arising from the OAQ international activities within ECA. In that case, the ECA project not only validates the work of the agency, but contributes to further legitimize its national role and prerogatives. Internal quality assurance of the OAQ could significantly improve thanks to a staff-exchange project carried out with NVAO (Nederlands- Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie) in that field, and one of the first joint-accreditations in Europe took place in the frame of an ECA pilot project between the OAQ and the CTI (Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur, France). The added value arising from a jointly organized procedure was a crucial element for the institution (the Federal Institute of Technology of Lausanne).

The various surveys and comparative ECA projects had a direct impact on the internationalization of the OAQ with regard to the development and continuous improvement of its assessments instruments. That resulted in an increased accountability of its work and in a greater national and international visibility, giving further significance to the OAQ quality seal, particularly with its potential in terms of international recognition.

Altogether, ECA as a project increased the internal validation of the OAQ activities also in terms of self-assurance about the recognition and significance of its work.

For the Spanish National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) the participation in the ECA project has also brought positive impacts to the Agency and to its work. Even though the legal framework for accreditation has been into force only since 2007[24], involvement in the network since the beginning of the Consortium has been a key issue for the development of the accreditation profile in Spain.

In terms of the peer reviews, the exchange of experts among agencies has built trust on the Agency's work inside and outside ANECA, has enriched the accreditation processes and has contributed to nationally fulfil the Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. In that sense, evaluation experts from OAQ, ÖAR, CTI and ACQUIN[25], among others, have participated in several assessment procedures complementing ANECA´s practices with a European perspective on quality assurance. Furthermore, experts from ANECA have, as well, taken part in accreditation processes of other ECA members like OAQ, CTI and ÖAR.

The compromise with the ECA Code of good practice has been of great help in improving the methods and procedures used by the Agency, and has been an interesting reflexion input for the self-evaluation process of the Agency during 2007 for its recognition of full membership at the European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA).

On a different matter, comparative analysis of accreditation criteria and procedures among several ECA members (OAQ, CTI, NVAO, GAC) has contributed to the Agency's deeper reflection on accreditation processes and to build trust between analogous European accreditation bodies.

The newest ECA member, the Polish State Accreditation Committee (PKA), has also benefited from the participation in the Consortium, due to the learning and reflection about accreditation criteria.

During the working session the audience was divided into sub-groups in order to discuss two concrete questions:

1. How can mutual recognition validate the work of accreditation and quality assurance agencies?

23 *Currently under discussion and to be entered into force in 2012.*

24 *Royal Order 1393/2007 that regulates Spanish official university programmes.*

25 *Center of accreditation and quality assurance of the Swiss universities, Austrian Accreditation Council, French Engineering Titles Commission and German Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute.*

2. Are there other ways to reach mutual recognition, despite the various obstacles?

Several ideas were brainstormed regarding the validation of the work of the agencies, predefining 'Validation' as "evidence that the work accomplished by an agency is useful to the objective defined within its own setting and context". Product of the discussion was that mutual recognition increases benchmarking and understanding of what the other quality assurance bodies do, builds trust since it promotes transparency and allows the agencies to talk a common language as far as accreditation is concerned. It also disseminates information, enhances joint learning and reflection on accreditation criteria and procedures and enlarges the credibility of the quality agencies to stakeholders.

Sharing of technical staff between agencies for periods no shorter than a year, exchanging international experts for the peer reviews and preparation of joint conferences are some of the ideas that emerged on the topic of other ways to reach mutual recognition.

After this interesting reflection it can be argued that mutual recognition of assessment decisions legitimates the role of the quality assurance agencies, since it contributes to the recognition of qualifications in higher education and prevents the necessity of multiple accreditations for institutions and programmes operating across borders.

ECA members have expressed that the many cooperation activities that were undertaken to establish the necessary trust for mutual recognition purposes have been as beneficial to ECA members as the mutual recognition agreements themselves. Therefore, there is a need to continue mutual learning by participating in ECA as a platform for cooperation, discussion and dissemination of experiences.

chapter 4: European perspectives

4.1. Mapping the diversity of European higher education

Peter van der Hijden, (head of Sector Higher Education, European Commission, Education and Culture DG)

Introduction

There are more than 4,000 higher education institutions in Europe, with a wide variety of roles, profile and size. We know their overall number, but that is where most of our knowledge ends. We have information about higher education systems, notably thanks to Eurydice (The information network on education in Europe) surveys. But we have very little detailed data about the performance of individual institutions, their missions, tasks or quality of performance. Such information could be very useful for university management, for policy makers at all levels, for students, parents and employers.

This article summarises some of the initiatives recently taken by the Commission, or supported by the Commission through the EU action programmes in education and research to try to measure the performance of Europe's universities.

The Qrossroads database

The European Consortium for Accreditation, ECA, has launched a Commission supported database called Qrossroads (with a Q), which contains quality reviews by agencies, plus summaries called Accreditation Statements. A growing number of agencies are expected to put their reviews on this site, making the quality review exercises accessible to a much wider audience.

The EQAR Register of quality agencies

The European Quality Assurance Register in Higher Education (EQAR) has been launched in March 2008. It lists quality assurance and accreditation agencies which comply with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance adopted by the Bologna Ministers in Bergen in 2005. The Register is backed by both Bologna Ministers and by the EU Recommendation of February 2006, for further cooperation in quality assurance in higher education. We expect the Register to grow, and to become a valuable source of information for students, scholars and other stakeholders within Europe and beyond.

The Tuning project

The Tuning Educational Structures in Europe Project is translating the level descriptors from the European qualifications frameworks (the Bologna Framework for higher education and the EQF for lifelong Learning of the EU) into reference points for a series of subject areas and professions such as history, nursing or mathematics, using the new language of learning outcomes and competences. These sector references will provide a common language for curriculum design, teaching, learning, assessment, recognition and quality assurance. Universities are encouraged to include the intended learning outcomes in their course catalogues and the best ones can be awarded the ECTS label.

With Commission support, the Tuning project has expanded to the Western Balkans, Turkey, Ukraine, Russia and Latin-America.

AHELO, a 'PISA' for higher education

OECD Ministers have met in Tokyo in January 2008 and given their green light for a feasibility study on the "Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes" (AHELO). This could eventually lead to a kind of 'PISA' for higher education. The EU can contribute to this exercise by offering its experience with learning outcomes, gained through the qualifications frameworks and the Tuning project.

Classification of higher education institutions

Higher education institutions have many different names (university, college, academy, institute, school) and their diverse profiles are at first sight not always clear. The classification project, led by the CHEPS Research Institute of the University of Twente, aims to categorise institutions according to what they do (e.g. whether they teach bachelors' degrees, masters' degrees or doctorates) and what they are (e.g. business-oriented, research intensive). A well organised classification system would help to quickly identify the profile of an institution and allow for fair comparison between institutions with similar missions.

Ranking the quality of education, research and innovation

Rankings tend to focus on research in the hard sciences and to ignore other aspects of universities performance in the field of humanities, social sciences, teaching quality and community outreach. The most famous rankings are the ones from Shanghai Jiao Tong University and the Times Higher Education Supplement.

The Commission encourages the debate around ranking and the development of tools to produce multi-dimensional rankings based on robust, relevant and widely accepted methodologies.

Through the Erasmus programme, The Commission is supporting a pilot project based on a more sophisticated approach developed by the German Research Institute CHE. CHE does not mix education, research and innovation, but allows the reader to set individual priorities and to produce his or her own ranking ('my ranking') per field of study. The Commission believes that such a ranking approach better reflects the diversity of European higher education, and corresponds more closely to the needs of users.

The Commission is looking forward to the comments of the stakeholders and policymakers on the viability of setting up independent European classification and ranking systems in the foreseeable future.

European database of higher education institutions

Every country has a database of higher education institutions and programmes. The Commission believes that by enhancing these national databases with information on university performance in education, research and innovation and by linking them at the European level, a valuable and reliable source of information on the higher education sector will emerge.

At present, policy makers and researchers are forced to organise ad hoc surveys with varying response rates. In 2008, DG RTD (in cooperation with DG EAC, EUROSTAT and stakeholders' representatives) will launch a call for tenders to assess the feasibility of an integrated European statistical information system on activities undertaken by universities in education, research and innovation. Once up and running, this database could become a very useful and sustainable source of information.

Conclusions

The transparency instruments described above are expected to help citizens and policy makers to take better informed decisions about where to study and how to organise the higher education systems at micro and macro level The Commission will continue to support such initiatives and welcomes comments on their impact.

4.2. A view from the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee

Gunnar Vaht (Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee)

Recognition of qualifications is an important component of the development towards the European Higher Education Area.

Academic and professional recognition

There are two types of recognition of qualifications – academic recognition and professional recognition. Academic recognition is the recognition of a qualification for the purpose of further studies. The main task is to assess whether the applicant is capable of continuing studies in the chosen direction and at the chosen level.

Professional recognition is the recognition of a qualification for the purpose of employment in a certain profession. The main task is to find out whether the knowledge and professional skills of the applicant are sufficient to pursue a particular profession.

International legal acts

The international legal instruments that regulate the recognition of foreign qualifications are conventions, recommendations, declarations, EU directives, bilateral and multilateral agreements.

The main legal instrument for academic recognition of the qualifications in the European Region is the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education, adopted in Lisbon on 11 April 1997. Although the main field of application of the Lisbon Recognition Convention is academic recognition, the Convention can also be of use for cases of recognition concerning the non-regulated part of the labour market.

