

Working Group on Recognition

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Specific task III

Clarify differences in recognition criteria and procedures and make recommendations with a view to ensuring more equal treatment of applications for recognition

1 – Differences in criteria and procedures

The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) is widely seen as a powerful instrument for providing fair and unbiased recognition. One of the key documents guiding the practical implementation of the LRC is “Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications”, adopted by the LRC Committee in 2001 and the revised text adopted by the Committee (possibly) in 2010. The Recommendation codifies established best practice in recognition and suggests further improvements.

In daily practice, however, the criteria and procedures of the LRC are interpreted in different ways by different countries, competent authorities and individual credential evaluators. Especially the basic principle of the Convention - that one should recognize a foreign qualification unless one can demonstrate substantial differences between the foreign qualification and the corresponding qualification in one’s own system - appears to be difficult to apply consistently.

In most cases, final decisions concerning recognition of individual qualifications are made by higher education institutions, which are assisted in different ways by ENICs/NARICs. ENICs/NARICs have an important role in many countries in advising higher education institutions, to provide information and to make recommendations concerning recognition of individual qualifications. Even if the advice from ENIC/NARIC would be consistent, there seem to be, though, big differences in recognition criteria and procedures in higher education institutions.

There are also big differences in how recognition work in higher education institutions is monitored, if at all.

In following, based on sources mentioned as well as the results of the analysis of National Action Plans, relevant issues are being listed.

1.1. Differences in criteria

The main emphasis in this paper is put on recognition criteria, since there seem to be more similarities in procedures than there are similarities in recognition criteria. With recognition criteria we refer to on what basis the recognition decisions are made and what is seen as substantial difference and thus makes recognition impossible or leads to partial recognition.

In 2008 a NARIC-project entitled *Survey on Substantial Differences* was carried out in order to investigate how the various ENIC/NARIC centers interpret and apply the concept of substantial differences in ten real-life cases. The main conclusion from this survey was that recognition practice in Europe is rather divided. In three typical cases outright controversial issues were identified. But even in the more ‘convergent’ cases there was a lack of general agreement among

ENICs/NARICs on how to deal with the case. The relevant parts of the analysis of the National Action Plans on Recognition dealing with similar issues strongly confirm this conclusion, as does the daily experience in ENIC/NARIC offices.

Concentrating on the controversial issues mainly from the survey, there are three important cases relating to recognition criteria that are relevant to describe here:

Accreditation and recognition of a programme or institution

Straightforward forms of national accreditation and/or recognition of programmes and institutions are usually not difficult to deal with for the ENICs/NARICs. However, it appeared that some ENICs/NARICs require that programmes and degrees must always be accredited/recognized in the country where the degree was issued. Accreditation of the programme in another country is not accepted by these ENICs/NARICs. Other NARICs do accept such a form of transnational accreditation, and will treat the degree as being legitimately issued in the country of accreditation. Still other ENICs/NARICs will in principle accept the degree as being accredited, but will further investigate the details of the transnational arrangement (especially in terms of quality) before making an evaluation.

Learning outcomes versus study load

One of the main current challenges is to use the learning outcomes as the basis for recognition of qualifications and to consider the weight of learning outcomes in relation to study load (input).

How to evaluate e.g. a foreign Master's programme that is considerably shorter in duration than the Master's programme required in one's own country? Some ENICs/NARICs consider a difference of 1 year (or a workload of 60 ECTS) as too substantial to grant full recognition. Other ENICs/NARICs will take the learning outcomes into account, and will accept the degree if the learning outcomes meet the requirements. Still other ENICs/NARICs do not specifically take the learning outcomes into account, but will accept the degree if it gives access to PhD studies in the home country.

Formal rights in the home country

Formal rights in the home country can mean e.g. a situation when a foreign Bachelor's degree for some reason does not give access to Master's programmes in the home country. Most ENICs/NARICs, if asked to evaluate whether such a foreign Bachelor's degree might give access to a Master's programme in their country, would deny full recognition on purely formal grounds. But some other ENICs/NARICs would investigate whether the learning outcomes of this Bachelor's degree might be sufficient for access to a Master's programme, regardless of the formal rights in the home country.

These three examples illustrate typical situations when the concept "substantial differences" is applied in different ways in different countries. Different recognition criteria lead to that individuals are treated differently depending on where they are, and where they want to continue their studies. Situations described earlier are simplified and the actual situations may be more complicated.

1.2 Differences in procedures

When it comes to procedures, there seem to be differences in e.g. information available to applicants, requirements concerning authenticity and translations, time required for recognition, who is involved and whether recognition procedures and decisions are monitored and/or considered as part of the overall quality assurance of the higher education institution.

2. Recommendations to ensure more equal treatment

To be discussed by the working group on the basis of the differences described above.

3 – European Area for Recognition – Information about ongoing project

As a follow-up to several previous NARIC-projects (such as the one described above) the NARIC project *European Area for Recognition* was launched in 2010. This project will concentrate on collecting recommendations on good practice in recognition from various projects and other sources (especially the Table on good practice at the end of the report on National Action Plans), to create coherency, consistency and convergence in European recognition practice. The project is organized in four stages (see picture below).

The project team consists of the NARICs of The Netherlands (coordinator), UK, Poland, France, Denmark, Flanders, Lithuania and the Czech Republic. Furthermore, there is a steering group consisting of the President of the ENIC network and the President of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee.

The main output of the project will be a European Recognition Manual, containing standards and guidelines on all aspects of recognition, as well as a comparison with the actual situation in Europe. This manual will be based on the Criteria and Procedures in the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and on the existing examples of good practice from previous projects and other sources. It will be accessible on-line (www.eurorecognition.eu), which will allow for continuous maintenance and will ensure that the end users are provided with the latest version of the manual.

The project is expected to contribute to a joint European recognition area of higher education, in which a similar methodology in recognition of diplomas is practiced, based on commonly agreed standards and guidelines, and in which recognition procedures are transparent to all stakeholders. As such, the project will also contribute to the general objectives of the Bologna process.

It is foreseen that the outcomes of the project will be adopted by the ENIC/NARIC-networks (perhaps an addition to the already existing Charter), and perhaps also by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee. The Recognition Manual may also be adopted by the Working Group on Recognition. Conversely, issues raised by the Working Group might be incorporated into the EAR-project.

European Recognition Area

EAR Project Planning



