

*Working group 1*

## **Towards a Multilateral Recognition Agreement of Accreditation Decisions**

*Discussion paper*

*draft, May 2010*

### **1. Introduction and background**

ECA has been founded in 2003 with the aim of reaching mutual recognition agreements. The ECA approach of mutual recognition is based on an intensive process of trust building through information exchange; commonly agreed tools and instruments; external evaluations of members and co-operation projects aimed at mutual recognition. This evidence based confidence enabled the participating agencies to accept the accreditation results of other ECA members as equivalent to their own and therefore to sign mutual recognition agreements in 2007.

In 2008 the ECA members agreed to continue and build on the work of phase 1 of the consortium and reconfirmed the aim to achieve mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions.

### **2. Are mutual recognition agreements able to fulfil the promises?**

Until now, the signing of MRAs seems not yet fully reflected in an adequate level of activity in their application. What might be the reasons for this slowed warm-up phase?

WG 1 identified the following potential obstacles of implementation:

a) The effect of MRAs is depending on transnational activities of HEIs. Only a few MRAs were signed and the signatory countries are not identical with those countries that are e.g. in consortia with joint programmes or joint accreditation procedures.

b) The accrediting power of most of the signatory members of MRAs is limited to the national scope. They cannot initiate transnational accreditation procedures. (The case of CTI illustrates that the range of application and impact of MRAs widens significantly if an agency's activities are not limited to the national scope.)

c) Joint declaration (Vienna sententia) is not yet implemented sufficiently. This may be partially due to the fact that one of the preconditions for "automatic" recognition of qualifications, namely the self-verification of the NQFs, has only been completed in a few cases. However, the Workshop with ENIC/NARICs with regard to the recognition of qualifications from joint programmes has also shown that accreditation is only one of the issues considered when making recognition decisions.

Notwithstanding these difficulties in the implementation there is already a number of benefits of MRAs that have become obvious:

- a) Facilitating accreditation of joint programmes
  - b) Reduction of costs and bureaucratic burden for establishing a joint programme
  - c) Facilitating the recognition of qualifications through providing a solid basis of reliable and comparable information
  - d) Positive side effects of MRAs as mutual learning and disseminating good practice among participating agencies.
- A more detailed analysis of the benefits of MRAs (including concrete examples for the different stakeholder groups) is outlined in a separate paper of WG 1.

### **3. From bilateral agreements to a multilateral agreement: MULTRA**

Bilateral MRAs signed in 2007 have to be evaluated and renewed after three years. But as already mentioned 12 bilateral agreements with only a limited number of ECA member countries involved are not enough to show an impact, particularly in the case of joint programmes. Therefore the logic step to the next level should be taken and ECA members should sign a multilateral recognition agreement (MULTRA).

#### **3.1. MULTRA - What it should be/what it cannot be**

What are the key features of MULTRA? How could the concept be defined with regard to the existing bilateral MRAs?

##### **Specific focus on joint programmes...**

Mutual recognition agreements are most useful for joint programmes as these don't have to be assessed in multiple national accreditation procedures when there are mutual recognition agreements.

The MULTRA will focus on joint programmes and therefore the content of the agreement has to be adopted as follows:

*The signing accreditation organisations agree to apply the ECA principles for accreditation procedures regarding joint programmes;*

*and confirm that within their competences they accept the results of the accreditation procedures of the other signing accreditation organisations **when accrediting joint programmes;***

*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 key sentences of the bilateral MRA would also fit for the MULTRA with the only difference that the scope is restricted to joint programmes. As a consequence signing the MULTRA should not pose any problems for those ECA members who have already signed a bilateral MRA.

Independently from the MULTRA the existing bilateral agreements should be renewed and also new bilateral agreements can be signed.

### **...and more visibility**

The MULTRA will be a step towards more visibility of mutual recognition and therefore lead to an increase of practical use. Furthermore it will strengthen the commitment of agencies to collaborate and to reach up to high quality standards.

### **Evidence-based trust ...**

The MULTRA should stand for a high level of trust between accreditation agencies. This trust between the partners is based on evidence gained through intense cooperation, in-depth comparisons and mutual observation of procedures. These practical experiences and evidence based trust is the key distinction from e.g. EQAR where a committee decides about the fulfilment of formal criteria. But the MULTRA must not become a closed and exclusive 'club'.

### **....but open to newcomers**

Signing new bilateral MRAs is a burdensome exercise for ECA members. This might be the reason why no new MRAs were signed since 2007. A significant added value of the MULTRA will be to offer a fast track for 'newcomers' to join the agreement. But what should be the entrance barrier for new members to join?

## **3.2. What evidence do we need for signing MULTRA?**

The key question for signing bilateral as well as multilateral agreements is: What kind of evidence do we need? Do we need evidence about the quality of the outcomes of a programme in absolute terms? Or do we e.g. need evidence about the good use of resources allowing the conclusion that this will lead to good quality?

WG 1 proposes the following, taking into account the experiences from ECA phase 1 and the results of the questionnaire among ECA members from 2009:

### **One single procedure...**

Agencies who have already signed bilateral agreements have already undergone observations and at least one comparative analysis and therefore should be in the position to sign the MULTRA without any additional requirements.

For new members signing the MULTRA (= those who have not yet signed any bilateral agreements) there should **be one single procedure**. From the answers of the above mentioned questionnaire we learned

- a) that the external review doesn't provide enough evidence for mutual recognition,
- b) that the comparative analysis and the observations of procedures are seen as the most valuable elements to reach mutual recognition.

Therefore the new procedure should combine the most important elements of the existing observation report and the existing comparative analysis format. A draft for a new format will be elaborated by WG 1.

To prevent that a new member comes in via the 'weakest link' at least two observers from two different MULTRA members should take part in accreditation procedures of the applicant member and do the comparative analysis.

### **... and consensus**

Mutual recognition is based on trust and therefore a consensus of all signatory members is needed to accept a new member to sign the MULTRA.

### **3.3 What are the benefits of MULTRA?**

- Concentrated on joint programmes
- Less burdensome procedure for joining the mutual recognition agreement
- Not necessary to engage in many different bilateral procedures
- Efficient way to expand mutual recognition to more Bologna countries and to implement it as an European tool of cooperation
- Increase of practical use of mutual recognition
- Increased visibility

### **4 Timetable**

WG 1 proposes the following two-phase procedure for signing the MULTRA: In December 2010 the MULTRA can be signed by ECA members that have already signed bilateral MRAs. Starting from June 2011 new members can sign MULTRA following the procedure outlined under point 3.2.