The convention was the first international legal instrument in which the right to a fair assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications was laid down. Another important key concept is that the Lisbon Recognition Convention replaced seeking full "equivalence" of the foreign qualification to that of the host country´s one by recognition of the foreign qualification if there are no substantial differences between the compared qualifications.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention also states the importance of information provision. Recognition under the Convention is based upon mutual trust and provision of information between the higher education systems. While the term "quality assurance" is not used in the context in the Convention, it is understood that information on the institutions and programmes that make up a national education system could be provided with reference to quality assurance.

Subsidiary documents

The Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for Assessment of Foreign Qualifications was adopted by the Intergovernmental Committee of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 2001. The recommendation is a step forward from the Lisbon Convention itself and shifts the focus of credential evaluation from input characteristics to the learning outcomes.

The Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees (adopted in 2004) and the Code of Good Practice for the Provision of Transnational Education (adopted in 2001, revised in 2007) are important legal instruments on the recognition of non-traditional qualifications.

Information needed for recognition

Recognition decisions are to be made on the basis of appropriate information on the qualifications for which recognition is sought. In case of a non-recognition decision the body making the assessment is responsible for demonstrating that an applicant does not fulfil the relevant requirements. A substantial difference must be demonstrated in case of refusal.

There is a need for information about the awarding institution – the type and the status of the institution. Before a specific study programme can be recognised in another country, a statement regarding the institution´s and the programme´s quality needs to have been made in its national context. Such statements are generally formulated in specific national terms for the benefit of national stakeholders but to make a quality

statement that is also internationally useful is sometimes difficult. For instance, the required sources and channels of information are not always available or may not have been designed to suit the needs of credential evaluators and recognition authorities.

It is relevant to give information about the concept of accreditation, about the accreditation within the national higher education system and about competent accreditation bodies in a particular country. In case of the recognition of individual qualifications abroad, the outcomes of quality assessment must be made public, whenever possible, in a widely-spoken language so that international evaluators, credential evaluation offices, higher education institutions or employers, can easily access and use them.

Recognition is based on quality assessment decisions

International recognition of qualifications is impossible without the knowledge about the quality of the particular programme and the awarding institution. The close link between quality assurance and recognition was underlined in the Prague Communiqué (2001). Common issues of recognition and quality assurance were analysed by a joint working group of the ENIC and NARIC recognition networks and the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) in 2002-2003.

In fair assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications it is recommended to judge only the value of the qualification, not external factors. The assessment should be based on learning outcomes, what a person knows and is able to do, and whether these outcomes are quality assured.

ENIC/NARIC Networks and national centres – common tasks and activities

The Lisbon Recognition Convention stipulates that for the provision of relevant information each Party of the Convention shall establish or maintain a national information centre and that these centres form the European Network of National Information Centres on academic recognition and mobility (ENIC Network). According to the Joint ENIC/NARIC Charter of Activities and Services the common tasks and activities of the national centres are:

- Facilitate access to information on the national higher education system and qualifications;
- Facilitate access to information on the foreign higher education systems and qualifications;
- Give advice or information on recognition matters and assessment of foreign qualifications.

Cooperation between the recognition and quality assurance networks

The Joint ENIC/NARIC Charter of Activities and Services (adopted by the Intergovernmental Committee of the Lisbon Recognition Committee in 2004) mandate the ENIC and NARIC Networks under the Bologna Process a task to promote cooperation with quality assurance bodies and networks in order to establish a common framework, share information and increase mutual trust between educational systems.

chapter 5: International perspectives on the benefits of mutual recognition

5.1. A global perspective

David Woodhouse (President of INQAAHE)

Outline

The topic of this presentation is mutual recognition (MR) and two mechanisms that can support its implementation, namely Guidelines of Good Practice and Indicators of Quality.

Mutual Recognition (MR)

The recognition by external quality assurance agencies (EQAs or EQAAs) of each other's work and judgements is often called mutual recognition, and in 2000 INQAAHE created and supported a working group on this topic (Woodhouse, 2001). The following is the definition that was used (Woodhouse, 2004):

Mutual recognition

By two or more external quality agencies is an affirmation by each that it accepts the decisions and judgements of the other (either entirely or for some defined purposes). Such recognition may be based on the agencies having comparable aims and procedures, so it is likely that they would reach the same conclusion in reviewing and passing a judgement on an institution, program or qualification (cf. The Washington Accord between engineering associations).

MR stands on two bases, namely
1. the quality of activity of the EQAs and
2. the scope of activity of the EQAs.

INQAAHE's Guidelines of Good Practice (GGP), and other possible equivalent codes of practice, are linked to the first of these in that an agency may be more likely to recognise the decisions of another agency that has been independently judged to be of good quality, e.g. by complying with the GGP (Section 5).

A commonly used crude categorisation of the scope of activity is whether the agency operates at institution or program level. Some people would claim that MR is only possible within either of these categories. A more detailed and specific approach looks at the indicators used by any agency, as these may afford the possibility of comparison and hence recognition without being hindered by the institution / program divide.

Benefits of Mutual Recognition of EQAs

The aim of mutual recognition of EQAs is not primarily to benefit the agencies themselves, but to achieve beneficial results for institutions and their students and graduates in terms of mobility, credit transfer, acceptance of qualifications etc.

Possible benefits of mutual recognition include:
- understanding and knowledge of and by each agency
- collaboration between agencies
- authorisation of agencies to operate across country boundaries (this is the one of greatest importance to AUQA)
- enrichment of agencies' activities
- appreciation of the quality parameters underpinning institutions and programs
- basis for judgements on the quality of institutions and programs in other jurisdictions, by employers and prospective students
- understanding of curricula, standards and criteria across country boundaries.

Benefit to students

Some people see the benefit to students primarily in providing security for students spending part of their program elsewhere: study abroad or student exchange. The responsibility here lies mainly with the institutions. The two (or more) institutions must have cast-iron contracts that guarantee the student will get the courses and credit promised. The best that an MR between the respective agencies can do is provide some basic security – like the pillars support the arches of a bridge.

The portability of completed or partial qualifications ('credit transfer') however is definitely in the realm of the EQA. MR can provide a basis for institutions to grant academic transfer and credit for prior studies at institutions in different jurisdictions. When two institutions are subject to the same quality agency, there is a presumption (albeit no guarantee) that a student may transfer between them with credit for prior studies. MR by two agencies of each other's decisions would extend this presumption across approved institutions of both agencies. Thus, MR could well contribute to portability of learning. It might establish a global threshold that can be understood by employers, students and others.

Benefit to institutions
The benefit to education institutions is most notable in the situation of educational export / import. If an institution is approved by agency X, and seeks approval by agency Y, perhaps in a different jurisdiction, and there is a MR agreement between the two agencies, then agency Y should, if possible, grant approval. At most, it should only check factors not checked by agency X. Depending on the nature of the 'shortfall', it may be more efficient for agency Y to ask agency X to carry out further checks on its behalf, as agency X is already familiar with the institution. This circumstance most often occurs when an institution, accredited in one country by that country's EQA, wants to offer courses in another country. If the two agencies have a MR agreement, the institutions may not need to go through a further full accreditation process. Thus, MR can assist institutions to operate across national and regional boundaries.

Benefit to graduates
Inasmuch as approval of an institution by an EQA provides some assurance about the characteristics of the institution's graduates, within the agency's region or country, recognition of that agency by another extends the scope of that assurance to the second agency's region. MR is highly beneficial to graduates, who may find this a major aid to practicing in other countries. This affirmation of graduate quality is also a benefit to employers.

It is obviously possible for EQA X to recognise the decision and judgements of EQA Y, without the converse recognition occurring

– ie, recognition need not be mutual. In this case, the benefits flow in one direction but not the other. This conference constantly refers to MR, but the recognition might well be uni-directional.

Considerations Relating to MR
Agencies exhibit a great deal of difference in purpose and scope. For example, some agencies review at the level of institutions, some at the level of programs of study, and some at the level of qualifications (degrees, etc.). Some agencies bear the burden of basic sifting (e.g. separating the legitimate from the fraudulent) while others deal with institutions where that sifting has already occurred; the latter can often focus much more on improving the good than weeding out the bad. There is also a significant difference between agencies whose work is or is not directly tied to financing; the former may be more able than the latter to shape an evaluative agenda that drills down to programs.

MR must take account of these differences, but they are not insuperable. Sceptics often say that even if MR happens, there would have to be one set of agreements between agencies that review at institution level, and a separate set for program review agencies. However, this is not necessarily so. Suppose agency X checks at institution level, while agency Y checks at program level. Y might nonetheless be willing to recognise the quality of programs in the institutions under X, because it is satisfied that X's checks are sufficiently comprehensive that they permit firm statements about program quality in its institutions. Conversely, agency Y may use its work on program review to build a more holistic picture of each of its institutions. Agency X may then be happy to accept Y's views, not only on Y's programs but also on Y's institutions.

Any agency contemplating recognising another would take into account a range of information, which would almost certainly include direct discussion and possibly investigation, and would certainly include the other agency's adherence to any Code of Practice, and status in relation to an international certification process.

Also, two agencies may have different requirements, often based on characteristics

or priorities of their respective societies. Therefore, while agencies A and B agree that each is equally competent and rigorous, A may have requirements that B does not check, so a 'B accreditation' cannot automatically be accepted by A as a valid accreditation within A's jurisdiction. What should be possible, however, is that A checks only those factors that for it are gaps in B's work (just as the Australian state EQAs for non-universities do a 'gap check').

Guidelines of Good Practice (GGP)

Over the 1990s, INQAAHE grew with the incidence and evolution of quality assurance and now is the professional association in the QA field. In 2002, INQAAHE formally recognised the emergence of a QA profession, and INQAAHE's role as the professional association for EQAs. Consequent on this, it began to set down a professional Code of Practice or set of Guidelines of Good Practice for EQAs and their staff.

