

BOLOGNA MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE 2010

MOBILITY AND RECOGNITION

Comments by Sjur Bergan, Council of Europe

Later today, we will board a train that will take us from Budapest to Wien in about the time it will take to enjoy a good central European dinner. We will enjoy the dinner but we will not be nostalgic for the time when elaborate border controls and identity checks made the journey long and cumbersome.

Would our qualifications be able to travel as easily and speedily as we will do tonight? This, to me, is one of the essential questions for the European Higher Education Area. Are we able to carry our intellectual luggage across borders and put all of our qualifications to good use in our new country - or do mobile learners still run into procedures and practices unencumbered by developments in European cooperation over the past two decades?

The basic rules and regulations to make life easier for mobile learners are in place. The Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention has now been ratified by all Bologna countries except two, and the country that joined us today, Kazakhstan, was among the early signatories. The ECTS is widely used; the Diploma Supplement a little less so but it is still issued in a majority of the Bologna countries.

Practice, however, is less promising. A key principle of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention is that foreign qualifications should be recognized unless you can demonstrate that there is a substantial difference between the qualification for which recognition is sought and the corresponding qualification of the home country. To say that this requires more attention is an understatement. Too often, even minor differences are considered to be a reason for non-recognition and too often recognition practice is not put into the broader context of promoting cooperation and mobility.

Fair recognition requires good policies. The independent assessment is silent about the national action plans submitted by ministers in 2007, but these plans give reason for concern because many are reports on an unsatisfactory state of affairs rather than road maps to better practice in the future. If national policies are too intent on "protecting" their own qualifications system and too little aware of their role in helping learners, fair recognition will not follow. If national policies seek to compare procedures and structures rather than assess students' real knowledge, understanding and ability to act expressed through learning outcomes, fair recognition will not follow. If national policies do not seize upon qualifications frameworks as instruments that make qualifications easier to understand, fair recognition will not follow. And if fair recognition does not follow, the fact that 45 of the now 47 Bologna countries have ratified the only legal text of the European Higher Education Area will not ensure mobility.

Fair recognition alone is of course not enough to ensure mobility. Scholarships, improved visa regulations and work permits and other elements that cannot be detailed in three minutes are also required. But unless all Bologna countries improve their efforts to put the European legal framework for recognition into practice nationally, the European Higher Education Area will not reach its goal of 20 per cent mobile students by 2020. The Council of Europe, UNESCO and the European Commission will continue our work to improve recognition but it is worth underlining that the subsidiary principle is as important to ensuring good practice as it is to making good decisions.

To make the European Higher Education Area an area of academic mobility for students and staff, we must develop institutional and national recognition practices that catch up with the international legal regulations, we must look more for reasons that make it possible to recognize foreign qualifications and less for those that may give us a reason to refuse recognition, and we must approach foreign qualifications with the same openness of mind with which we would like our own qualifications to be considered abroad. To meet our mobility goals, we must take not the nostalgia train but the train to the future; the train that crosses borders with a maximum of speed; the one that uses the legal framework to make recognition possible rather than to prevent it from happening – the train that aims at making the European Higher Education Area a living reality that makes a difference in the lives of students and teachers.