

The benefits of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions

1. Introduction

In December 2007 twelve bilateral mutual recognition agreements and four letters of intent were signed in Barcelona. In the subsequent conference publication the following challenges and questions were highlighted for the future:

“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, particularly 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 Crossroads.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? Is there a bright future for mutual recognition agreements across continents?”¹

In the two years that have passed since then, all of these points were addressed (although not all questions are fully answered yet):

- An ECA seminar to inform each other about changes in accreditation systems has been held on 9 December 2009.
- It has become clear that the benefits of mutual recognition are most obvious when applied to joint programmes. In TEAM II five pilot projects for the single accreditation of joint programmes have been carried out.
- A multilateral mutual recognition agreement aimed at joint programmes is being proposed by WG 1 (see separate paper). A streamlined methodology for newcomers to enter into this multilateral agreement will be developed by WG 1 after Graz.
- The focus of the cooperation with ENIC-NARICs has gradually moved away from “automatic” recognition of *all* foreign qualifications with mutual recognition of accreditation decisions as a pre-condition (Joint Declaration) to cooperation with regard to the recognition of qualifications from *joint programmes*. The success of the Warsaw Workshop where ENIC-NARICs explored recognition issues regarding qualifications awarded by joint programmes showed that this is a very important topic for future cooperation between ENIC-NARICs and ECA. Although “automatic”

¹ ECA, “The Benefits of Mutual Recognition of Accreditation and Quality Assurance Decisions”, p.15, The Hague, 2008.

recognition of foreign qualifications remains a long-term goal, it has become apparent that on the axis of accreditation and recognition of joint programmes immediate benefits are within reach. In addition, the work on learning outcomes is of relevance for both recognition (e.g. CoRe II project) and accreditation (e.g. the work of ECA WG 4 on the assessment of learning outcomes).

- TEAM II has enabled the improvement of Qrossroads and the inclusion of 6 additional countries (bringing the total at 13 countries by the end of 2010).
- TEAM II and the proposed new JOQAR project deal with the development of a methodology for single accreditation of joint programmes.
- The proposed JOQAR project focuses on the accreditation and recognition of joint programmes, and includes international partners outside of ECA. The establishment by INQAAHE of a Working Group on Mutual Recognition (chaired by Rolf Heusser) will bring together mutual recognition initiatives, agencies and stakeholders from across the globe. This will enable an international exchange of information on mutual recognition methodologies and results. It will also provide an opportunity to “test the waters” for using the ECA methodology on other continents.

What we will look at in this short paper are the (possible) benefits of mutual recognition as they have emerged in the two and a half years since the bilateral mutual recognition agreements were signed. These benefits can be distinguished in general benefits, corresponding to the main goals of the Bologna process, and the benefits of mutual recognition for each of the stakeholders in accreditation and quality assurance.

2. General benefits of mutual recognition

Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions contributes to at least three goals and action lines of the Bologna process; increasing the number of joint programmes by facilitating accreditation of joint programmes; facilitating the recognition of qualifications and thereby enhancing student mobility in the European Higher Education Area; and, increasing the co-operation between accreditation and QA agencies through mutual learning, disseminating good practices and establishing common principles and practices which lay the foundations for mutual recognition agreements.

1. Facilitating accreditation of joint programmes (single accreditation procedure instead of multiple national procedures).

From the survey on mutual recognition that WG 1 held among ECA members (presented in Zürich in June 2009) it became clear that six out of the twelve agencies that responded had already carried out an accreditation procedure regarding a joint programme. These agencies were ANECA, AQAS, ASIIN, CTI, NVAO and ZEvA. It is quite likely that more agencies have been accrediting joint programmes in the meantime. The survey made it clear that accreditation of joint programmes is carried out in different ways, not only between agencies but also between accreditation procedures of joint programmes undertaken by the same agency. From the six agencies that have carried out at least one accreditation procedure regarding a joint programme there were two agencies that reported a single accreditation of a joint programme based on a mutual recognition agreement. Furthermore, four agencies had carried out an accreditation of a joint programme in cooperation with at least one other agency. Three agencies reported that they had carried out a national accreditation procedure in which they only looked at their national requirements and the part of the programme

provided in their own country. Three agencies said that there had been multiple accreditation procedures in other countries in addition to their national procedure.