The GGP were formally adopted in 2003 and thoroughly revised in 2007. Agencies are encouraged to use the GGP for self measurement. Some agencies also have been independently reviewed against the GGP. (Member agencies of INQAAHE that have been independently found to be in alignment with the GGP can be added to a list of such 'compliant' agencies on the INQAAHE website.)

Indicators of Quality in Higher Education

In 2002, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) of India convened a meeting in Bangalore of representatives of several EQAs and other relevant bodies in the Asia-Pacific region. The purpose of the meeting was to identify common 'indicators of quality in higher education' to enhance comparability between qualifications obtained in different countries. These indicators have now been further developed by a Project Group of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network led by Dr Antony Stella (Stella, 2007). (Dr Stella, a prime mover of the NAAC project, is now with the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA).)

The goals of any standards must relate both to the EQA itself (which must exhibit integrity and accountability) and its institutions (to help them to change and improve).

Indicators to assess the quality of HEIs

1. Integrity and mission
2. Governance and management
3. Human resources
4. Learning resources and infrastructure
5. Financial management
6. Student profile and support services
7. Curricular aspects
8. Teaching-learning and evaluation
9. Research, consultancy and extension
10. Quality assurance

Action

Recognising agencies as legitimate EQAs is not the same as recognising institutions and programs as good and reputable. However, institutions or programs accredited or approved by an EQA that itself has satisfied an independent check against international

criteria are known to have stood the test of a credible external review.

From the large number of projects relating to MR in several parts of the world some common experience can be inferred. Generally, they involve discussions between groups with similar background. They lie within a situation where the political pressures are consonant with MR. They presuppose and betoken mutual trust between the agencies, and enhance confidence in the evaluation procedures. They usually relate specifically to qualifications.

To achieve mutual recognition, agencies
- must first be aware of each other; then
- they must talk to each other; then
- they must understand each other; and then
- they must trust each other.

None of this is easy. However, it is potentially very useful to the institutions and other bodies to which we are answerable, and therefore it is irresponsible of quality agencies not to try to achieve these benefits. With increasing mobility of students, institutions, graduates and employers across national boundaries, and with most quality agencies being either nationally or sub-nationally based, consideration of the possibilities, difficulties, advantages and drawbacks of mutual recognition of the activities of quality agencies is important both regionally and globally.

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Terminology

Accreditation
An evaluation of whether an institution qualifies for a certain status (or the actual conferring of that status). In principles, the result of an accreditation is a yes/no or pass/fail decision, but gradations may be possible.

Certification
of an EQA means an affirmation, by a qualified third party, that the agency meets some agreed criteria. Such criteria may include that the agency's aims are appropriate and adequate, and its procedures are effective in achieving those aims.

EQA or EQAA
External Quality Assurance Agency
(ie external to the institutions it reviews)

QA
Quality assurance. (The same abbreviation is sometimes used for 'quality assessment'.)

Recognition
of an EQA means an acceptance by another body or agency that the agency's decisions and judgements are valid. Such recognition may mean that the other body or agency trusts the first agency's decisions for some purposes of its own.

5.2. The Latin-American perspective

María José Lemaitre (President of RIACES)

Background

Quality assurance processes have developed in Latin America since 1990, and it is interesting to note that they do not follow a common model but rather, have been established in response to the challenges and needs of the respective higher education systems.

Thus, there is a wide range of mechanisms, such as licensing, accreditation and audit; a focus on programmes, institutions, or student learning outcomes; different types of agencies, some governmental, others public but autonomous and some private ones. All of them, however, use self assessment and external review as the main instruments, albeit with different relative weights and sometimes, accompanied by other evaluation tools.

All of them base their operation on clearly defined standards and procedures, usually developed in consultation with the main stakeholders in the field. In many cases, reviewers are shared by several agencies, increasing the exchange of experiences and the chance for learning from each other's successes and mistakes.

These developments have been encouraged mainly because of the need to make sense of and develop regulatory measures for higher education systems where traditional public and private universities have been joined by new private providers, and where many public institutions have been forced to take a mostly private, profit seeking approach in order to cover the deficits resulting from decreased public spending in higher education.

At the same time, governments demand mechanisms that can contribute to increased trust among countries and the assurance that professional training meets basic standards in different countries and institutions. Mobility of students, academic staff and professionals is a significant feature of many Latin American countries, and the need for schemes that make it possible to work towards the recognition of studies, qualifications and degrees has been in the forefront of many public policies in the region.

There have been many attempts in this respect, but one of the most successful and interesting is that of the MERCOSUR accreditation mechanism. The development of RIACES is also a contributing factor, and these two experiences will be the subject of this paper.

The MERCOSUR accreditation mechanism

MERCOSUR is an agreement for economic integration, signed in 1991, by four Latin American countries, which are its full members: Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. In 1996, Chile signed it as an associated member, followed by Bolivia in 1998, Peru in 2003 and Venezuela in 2004.

Education was always a central issue within MERCOSUR. In 1991, the Ministers of Education established the Educational Sector, with them as the main decision making body and the following objectives:
- Development of a civic culture supportive of the integration process
- Training of the human resources needed to support regional and national development
- Harmonization of educational systems

MERCOSUR brings together six countries that differ in almost every measure that can be taken, such as size, population, income, number of higher education institutions, coverage of higher education, stage of development of the primary and secondary educational systems, higher education regulations and policies, making the goal of integration a difficult one. At the same time, while the Ministers of Education have agreed to work together, there is no political agreement binding those six countries together, and even the economic agreement among the four full members is somewhat shaky. These features make the itinerary followed by the accreditation mechanism all the more interesting.

Memorandum of Understanding

In 1998, the Ministers of Education signed a MoU for the development of an experimental accreditation scheme.

The MoU highlights the relevance of higher education for the regional integration process. It also recognizes increased patterns of mobility as a significant tool for achieving the goals of MERCOSUR and points to programme accreditation as a means both for helping people to move within the region, and for promoting educational quality through the enhanced comparability of training processes.

The proposed mechanism is based on the following principles:

- Accreditation refers to the process that assures that programmes meet quality requirements agreed upon at the regional level, and leads to the public validity of academic degrees.
- The accreditation mechanism must recognize each country's legislation and respect the autonomy of HEIs.
- Participation in the accreditation scheme is voluntary, open only to degree granting, legally recognized higher education institutions.
- Accreditation will be valid for a fixed period of time, and must be renewed on a cyclical basis.
- Accreditation results will be valid in all signatory countries.

The Memorandum also sets some basic criteria for the proponed mechanism:

- The Ministers of Education would define the programmes covered by the mechanism, and in the first stage, these were Medicine, Engineering and Agronomy.
- The common expected learning outcomes and the quality criteria to be applied in the accreditation processes would be developed by three consultative committees, each bringing together experts from all six countries.
- MERCOSUR accreditation would be the responsibility of national agencies, organized as legally established public bodies, and designated as such by the government.
- Each programme applying for accreditation must present a self assessment report, and agree to an external review. Both self assessment and external review would be carried out following pre-determined, commonly agreed procedures.

- MERCOSUR criteria and procedures had to be approved by the Ministers of Education. Non-accreditation decisions would not be open to appeal within the MERCOSUR system, but positive decisions could be rejected and the appeal presented to the Ministers of Education.
- Outcomes would be disseminated through the Mercosur Information System.

Work on the implementation of the MoU began in 1999, with the establishment of a Working Group of Specialists in QA, and of the three Consultative Committees mentioned above.

During 1999 and 2000, expected learning outcomes and quality criteria were developed by the Consultative Committees, and the Working Group developed the necessary procedures and guidelines for the implementation of the accreditation mechanisms. At the same time, a validation exercise was carried out, in order to check the applicability of the criteria and the effectiveness of the procedures, after which some minor adjustments were made.

The main features of the common procedures are the following:

- All national agencies would apply the MERCOSUR quality criteria; they could set up additional requirements if they considered it necessary, but the core requirements would be those defined by MERCOSUR.
- A similar approach was taken with regard to materials and guidelines: they could be complemented by national handbooks or other materials, provided they covered all the issues considered in the MERCOSUR documentation.
- External review had to be carried out by at least three reviewers, two of whom had to come from MERCOSUR countries other than the host country, and all reviewers had to undergo MERCOSUR organized or approved training sessions, as one of their responsibilities would be to make sure that MERCOSUR standards and procedures had been applied during the whole process.

Finally, in 2002 the Ministers of Education approved the standards, procedures and

guidelines, and invited higher education institutions from the six countries to apply for Mercosur accreditation for their programmes in Medicine, Engineering and Agronomy. However, since this was to be an experimental application, each country defined a limit to the number of programs that could take part in the process.

During the three following years, nineteen Agronomy programmes, twenty eight Engineering programmes (in five different areas) and ten Medicine programmes took part in the accreditation mechanism.

This made it possible to make a thorough assessment of the mechanism, leading to some adjustments to the guidelines, criteria and procedures. This assessment process led to the proposal of the final mechanism, which was approved in the November 2007 meeting of the Ministers of Education. In this meeting, the Ministers approved a MERCOSUR accreditation scheme, called it ARCU-SUR and added to the three initial programmes four new ones: Architecture, Dentistry, Nursing and Veterinary Medicine.

ARCU-SUR thus becomes an accreditation scheme whose outcome is not only the recognition of accreditation procedures and criteria, or of accreditation decisions, but also the recognition of the academic validity of degrees granted by accredited programmes. As such, it is an extremely important process, which has the following features:

- The accreditation processes are carried out by national accrediting agencies.
- Agencies must meet basic reliability criteria: they must have a pluripersonal board, have provisions for independent judgments, and be officially appointed as national agencies.
- Accreditation is granted on the basis of ARCU-SUR approved expected learning outcomes and quality criteria and agencies must apply the procedures commonly agreed upon.
- Accreditation implies the academic recognition of university degrees in all six countries.
- National accrediting agencies meet regularly to supervise the process and to suggest any needed adjustments.
- The Ministers of Education, in one of their regular meetings, must approve any changes to the accreditation scheme.
- Accreditation results are reported and disseminated through the MERCOSUR information system; national agencies can also provide this information once it has been reported to the meeting of Ministers of Education.

This accreditation scheme has provided significant benefits to the Latin American quality assurance mechanisms, not the least of which has been its role as a very important learning opportunity; the main lessons learned through its design, development and implementation are the following:

- The process can be quite cost effective, as each country funded the attendance of its representatives to the working groups, the consultative committees and the training sessions; the members of the consultative committees and the working group did not get any special pay for their contribution (which was part of their obligations as public servants or academic staff at their institutions), and higher education institutions paid for the external reviews.
- The agreement on quality criteria and accreditation procedures ensures validity and reliability of the process, and has helped existing and new quality assurance agencies to develop in accordance to these harmonized requirements.
- The process followed meant that programmes had a common blueprint for the quality criteria, which are applied within the framework of the expected learning outcomes. Therefore, it becomes quite easy to extend the process to other programmes, which will only require consultative committees to agree on the expected learning outcomes for each additional programme included in the scheme.
- A very important development was the decision to base the process on national accrediting agencies; initially, the MoU suggested that the review teams would act as a sort of supranational organization (because it stated that if the recommendation of the review team was unanimous it was mandatory for the agency); this was strongly rejected, and therefore accreditation decisions belong to the national

agencies. It is interesting to note in this respect that the MoU provides for appeals against positive decisions, leaving appeals against denial of accreditation for the national level.

The Iberoamerican Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (RIACES)

The Network was established in Buenos Aires, in 2004. It currently has twenty nine members, from eighteen countries in Latin America, the Spanish speaking Caribbean and Spain. It was established as an inclusive network, that is, opening its membership not only to quality assurance agencies, but also to governmental organizations or to associations of universities dedicated to the promotion of quality in higher education. This decision was made because in many countries within the region, quality assurance is still in its initial stages, and the quality of higher education is the responsibility of a wide range of organizations.

Its goal is to promote cooperation and exchange among Iberoamerican countries on issues of assessment and accreditation of quality in higher education, and thus, to contribute to the quality of higher education in the region.

Since 2006 it has enjoyed a grant from the World Bank which has enabled it to carry out a number of actions addressed to the fulfillment of this goal. The main priorities for action during these years are the following:

- Support to quality assurance activities in those countries with no agency or where QA is in its initial stages.
- Support to existing agencies.
- Strengthening links with international organizations (IESALC-UNESCO, IN-QAAHE, OEI, ALCUE)
- Strengthening of the secretariat in order to provide information and act as a clearinghouse for QA issues (www.riaces.net).
- Generating conditions for mutual recognition processes.
- Carrying out studies on subjects identified by the General Assembly.

26 These guidelines were developed closely following the documents prepared by INQAAHE and ENQA.

Its work has been highly effective in many ways; it has provided training opportunities to existing and developing agencies, and has supported the establishment of QA initiatives in Central America, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay and Uruguay. One of the most important outcomes of its work has been the development of a Latin American QA community, which recognizes its members and shares a common language, recognizes the same interests and has been able to develop quality assurance mechanisms in accordance with the needs of each national higher education system.

In terms of promoting the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions, RIACES made the following contributions:

Harmonization of quality criteria in the MERCOSUR programmes among RIACES members. Through the support and organizational capacity of RIACES, all Latin American countries took part in specialized seminars dealing with the discussion of common quality criteria for Engineering, Medicine and Agronomy. Once an agreement on these criteria was reached, a meeting of QA agencies was held, and now it is possible to extend the MERCOSUR process to other countries within the region.

Support for the development and strengthening of QA agencies. In order for accreditation decisions to be recognized, it is essential that QA agencies can be considered reliable and effective. RIACES has been working on this through the development of Project CINTAS, carried out with the support of ANECA (Spain); CINTAS has developed a set of guidelines and will carry out special workshops to help QA agencies to develop internal QA schemes for themselves, in order to make it possible for them to provide evidence of the effectiveness and reliability of their criteria and procedures.

A second initiative in this respect has been the development of guidelines and a handbook for the self assessment of QA agencies. During 2008, agencies are invited to carry out their self assessment based on the RIACES guidelines[26], and be the object of an external review organized by RIACES, which will provide feed back and possibly help them overcome any identified weaknesses.

Finally, RIACES is encouraging countries within the region to sign bilateral agreements

for the mutual recognition of degrees offered by accredited programmes.

The programme for 2008 includes the experimental application of common standards in non MERCOSUR countries, following the approval of quality criteria; the support to the self assessment of QA agencies, and external review of those that want it; a study of the barriers to mutual recognition of degrees for professional work (not just academic validity); this is complex, since professional certification involves other stakeholders who are not members of the higher education system, but at least the identification of these barriers may show those responsible for certification and higher education policy makers ways of overcoming them. Finally, it is expected that this work will enable RIACES to work in selected countries in the development of procedures for professional certification which include accreditation as a 'fast track' for the academic recognition of qualifications – a commonly necessary, albeit not sufficient, requirement.

Latin America as a region has a lot to offer in this respect. It has been active in the field of QA since 1990, long before other regions in the world. It has complex higher education systems, and experiences the same challenges other systems face, although with much fewer financial and political resources. We hope that sharing our experience will be of use to others, and thank ECA for the opportunity it gives us.

5.3. **The Asian-Pacific perspective**

Peter Cheung (former President of APQN; former Executive Director of HKCAAVQ)

Synopsis

Globalization of higher education is a trend. Heralding that, we see the emergence of global and regional networks for Quality Assurance. The first and the most significant of them is the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) which was born out of Hong Kong in 1991 and has now a membership of 196 agencies in 81 countries. Noteworthy that this phenomenal growth has been achieved without governmental support or financial aid of any significance. It is more the collective wish of QA community of having a professional forum and a representative voice that has launched and driven the initiative.

Under the encouragement of the INQAAHE, regional networks are up and coming. The first of them is the Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN) which was established in 2004 under the lead of Australia, India and Hong Kong. Geographically it covers a wide expanse of land and over half of the world's population. At the moment, only four years after its inauguration, the APQN has 20 full members, 8 intermediate (note: full members pending vetting) members, 5 associate members, 7 institutional members and 3 observers.

With an initial grant of US$1.3 M from the World Bank for three years, the APQN started its website and information clearing house, launched an ambitious programme of Project Groups (5 completed, 4 in progress), a series of workshops and seminars. There is now a central register of experts for members to draw on as consultants or panelists. Under its auspices, four Memoranda of Cooperation between agencies have been signed and activities like staff exchanges are ongoing under them. In all, the APQN sets an example of how development money (mainly used in support of developing countries participating in the Project Groups, workshops and seminars) can be leveraged and combined with the pro bono contribution of the more advanced members to sustain an inclusive programme of outreaching and mutual help, thus generating a lasting sense of family within the network.

Into the future, beyond doubt we shall see more regional networks coming up, with the INQAAHE re-gearing itself to become a focal point of coordination and as the voice for the QA community as a whole. The latter role is particularly important when the world over is focusing on quality, for investments in

education or education reform. The QA community simply should have its say. It should be contributing to efforts like what is under the World Bank (and its funding mechanism GIQAC), the UNESCO, the OECD and, not the least, the World Trade Organization (the Trade in Services negotiations as they include transnational education), to name but a few.

No doubt mutual recognition is recognized as a goal by the INQAAHE and the regional networks. The APQN's participation in the Brisbane Communiqué (covering 52 counties in the Asia Pacific and the Middle East), hope-fully in the same pattern as the ENQA for the Bologna Process in Europe, should be a good illustration of such determined efforts. As for the longer term, I would invite attention to the declared vision of the APQN when it was formed in 2004:

"By 2010 the APQN would like to see that all its full members will recognize each other's judgments, and all operators of higher education will be subject to the requirements of only one agency - in other words, there will be no quality barrier to the full mobility of students across the region"

chapter 6: Qrossroads

Axel Aerden (NVAO)

Introduction

In 2005, some of the ECA members and ENIC/NARICs (bodies responsible for issues relating to the recognition of foreign qualifications or diplomas) signed the "Joint declaration regarding the automatic recognition of qualifications". To achieve the aim of this declaration, the signees identified certain preconditions and actions. One of the preconditions identified was the development of a transparent information tool, which would provide information on the accreditation organisations, systems and decisions as well as information on the qualifications of accredited higher education programmes and institutions. This coincided with the desire of ECA members for an information tool for accreditation decisions. This desire had been present since the start of ECA, and was first thought of as a supplement in English to accreditation decision reports. However, the necessity of labour intensive and costly translations made this difficult to achieve. Instead,

all productive energy went into developing a web-based information tool for accreditation decisions.

Aims and audiences

The original aim of the information tool is to present the qualifications of accredited programmes and/or institutions in the perspective of the higher education system (and the relevant qualifications framework). This aim is of course the result of the co-operation with the ENIC/NARICs. Although they can be seen as the original target audience ECA has expanded that target audience to (future) students, higher education institutions and employers. The development has been supported financially through the European Commission Socrates programme.