In all of these cases it is possible that the accreditation results in one country are not accepted by agencies in the other countries involved in the joint programme. When this happens, a multiple accreditation procedure with duplication of efforts made and waste of resources and time, quickly becomes an undesired reality for the joint programme. Therefore, it's very beneficial for joint programmes if they only have to undergo a single accreditation procedure. As the number of joint programmes is expanding² the necessity to reduce barriers for joint programmes by a single accreditation instead of multiple accreditation procedures is increasing. If there would be a multilateral recognition agreement in which agencies accept the results of a single accreditation procedure, based on agreed principles, then this would facilitate the accreditation and the enhancement of joint programmes as such.

2. Facilitating the recognition of qualifications.

International recognition of qualifications is rooted in legislative structures. Quality of diploma's and degrees were and are still most often 'guaranteed' by national authorities, most often the state with or without accreditation or national inspectorate reports. However, new types of provisions in higher education have emerged which are not 'covered' by national legislation. Reliable guarantee of qualifications obtained in this 'grey' area has created new needs in the field of international recognition. These include the recognition of:

- (international) joint degrees and programs
- degrees and diploma's in private higher education
- diploma's of non-degrees programs
- assessment of good practice in defining higher education output in terms of learning outcomes and competencies
- assessment of the quality assurance of non-traditional types of learning, including non-formal and informal learning
- confirmation of the quality of private/independent accreditation agencies

In this field the contributions of cooperating accreditation agencies could provide great added value. Mutual recognition agreements are one step in that direction. Involvement of ENIC-NARICs has increased awareness of initiatives and activities in the field of accreditation, which so far for many, were fairly out of scope.

Accreditation of programmes and their qualifications are irrevocably linked. Accreditation leads to 'approved' qualifications. International recognition of qualifications and recognition practice is, and has traditionally always been, based upon national (and international) legislation. Close cooperation has led to bilateral and sometimes multilateral agreements and – after many, many years – an umbrella agreement on good practice and the principles concerning criteria and procedures (Lisbon Convention 1997). Still, agreements were and are linked to national structures. Higher education programmes and institutions 'outside the (national) system' are seldom included.

A call to link accreditation and the recognition of qualifications has led to a number of initiatives, among them cooperation agreements of ECA members and the ENIC-NARIC and

² An estimate is that there are some 2,500 joint programmes already in Europe, including more than 100 Erasmus Mundus Masters Courses.

recognition bodies involved (Joint Declaration). Further cooperation is desirable. Mutual recognition enhances trust in each other QA systems and recognition can benefit from this trust.

On the long term this can be most effective if the Joint Declaration regarding “automatic” recognition with mutual recognition of accreditation decisions as a pre-condition is implemented and enlarged with other countries. Improved and smoother recognition of qualifications will facilitate mobility of students and graduates in the European Higher Education Area. On the short term joint programmes and learning outcomes seem to be the areas where cooperation between ENIC-NARICs and ECA members can deliver more immediate benefits. If accreditation agencies enter into a multilateral recognition agreement regarding joint programmes then the recognition of qualifications from joint programmes can also be enhanced. Similarly, if ECA members manage to establish coherent and effective practices for the assessment of learning outcomes then the recognition of qualifications will benefit from this too.

- 3. Cooperation between agencies with the aim to reach mutual recognition agreements contributes to mutual learning, dissemination of good practices and the establishment of common principles and practices. When mutual recognition agreements lead agencies to accept the accreditation results of other agencies it will save staff time and resources. In addition, the international cooperation on mutual recognition can increase the national legitimacy of agencies and the support of stakeholders.*

The survey held by WG 1 showed that all responding twelve agencies thought that the work on mutual recognition had improved international collaboration. Six out of ten responding agencies said that the bilateral mutual recognition agreements that they signed led to an even closer collaboration between agencies. So the benefits of mutual recognition for cooperation between agencies are evident. Two agencies reported that they had already accepted accreditation results based on mutual recognition agreements. There are also other experiences of agencies where it became clear that, if there had been a mutual recognition agreement, it would have saved time and resources that now had to be invested in assessing whether a foreign accreditation complied to national requirements.