Aims and audiences

Before developing Qrossroads as a database-driven website, the project partners undertook several activities to make sure the

Figure 1: example of phase 1 information gathering
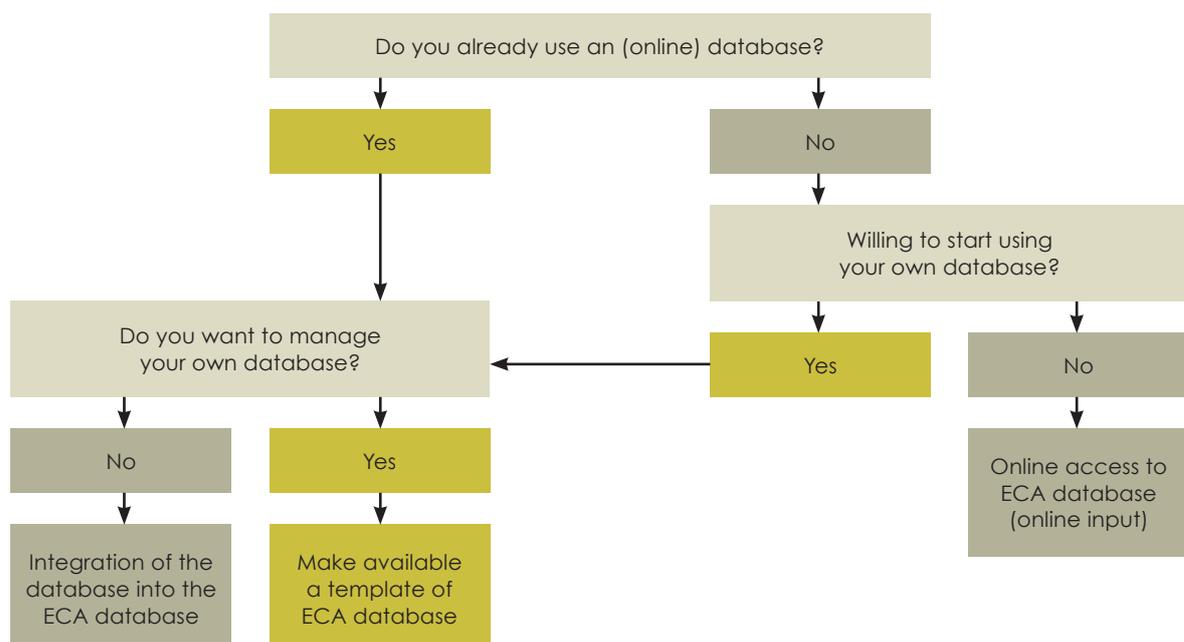
enterprise would yield the expected results. Three phases can be identified.

The first phase was the phase in which the necessary information was gathered about the willingness of the partners to participate fully and about the use of databases and other available information regarding qualifications.

In the second phase the partners tried to find a common ground regarding the data Qrossroads would need to present and which they in turn would have to deliver.

In the third phase all the practicalities were handled, such as the financial approach and the technical issues.

In this phase, a Steering Group and a Stakeholder Group, with representatives of the ENIC/NARICs, the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in HE (EURASHE), the European Students' Union (ESU) and BusinessEurope was established.

Technical issues

Qrossroads is a database-driven website. The data is however provided by decentralised databases owned and/or managed by an accreditation agency. Qrossroads has therefore centralised data without having centralised the database.

These are the possible flows of data from a decentralised database to the Qrossroads database:

1. Accreditation organisations who already manage a database with qualification details (e.g. NVAO's http://www.hogeronderwijsregister.be) communicate data automatically to the Qrossroads database. The project has provided the tools and information to implement an export function on these databases. The Qrossroads database is therefore able to accept data automatically from these databases.

2. Accreditation organisations without an online database but who want to host and manage their own database have been provided with one (based on Qrossroads). This template database includes tools to add data in an easy and efficient way. This new decentralised database can communicate data automatically to Qrossroads.

3. Accreditation organisations without a database and not willing to host and manage one are provided with a database on the server where Qrossroads is hosted. The central server of course provides tools to add data in an easy and efficient way. This new database can communicate data automatically to Qrossroads.

Figure 2: communication of data from local to central server

Central administration
- National HE systems
- Management of Accr. agencies
- Recognition bodies
- European frameworks
- Overall management

XML parser

Secure sync

Internet

Local administration
- Programme data
- Institutional data
- General management: *central & decentralised admin.*

XML

Central DB

Local DB

Qrossroads.eu
- General information
- Search engine
  – Programme data
  – Institutional data

Local public website
- Included in a website
- (public) access to the database

The website

Qrossroads is a website at the crossroads of quality and qualifications. The Qrossroads website only provides information on qualifications from accredited programmes and institutions (including including, where available, content information regarding its assessment). The search engine of the website provides access to this information through simple and advanced search features including country maps with the location of all the institutions. Included in the details of each programme and institution are the references to the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.

All this information is presented in the framework of the higher education systems of the countries concerned, with links to the overarching Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area and the European Qualification Framework. The profile of each accreditation organisation and the profile of each recognition authority (ENIC/NARIC) is included. Additionally, Qrossroads presents overall information about higher education in Europe and about studying in Europe and the countries part of the Qrossroads network.

Qrossroads is also ECA's response to the recommendation by the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament in which they recommend to the member states to "ensure public access to the assessments made by the quality assurance or accreditation agencies".

In 2008, accreditation organisations from nine countries will have their data included in Qrossroads: Austria, Belgium (Flanders), France, Germany, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain and Switzerland. Additional countries are intended to be included in the coming years.

Conclusions and outlook

Rolf Heusser (ECA Chairman; Director of OAQ)

Lessons learned

The ECA approach and roadmap towards mutual recognition have delivered clear results and have enabled the participating agencies to reach the final outcome within the time period foreseen. Success would have not been possible without the true commitment of all ECA members, who invested much energy and time to reach their goals (close to 100 meetings/projects within the 4-year project period).

In the ECA project, the combination of formal agreements with practical co-operation projects has been particularly useful. Mutual observation and in-depth comparisons proved to be essential elements in order to build up sufficient trust among the member organisations. ECA could also much benefit from the cooperation with the ENIC/NARIC network. Both accreditation organisations and ENIC/NARIC are moving towards the principle according to which differences are accepted because there is trust in each others decisions.

Although ECA members act according to a common "Code of good practice", they respect diversity in accreditation. National specificities in accreditation procedures are respected and accepted as long as they do not fundamentally influence the final accreditation decisions.

The ECA project revealed that mutual recognition is not a destiny, but a journey, which resulted in innovative side products (commonly established on-line information tool, simplified accreditation of joint programmes, etc.). Mutual understanding and trust between accreditation organisations have significantly increased during the project period. Each participating agency acknowledged that the project was a very valuable learning experience that helped to validate the own work and helped to enhance the quality.

Acceptance of qualifications and cross-border academic and professional mobility can be advanced if accreditation decisions and mutual recognition agreements are visible and easily accessible for recognition bodies, higher education institutions, students, employers and graduates. Therefore, ECA members have committed themselves to set up an on-line Information tool for accreditation decisions that will provide this information in a standardised format and will go on-line in 2008. For this purpose, ECA obtained funding from the European Commission's Socrates programme[27].

Outlook

In June 2008, it was agreed to continue the ECA project until the end of 2011. The goal of the follow-up project is to maintain and enhance the efforts in the domain of mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions, and to provide a platform for continued methodological exchange among agencies aiming at intensive mutual learning. It is suggested that the new ECA project will search for close cooperation with higher education stakeholders, especially the students, the institutions and the labour market in order to make sure that the "final users" can maximize the benefits deriving from the ECA work.

Finally we have to realise that mutual recognition of quality assurance and accreditation decisions has become an important international issue in higher education. Mutual recognition initiatives are encouraged by the recommendations of UNESCO/OECD[28]. It is important to strengthen the links with other regions in the world in order to exchange experiences and ideas. In the future intercontinental links in the domain of mutual recognition could facilitate global mobility of students and staff.

[27] *The project Transparent European Accreditation decisions and Mutual recognition agreements (TEAM).*

[28] *UNESCO/OECD "Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education", 2005.*

8.1. Code of good practice for the members of the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA)

Zurich, 3 December 2004

Introduction

Based on Article 4 of the Agreement of Cooperation of the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education and taking into consideration the conclusions of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin (2003) regarding Quality Assurance:

- The European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA) agrees on a common Code of Good Practice (Code).

- The member organisations of the ECA commit themselves to sign and implement the 17 standards of the Code. These 17 standards should be implemented before the end of 2006.

- New member organisations are obliged to sign the Code upon membership and implement all standards of the Code before the end of 2006.

- In 2007, a panel of independent experts will carry out an external evaluation of all member organisations to establish whether all the standards of the Code are met.

ECA Code of Good Practice: the Standards

The accreditation organisation:
1. Has an explicit mission statement.
2. Is recognised as a national accreditation body by the competent public authorities.
3. Must be sufficiently independent from government, from higher education institutions as well as from business, industry and professional associations.
4. Must be rigorous, fair and consistent in decision-making.
5. Has adequate and credible resources, both human and financial.
6. Has its own internal quality assurance system that emphasises its quality improvement.
7. Has to be evaluated externally on a cyclical basis.
8. Can demonstrate public accountability, has public and officially available policies, procedures, guidelines and criteria.
9. Informs the public in an appropriate way about accreditation decisions.
10. A method for appeal against its decisions is provided.
11. Collaborates with other national, international and/or professional accreditation organisations.

The accreditation procedures:
12. Accreditation procedures and methods must be defined by the accreditation organisation itself.
13. Must be undertaken at institutional and/or programme level on a regular basis.
14. Must include self-documentation/-evaluation by the higher education institution and external review (as a rule on site).
15. Must guarantee the independence and competence of the external panels or teams.
16. Must be geared at enhancement of quality.

The accreditation standards:
17. Must be made public and be compatible with European practices taking into account the development of agreed sets of quality standards.
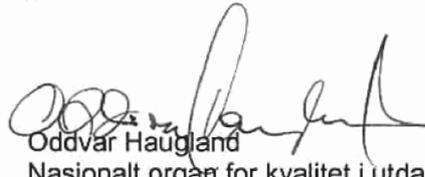
Signatures

The following ECA member organisations commit themselves to implement the 17 standards of this Code of Good Practice before the end of 2006:

The following ECA member organisations commit themselves to implement the 17 standards of this Code of Good Practice before the end of 2006:
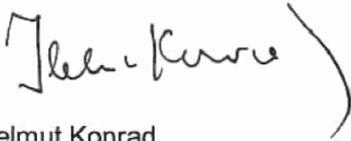
Helmut Konrad
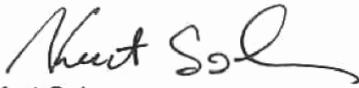Österreichischer Akkreditierungsrat, Austria

Oddvar Haugland
Nasjonalt organ for kvalitet i utdanningen
(NOKUT), Norway

Herman-Josef Buchkremer
Agentur für Qualitätssicherung durch
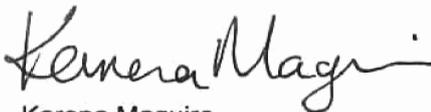Akkreditierung von Studiengängen (AQAS),
Germany

Detlev Kran
Foundation for International Business
Administration Accreditation (FIBAA), Germany

Kurt Sohm
Fachhochschulrat, Austria

Francisco Marcellán
Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad
y Acreditación (ANECA), Spain

Karena Maguire
the Higher Education and Training Awards
Council (HETAC), Ireland

Hans-Uwe Erichsen
Akkreditierungsrat, Germany
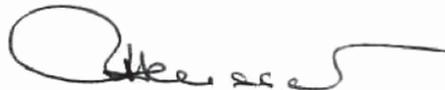
Thomas Reil
Akkreditierungs-, Certifizierungs- und
Qualitätssicherungs-Institut (ACQUIN),
Germany

Loek Vredevoogd
Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatie Organisatie
(NVAO i.o.), The Netherlands/Flanders

Rolf Heusser
Organ für Akkreditierung und
Qualitätssicherung
der Schweizerischen Hochschulen
(OAQ), Switzerland

Rainer Künzel
Zentrale Evaluations- und
Akkreditierungsagentur (ZEvA), Germany

Zurich, 3rd December 2004

Annotations

The Code of Good Practice guarantees comparability of accreditation procedures throughout Europe and defines internal quality assurance measures of accreditation organisations. The Code contains a series of normative standards with correlating questions and points of reference. Relying on concrete evidence, the reference points will illustrate how the pre-defined standards can be met by the various accreditation organisations. Documents of the accreditation organisation, e.g. a mission statement and strategic plan with regard to standard 1, can serve to provide evidence.

The 17 standards are binding for ECA members and should all be met. The reference points serve as possible illustrations of the standards and should not be used as a check list. External evaluation of the accreditation organisations is necessary and will guarantee that ECA members fulfill the standards of the Code of Good Practice.

Specifically, the Code fulfils the following purposes:

• The Code provides transparency for politicians, the governments and other stakeholder groups in higher education.

• The Code guarantees reliability of the accreditation procedure for higher education institutions.

• The Code defines necessary requirements for accreditation organisations. All members of the ECA must fulfill these requirements and should review their procedures regularly against this code.

• The Code serves as a yardstick for external evaluations of all members of the consortium.

• The Code serves to support the internal quality assurance policies of an accreditation organisation and provides suggestions for the continuous improvement of its quality.

• The Code shall not lead to predominance of one single point of view, but should instead promote good practices and prevent bad quality.

• The Code should be updated when necessary to conform to the international state of the art of good practices.

The accreditation organisation:

Standard	**1. Has an explicit mission statement**
Question	What is the organisation's mission statement?
Reference points	• The accreditation organisation has an explicit mission statement or a set of objectives
	• The mission statement is coherent in scope and content and is revised on a cyclical basis
	• The mission statement is communicated publicly
	• The statement makes clear that accreditation is a major activity of the accreditation organisation
	• The accreditation organisation has a strategic plan enabling it to implement its mission statement
Standard	**2. Is recognised as a national accreditation body by the competent public authorities**
Question	What are the official status and the legal basis of the accreditation organisation?
Reference points	• The accreditation organisation has been established by law as a corporate body or is based on agreements of national authorities
	• Accreditation is regulated in the relevant legislation/rules

Standard	**3. Must be sufficiently independent from government, from higher education institutions as well as from business, industry and professional associations**
Question	How does the accreditation organisation demonstrate its independency?
Reference points	• The accreditation organisation is carrying out its operations independently (setting up of accreditation framework, carrying out accreditation procedures, etc.) • Independency of the decision making process is guaranteed; there is evidence that no party has unjustified influence on the outcome of the decision.
Standard	**4. Must be rigorous, fair and consistent in decision-making**
Questions	How are decisions taken within the accreditation organisation? How are decisions on assessments taken and how are they communicated?
Reference points	• The rules leading to the accreditation decision are transparent and warrant equal treatment • Decisions on accreditation must be based on predefined quality standards and have to be comprehensible
Standard	**5. Has adequate and credible resources, both human and financial**
Question	What are the financial and human resources of the accreditation organisation: actual situation and perspectives?
Reference points	• The accreditation organisation has adequate human and financial resources to achieve its objectives and fulfil its mission in a effective and efficient manner • There is sufficient evidence for a secured midterm financing of the organisation • Human resources development for its staff is provided
Standard	**6. Has its own internal quality assurance system that emphasises its quality improvement**
Questions	Which quality assurance mechanisms does the accreditation organisation routinely use? Are the organisation's procedures being evaluated (on process and effect)?
Reference points	• The accreditation organisation has a functioning system for assuring and improving quality which is embedded in the organisation's overall strategy • Quality assurance covers all operations of the accreditation organisation • Responsibilities for quality assurance are defined and documented • The quality policy of the accreditation organisation is published, including the organisation's goals, processes and methods • The accreditation organisation has internal feedback mechanisms that include procedures for reflections and subsequently revision of processes and methods • The accreditation organisation has mechanisms that provide feedback from expert panels and external stakeholders (e.g. institutions/programmes that have been accredited); results of such feedback are used for improvements • Process and effect of accreditation are systematically reviewed by the accreditation organisation; the results are used for quality enhancement

Standard	**7. Has to be evaluated externally on a cyclical basis**
Question	How and how often is the accreditation organisation evaluated externally?
Reference points	• External evaluations of the accreditation organisation have to be carried out • These external evaluation committees control if the code of good practice is fullfilled by the accreditation organisation • The results of the external assessment must be made public
Standard	**8. Can demonstrate public accountability, has public and officially available policies, procedures, guidelines and criteria**
Questions	How does the accreditation organisation include the public in its activities? How is the public informed? How are the higher education institutions informed?
Reference points	• Information about the accreditation organisation's policies, procedures, guidelines and criteria are publicly available • The information must be up-to-date • The accreditation organisation's public accountability is demonstrated by reporting regularly on the outcomes and the effects of accreditation procedures and related activities • The accreditation organisation provides higher education institutions with a clear documentation about the accreditation framework and the accreditation procedures (guidelines for self-evaluation, external evaluation)
Standard	**9. Informs the public in an appropriate way about accreditation decisions**
Questions	How is the public informed about accreditation decisions? Do legal requirements or other documents regulate the publication of reports?
Reference points	• The outcome of the accreditation must be made public • The format of publication refers to standardised European templates • Expert reports and the reports of the accreditation organisation must be published according to national regulations
Standard	**10. A method for appeal against its decisions is provided**
Question	What is the accreditation organisation's method for appeal?
Reference points	• There is a possibility to appeal against accreditation decisions • Procedures of appeal are specified • Equal and fair treatment of all applicants is guaranteed
Standard	**11. Collaborates with other national, international and/or professional accreditation organisations**
Question	With which European networks or agencies in the field of quality assurance and accreditation does the accreditation organisation collaborate on a regular basis?
Reference points	• The accreditation organisation collaborates actively with other national/professional accreditation organisations • The accreditation organisation acts conformly with overarching European frameworks in the field of quality assurance/accreditation

The accreditation procedures:

Standard	**12. Accreditation procedures and methods must be defined by the accreditation organisation itself**
Question	Is the accreditation organisation independent in defining its terms of procedures?
Reference point	• Processes and methods of accreditation are in the responsibility of the accreditation organisation and are not defined by other bodies

Standard	**13. Must be undertaken at institutional and/or programme level on a regular basis**
Questions	Is the accreditation organisation active in programme or institutional accreditation? Which are the regulations for reaccreditation?
Reference points	• The accreditation organisation has regular accreditation activities at institutional and/or programme level • Reaccreditation and validity of accreditation decisions are regulated

Standard	**14. Must include self-documentation/-evaluation by the higher education institution and external review (as a rule on site)**
Question	How is the accreditation procedure structured?
Reference points	• Self-documentation/-evaluation and external review are part of the accreditation procedure • External reviews encompass on site visits at the higher education institutions • The external review team is instructed clearly about its tasks • The accreditation organisation provides specific regulations in case of ex ante-accreditations

Standard	**15. Must guarantee the independence and competence of the external panels or teams**
Question	How is the independence of external panels guaranteed? Are selection criteria for expert panels set up?
Reference points	• Selection criteria for external panels/expert committees are set up and published by the accreditation organisation. • Selection criteria assure competence and independence of external experts • Independence of the experts is assured by a written statement • The decision about the composition of the expert team is made by the accreditation organisation in a transparent way

Standard	**16. Must be geared at enhancement of quality**
Question	Which elements and mechanisms within the accreditation process are used to enhance quality at the higher education institution?
Reference points	• The accreditation process contains elements that promote quality development and improvement of the higher education institution • The accreditation process should respect autonomy, identity and integrity of the higher education institutions

Standard	17. **Must be made public and comply with European practices taking into account the development of agreed sets of quality standards**
Questions	Which are the quality standards and criteria used for accreditation procedures? Do they meet international standards?
Reference points	• The quality standards and criteria used in the accreditation procedures correspond to European good practices • The quality standards and criteria are made public • The process of formulation of the quality standards and criteria is transparent and involves all important stakeholders

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8.2. ECA Principles for the Selection of Experts

Dublin, 2 June 2005

Introduction

- Convinced of the importance of agreed procedures and principles for the selection of experts and the composition of expert panels;
- As a necessary step towards reaching the aim of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions;
- In line with the Conclusions of the fourth meeting of the Consortium, 2-3 December 2004 in Zürich;
- Based on standard 15 of the ECA Code of Good Practice;

The members of ECA agree on the following principles for the selection of experts:

Procedures

- Any decision regarding the expert panel should be based on the policies, procedures and criteria of the accreditation organisation or on relevant legislation.
- Panel members must be independent and in a position to make unbiased judgments. Any possible conflict of interest must be disclosed.