The discussion by QA and accreditation agencies during the Barcelona conference (2007) touched on the validation of the work of agencies, where ‘validation’ was defined 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 other agencies do. It builds trust since it promotes transparency and allows the agencies to communicate with a common language as far as accreditation is concerned. It also disseminates information, enhances joint learning and reflection on accreditation criteria and procedures. Moreover, it increases the credibility of the agencies to stakeholders.³

3. Benefits of mutual recognition for stakeholders

Mutual recognition has not only general benefits, relating to the goals of the Bologna process. It also has specific benefits for stakeholders and it is important to convey these benefits to stakeholders and involve them in our work on mutual recognition. Higher

³ ECA, “The Benefits of Mutual Recognition of Accreditation and Quality Assurance Decisions”, p. 23, The Hague, 2008.

education institutions (HEIs), students, graduates, employers, ENIC-NARICs and, last but not least, accreditation/QA agencies can all benefit from mutual recognition in the following ways:

Benefits for HEIs:

- getting an accreditation label that is recognised by the national accreditation body and foreign partner agencies

for HEIs offering joint programmes:

- mutual recognition enables resources-saving, single accreditation procedures instead of multiple procedures

for HEIs offering programmes abroad:

- mutual recognition enables resources-saving accreditation procedures (acceptance by agencies in other countries of accreditation carried out by the agency in the home country of the HEI) and enhances recognition of qualifications in the home country and the receiving country

for HEIs establishing a campus/site abroad:

- mutual recognition enables resources-saving accreditation procedures (acceptance by agencies in other countries of accreditation carried out by the agency in the home country of the HEI) and enhances recognition of qualifications in the home country and the receiving country.

Benefits for students:

- Transparent and reliable information on quality of programmes and institutions as this is the result of cooperation between agencies (through mutual recognition agreements and made visible and searchable on Qrossroads).
- Mutual recognition enhances the recognition of qualifications obtained by students and graduates and thereby contributes to cross-border mobility for the purposes of (further) study and work.
- Although the responsibility for providing security for students spending part of their programme elsewhere (study abroad or student exchange) lies mainly with the institutions, a mutual recognition agreement between the respective agencies does provide some basic security – like the pillars support the arches of a bridge.
- Mutual recognition 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 that a student may transfer between them with credit for prior studies. Mutual recognition by two agencies of each other's decisions would extend this presumption across approved institutions of both agencies. Thus, mutual recognition could well contribute to portability of learning. It might establish a global threshold that can be understood by students, employers, and others.⁴

Benefits for graduates and employers:

- Mutual recognition agreements provide trust in the quality of the diploma and qualification of foreign applicants to the employers.

⁴ ECA, "The Benefits of Mutual Recognition of Accreditation and Quality Assurance Decisions", p. 28-29, The Hague, 2008.

- Inasmuch as approval of an institution by an accreditation agency provides some assurance about the characteristics of the institution's graduates, within the agency's country, recognition of that agency by another extends the scope of that assurance to the second agency's country.
- Mutual recognition 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.

Benefits for ENIC-NARICs:

- For a recognition body mutual recognition agreements reflect trustworthy results of sound cooperation in the field of accreditation. The network thus created has a potential to provide a solid basis for the recognition of qualifications in transnational settings and private education, serving as a link to qualifications in the national structures.
- Recognition bodies are in need of reliable information on quality assurance of learning outcomes in higher education and the assessment of non-traditional learning paths. Cooperating accreditation agencies could provide valuable contributions – and maybe even guidance - in these issues. This cooperation could e.g. lead to joint statements in terms of learning outcomes which could serve as guidelines in programme design and the recognition of qualifications.
- Information tools such as Qrossroads make information on e.g. mutual recognition agreements, accredited qualifications and accreditation systems easy accessible for ENIC-NARICs.

Benefits for accreditation and QA agencies:

- Mutual recognition enables resources-saving single accreditation procedures for joint programmes.
- Mutual recognition enables resources-saving accreditation procedures by accepting foreign accreditation results for foreign programmes offered within the national borders.
- Mutual recognition enables resources-saving accreditation procedures by the acceptance in other countries of the accreditation results for a national programme offered abroad as well.
- Collaboration between agencies and in-depth insight of their quality systems.
- Learning from good practices carried out by partner agencies.
- Enrichment of agencies' activities.
- Increased appreciation of the quality parameters underpinning institutions and programmes.
- Authorisation of agencies to operate across country boundaries and to provide accreditation for foreign programmes offered abroad.
- Basis for judgements on the quality of institutions and programmes in other jurisdictions, by employers and prospective students.
- Understanding of curricula, standards and criteria across country boundaries.
- Increased national legitimacy and support of stakeholders because of intensive international cooperation and the acceptance of accreditation results in other countries.