- The selection criteria for expert panels must be established and published by the accreditation organisation.
- Applicants undergoing accreditation are given the opportunity to comment on the selection of panel members.
- The accreditation decisions should be made by the relevant authority and not by the group of experts themselves.
- Panel members must be committed to treat all material and findings as strictly confidential.
- Panel members are briefed adequately by the accreditation organisation on the context within they are operating (national legislative environment, criteria, procedures and guidelines).
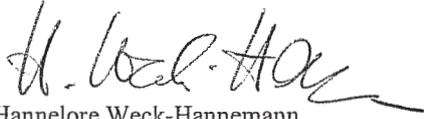
Composition

The number of panel members may vary depending on the range of competence of individual members. Gender balance should be taken into consideration when appointing a panel of experts. The expert panel should have the following mix of expertise appropriate to the objectives of the accreditation procedure.

Institutional Accreditation Panels
- experience in quality assurance in higher education
- appropriate academic qualifications and recognised expertise in the relevant area(s)
- expertise in institutional governance and management
- leadership experience in research/academic management
- relevant international experience that provides a basis for making international comparisons
- knowledge on teaching and learning methods

- expertise in development, design, provision and evaluation of higher education programmes
- knowledge of the country-specific system of higher education, institutions and applicable legislation.

Depending on the national context it is commendable to include in the institutional accreditation panel:
- student representatives
- representatives from the labour market
- a significant proportion of panel members from outside the country.

Programme Accreditation Panels
- experience in quality assurance in higher education
- appropriate academic qualifications and scientific or professional reputation in the relevant area(s)
- relevant international experience that provides a basis for making international comparisons
- knowledge on teaching and learning methods
- expertise in development, design, provision and evaluation of higher education programmes
- knowledge of the country-specific system of higher education, institutions and applicable legislation.

Depending on the national context it is commendable to include in the programme accreditation panel:
- student representatives in the respective area(s)
- representatives from the labour market
- a significant proportion of panel members from outside the country.

The following ECA member organisations have committed themselves to implement the ECA Principles for the Selection of Experts on 2nd June 2005 in Dublin:
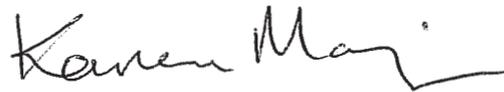
Hannelore Weck-Hannemann
Österreichischer Akkreditierungsrat, Austria

Kurt Sohm
Fachhochschulrat, Austria

René-Paul Martin
Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur (CTI), France

Jürgen Kohler
Akkreditierungsrat, Germany
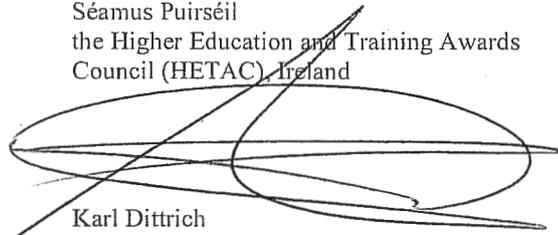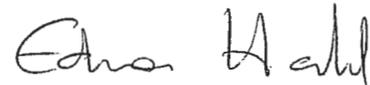
Thomas Reil
Akkreditierungs-, Certifizierungs- und
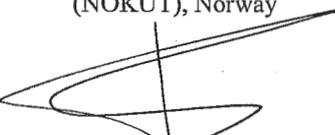Qualitätssicherungs-Institut (ACQUIN), Germany

Georg Reschauer
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Bereich Heilpädagogik, Pflege, Gesundheit und
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Udo Dierk
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Rainer Künzel
Zentrale Evaluations- und Akkreditierungsagentur
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Séamus Puirséil
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Council (HETAC), Ireland

Karl Dittrich
Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie
(NVAO), The Netherlands and Flanders

Oddvar Haugland
Nasjonalt organ for kvalitet i utdanningen
(NOKUT), Norway

Francisco Marcellán
Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y
Acreditación (ANECA), Spain
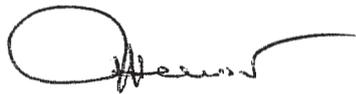
Rolf Heusser
Organ für Akkreditierung und Qualitätssicherung
der Schweizerischen Hochschulen (OAQ),
Switzerland

8.3. Joint declaration concerning the automatic recognition of qualifications

Vienna, 8 December 2005

Preamble

The participating members of the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (hereafter "ECA members") and the participating European National Information Centres / National Academic Recognition Information Centres (hereafter "ENIC/NARICs"),

Having regard to the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, Lisbon, 11 April 1997 (hereafter the "Lisbon Recognition Convention")[1],

Considering that the European ministers responsible for higher education called upon existing organisations and networks such as NARIC and ENIC to promote, at institutional, national and European level, simple, efficient and fair recognition reflecting the underlying diversity of qualifications in their Prague Communiqué,

Having regard to the overarching Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (hereafter the "overarching Framework") adopted by the European Ministers responsible for higher Education, as stated in their Bergen Communiqué,

Convinced that the improved recognition of qualifications is closely linked to improved and transparent quality assurance and this through cooperation between national systems based on a common understanding of goals, procedures and methods,

Realising that the responsibility for higher education lies with the relevant national authorities,

Agree to

form a partnership dedicated to the recognition of higher education qualifications based on accreditation results or decisions.

The aim of this partnership is a state of affairs where the ENIC/NARICs will recommend automatic recognition or, where appropri-

ate, will automatically recognise qualifications of higher education institutions and/or programmes, accredited by ECA members, at their proper level in the overarching Framework.[2]

To achieve this aim the following preconditions have been identified:
- The ECA members recognise each other's accreditation results or decisions.
- The National Qualifications Frameworks of the countries concerned are compatible with the overarching Framework and thus with each other's National Qualifications Frameworks.
- The Lisbon Recognition Convention is entered into force in the countries concerned.

ECA members and ENIC/NARICs will undertake the following actions to meet the preconditions:
- The ECA members will enter into mutual recognition agreements of accreditation results or decisions before the end of 2007.
- The ECA members and the ENIC/NARICs will encourage and contribute to the elaboration of National Qualifications Frameworks that are compatible with the overarching Framework.
- The ENIC/NARICs will encourage and contribute to the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, including appropriate bilateral instruments between the countries concerned.
- Before the end of 2009 the ENIC/NARICs will recognise qualifications or recommend recognition in accordance with the Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee in Riga on 6 June 2001.

ECA members and the ENIC/NARICs will consequently:
- exchange expertise, information and documentation on the subjects relevant for this partnership
- invite each others representatives to meetings and working groups on subjects related to this partnership

[1] *The terms defined in the Lisbon Recognition Convention are used in the same sense in the present Declaration, and reference is made to the definition of these terms in Section I of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.*

[2] *The concept of automatic recognition is presented here as recognition without invoking the substantial differences provisions under the Lisbon Recognition Convention regarding the quality and the level of the qualification.*

- develop a transparent information tool, which provides information on the accreditation organisations, systems and decisions as well as information on the qualifications of accredited higher education programmes and institutions.

- ask for official support of the competent national authorities, where appropriate.

The automatic recognition of qualifications will come into effect for those countries of which an ECA member and the corresponding ENIC/NARIC have signed this declaration.

ECA members

HANNELORE WECK-HANNEMANN
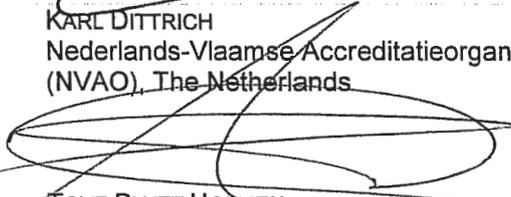Österreichischer Akkreditierungsrat
(AAC), Austria
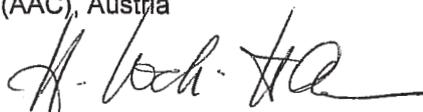
KURT SOHM
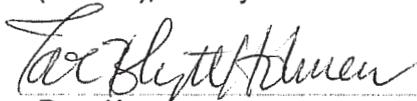Fachhochschulrat
(FHR), Austria

GUY AELTERMAN
Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie
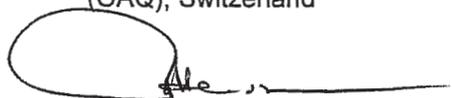(NVAO), Flanders (Belgium)

KARL DITTRICH
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(NVAO), The Netherlands

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Nasjonalt organ for kvalitet i utdanningen
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(OAQ), Switzerland

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(ANECA), Spain

ZBIGNIEW MARCINIAK
Polish State Accreditation Committee (PKA),
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ENIC/NARICs

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ENIC/NARIC Austria

ERWIN MALFROY
ENIC/NARIC Vlaanderen

JINDRA DIVIS
ENIC/NARIC The Netherlands (NUFFIC)

ROLF LOFSTAD
ENIC/NARIC Norway (NOKUT)

CHRISTINE GEHRIG
ENIC Switzerland

EWA MAJDOWSKA
ENIC/NARIC Poland

8.4. Principles for accreditation procedures regarding joint programmes

Berlin, 14 June 2007

Introduction

Joint programmes are programmes offered jointly by different higher education institutions irrespective of the degree (joint, multiple and double) awarded. Joint programmes could be subject to accreditation procedures by different accreditation organisations in each of the states where the joint programme is offered. These distinct accreditation jurisdictions imply the potential involvement of several accreditation organisations and therefore the execution of different accreditation procedures.

The members of ECA however agree that the Code of Good Practice applies to all accreditation organisations including their procedures regarding joint programmes. The principles set out below could be an integral part of a mutual recognition agreement. This implies that accreditation decisions regarding joint programmes are/should be subject to the relevant mutual recognition of accreditation decisions agreements.

In order to increase mutual trust and transparency, the members of ECA concur that accreditation procedures regarding joint programmes should take into account the following principles.

Principles for the accreditation of joint programmes

Information sharing and transparency
- On receipt of a request for the accreditation of a joint programme the accreditation organisation informs the other relevant accreditation organisation(s) about the request;
- The other relevant accreditation organisation(s) provide(s) information on:
  – Whether the programme is part of, has already undergone or is undergoing a quality assurance and/or an accreditation procedure;
  – Whether the relevant institutions can legally offer the joint programme (including the status of the degree involved).

The composition of the expert panel
- There should be particular emphasis on the inclusion of experts with relevant international experience and knowledge.

The assessment process
- The submitted documentation must include comprehensive information on the totality of the joint programme and not just the single contribution (national and/or institutional);
- The panel has to determine site visit(s) requirements;
- Any site visit(s) must include representatives of the programme who are able to present the totality of the joint programme across all sites (even if there are not representatives from all sites);
- The panel makes its assessment on the totality of the joint programme, including taking into account the learning outcomes aimed for by the joint programme irrespective of the individual study pathways;
- The assessment process should, where possible, include at least one observer from another relevant accreditation organisation.

The accreditation decision
- The accreditation decision is based on the assessment of the totality of the joint programme (even if the accreditation decision is only binding in the "jurisdiction" of the accreditation organisation that took the decision);
- The accreditation decision must be communicated to the relevant accreditation organisation(s).

Principles for the quality assurance of joint programmes through institutional accreditation

The principles below can be seen in the light of an institution undergoing institutional accreditation for the first time or an institution getting renewal of its institutional accreditation.

Information sharing and transparency
- A request for the accreditation of an institution offering or seeking to offer joint programme(s) should include information on the joint programme(s) involved;
- The accreditation organisation should inform the other relevant accreditation organisation(s) about such joint programmes;
- These other relevant accreditation organisation(s) should provide information on such joint programmes:
- Whether the programmes are part of, have already undergone or are undergoing a quality assurance and/or an accreditation procedure;
- Whether the relevant institutions can legally offer these joint programmes (including the status of the degree involved).

The composition of the expert panel
- There should be particular emphasis on the inclusion of experts with relevant international experience and knowledge.

The assessment process
- Accreditation organisations should assess whether an institution seeking accreditation pays regard to the following principles within their own quality assurance procedures:
- The institution has the mechanisms to gather information on the totality of each joint programme and not just the single institutional contribution;
- The institution has, or has the potential to put in place, quality assurance procedures that can consider its joint programme(s) or these procedures have been complemented/replaced by a quality assurance system set up by the joint programme itself;

- The institution regularly assesses the totality of each joint programme, including taking into account the learning outcomes aimed for by each joint programme irrespective of the individual study pathways.

The accreditation decision
- The accreditation decision must be communicated to the relevant accreditation organisation(s).

The introduction of new joint programmes
- Accreditation organisations should inform accredited institutions that they are expected to quality assure any new joint programme(s) with a rigour equivalent to that which provided the basis of the institution's accreditation.

Approved in the plenary session of the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education in Berlin on 14 June 2007.

On behalf of ECA,

Rolf Heusser
Chairman of ECA

8.5. Example of a mutual recognition agreement: NVAO and OAQ Agreement on mutual recognition of accreditation decisions[1] between Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie (NVAO) and Państwowa Komisja Akredytacyjna (PKA)

Introduction

The European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) was founded in 2003 and consisted originally of 12 accreditation organisations from 8 countries. Since then, ECA was enlarged with 3 organisations and 2 countries. As a consequence, there are 15 ECA members from 10 different European countries in 2007.

ECA acts as a project organisation aiming at mutual recognition of each others accreditation decisions. The recognition of qualifications and the mobility of students and graduates would highly benefit from the trust in quality as expressed by mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. By striving towards and fulfilling this aim the ECA partners contribute to the accomplishment of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which includes the important development of national qualifications frameworks in accordance with the overarching European Qualifications Framework.

The partner organisations in ECA realise that their recognition of each others decisions should be based on (earned) trust and thorough mutual understanding of accreditation frameworks, procedures and decision-making. ECA members have made a lot of efforts to reach that trust and mutual understanding. They have committed themselves to common standards and principles, and compared and observed each others frameworks, procedures, and decision-making.[2]

The ECA partners realise that the effects of this mutual recognition agreement will be highly increased if national governments and recognition authorities would include this agreement in their national policies on the recognition of foreign qualifications.[3]

Preamble

Aiming to contribute to the internationalisation of higher education and to enhance the mobility of students and graduates in Europe;

with the purpose to facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications by informing recognition authorities on the quality of these qualifications;

with the additional purpose of facilitating joint programmes and degrees by eliminating multiple accreditation procedures in different countries and implementing one procedure under supervision of one of the signatory agencies;

convinced that mutual recognition agreements between accreditation organisations enhance transparency in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and provide important information on the quality of foreign institutions and programmes for students, higher education institutions and the labour market;

relying on the work of ECA since 2003 to build up mutual trust between the member organisations;

based upon the ECA Agreement of Cooperation (2003), the ECA Code of Good Practice (2004) and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2005), the ECA Principles for the Selection of Experts (2005) and the ECA Principles for Accreditation Procedures regarding Joint Programmes (2007);

realising that the trust building activities leading to mutual recognition have increased mutual understanding, good practices and the validity of the work of the accreditation organisations;

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[1] *In some countries the national legislation enables accreditation organisations to take legally binding accreditation decisions and to accept accreditation decisions of other accreditation organisations as their own. In some other countries this is not the case and mutual recognition may refer to "accreditation results" (the judgements made on the quality) rather than to "accreditation decisions" in a legal sense. It is up to the accreditation organisations to take into account the legal context in their respective countries and to decide whether in a certain agreement it is appropriate to use either "accreditation decisions" or "accreditation results". In both cases what is mutually recognised is the judgement on the quality. This mutual recognition agreement does not include consequences (e.g. funding) that may be connected to accreditation in a given national setting but that do not apply to foreign accreditations.*

taking into account the results from in-depth comparisons and observations of their accreditation procedures and standards;

acknowledging the variety of national higher education systems and accepting the existence of different legal prerequisites for accreditation procedures, standards and decisions.

Agreement

The signing accreditation organisations agree to regard their accreditation procedures, standards and decisions as free of significant differences;

and confirm that within their competences they accept the decisions of the accreditation procedures of the other signing accreditation organisation;

on the condition that the external evaluation of PKA according to the ECA Code of Good Practice will be positive (to be known in 2008);

and on the condition that the signing agencies continue to exchange information about their accreditation systems on a regular basis. Substantial changes of the accreditation systems should be communicated without delay.

The signing accreditation organisations agree to give each other access to all relevant documents relating to the accreditation decisions. Documents that are not published must be treated confidentially.

This agreement is valid for 3 years and can be extended after re-evaluation of the preset conditions.

Any of the signing accreditation organisations may denounce this agreement by written notification to the other party at any time. The written notification must include the reasons for and the date of the termination of this agreement.

2 *An overview of the ECA approach towards mutual recognition and the results achieved are included in the ECA report for the London Ministerial conference and can be downloaded from: http://www.ecaconsortium.net/index.php?section=content&id=20*

3 *The signing accreditation organisations will do their part to facilitate the recognition of qualifications, e.g. by disseminating this mutual recognition agreement to national governments and recognition authorities and by participating in the information tool on accredited qualifications.*

Dr. Karl Dittrich
Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie (NVAO)

Signed on: 10th December 2007 in Barcelona (Spain).

Cc:
• National and recognition authorities
• ECA Coordinator

Professor Zbigniew Marciniak
Paňstwowa Komisja Akredytacyjna (PKA)

Comparability of the quality of programmes and
institutions is a prerequisite for the creation of the
European Higher Education Area. Since the
beginning of the Bologna Process the need for
close co-operation of accreditation and quality
assurance agencies and the acceptance of
national quality assurance systems has been
emphasised by the ministers responsible for higher
education.

Against this background, 15 national
accreditation organisations from 10 European
countries have worked together in the European
Consortium for Accreditation in higher education
(ECA) with the aim to achieve the mutual
recognition of accreditation decisions.

In 2007 they reached their goal and signed
mutual recognition agreements. This publication
gives an insight into this project undertaken by
ECA and summarises the results of their
dissemination conference that took place in
Barcelona in December 2007.

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