

REPORT FROM THE INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON THE ROLE OF NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS AND QUALITY ASSURANCE IN RECOGNITION

Trakošćan, Croatia, 11 December 2013

Introduction

The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) and the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia jointly organised the International Seminar on the Role of National Qualifications Frameworks and Quality Assurance in Recognition, which was held on 11 December 2013 in Trakošćan, Croatia.

Background

The seminar was held as an activity under the Peer learning and peer review initiative proposed by the Bologna Follow-Up Group in its Work Plan 2012-2015. The Peer learning and peer review initiative proposal was first included in the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué to promote progress in the implementation of Bologna reforms at both national and institutional levels. The proposal was further elaborated and adopted by the BFUG in Dublin in March 2013. The aim is to set up a voluntary system of peer learning and review, which will facilitate the exchange of good practice and the assessment of the implementation of Bologna reforms, as well as help inform national policies on a thematic basis.

Peer learning activities facilitate mutual learning and the exchange of good practice across the EHEA countries. Peer reviews provide countries with the opportunity for a comprehensive external assessment by international experts of policies and measures being implemented in their country.

The seminar in Trakošćan was among the first international seminars supporting the new BFUG peer learning and peer review initiative.

Specific topics of the seminar

The seminar addressed two topics: the challenges in recognition systems and procedures and the effective use of Bologna tools in recognition (1) and cross-border quality assurance in higher education (2).

The first thematic session was structured in two parts, a plenary session where two case studies were presented (Flanders and Croatia) and discussions in small working groups that were informed by guiding questions related to:

- the strengths/opportunities of the different recognition systems (presented in case studies and participants' own country) at national, institutional and individual levels;
- the challenges in using the QA and NQF (more systematically) in recognition procedures, including both legal provisions and practice of national bodies such as ENIC-NARIC as well as higher education institutions;



- the contribution of the Bologna tools (NQF, ECTS, DS, EQAR and ESG) to the different aspects of the recognition process;
- steps at the European level that would make it easier to use the QA and NQFs in recognition.

PART ONE - challenges in recognition systems and procedures

The Flemish and Croatian models of recognition of foreign qualifications were presented as case studies after which the participants were invited to share and review their own national experiences and challenges in the light of the case studies presented.

Recognition in Flanders

The new legal framework for automatic recognition of foreign higher education qualifications in Flanders came into force in July 2011. It relies on quality assurance and qualifications frameworks that promote trust in foreign qualifications. Automatic recognition follows the principle that "a Bachelor in a home country is a Bachelor in a host country and that a Master in a home country is a Master in a host country". Automatic recognition means that there is no need to submit an individual request for recognition and that there is no need for a recognition procedure. Automatic recognition implies also a direct access to further studies and the labour market (non-regulated professions).

The framework allows for **level recognition** (foreign higher education qualifications can be declared equal to the Flemish degrees "Associate degree", "Bachelor", "Master" or "Doctor") based on three pillars: (1) quality assurance in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG), (2) use of the EHEA degree structure and (3) national qualifications frameworks self-certified against QF-EHEA. **Full specific recognition** (as specific higher education qualifications in Flanders, such as "Master of Science in Mathematics") is based on an additional comparison of learning outcomes between the foreign and local degree. The Flemish government is tasked to establish lists of degrees from other countries/regions that are automatically recognised on this basis.

Individuals who obtained the foreign qualifications *Short cycle qualification/Associate degree, First cycle qualification/Bachelor degree or Second Cycle qualification/Master degree* and attended programmes accredited by an accreditation organisation listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) also do not have to follow an individual academic recognition procedure, since their degrees are automatically recognised at the same level with the new act. Since EQAR lists quality assurance agencies that substantially comply with a common set of principles for quality assurance in Europe, the ESG, Flanders declares these degrees automatically, generally or specifically, as being equal to the higher education degrees of Associate degree, Bachelor and Master of Flanders.



Comments on the Flemish model

The following comments and participants' conclusions came up from discussions in the working groups:

- The seminar participants recognised the trust in the entire system as an advantage of the Flemish model, which leads to more efficiency. An efficient procedure of recognition with a shorter and simplified process and better cooperation between institutions can increase incoming and outgoing mobility and provide direct access to the labour market. Such a model of quality assurance, with a strong link between recognition, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance and no burden of proof of possible substantial difference, can encourage other countries to develop a similar system.
- On the other hand, the recognition cannot be considered as automatic if there is still a need for confirmation and check. Only at the level of generic recognition is the process automatic, while there is still a process of evaluation of specific qualifications, therefore the concept of "automatic" can be misleading.
- Also, there would be a problem if not every qualification is treated on its own merits - for example, if one has a degree that has not been accredited by an agency listed in EQAR. What about universities which are not officially recognized - does there have to be a list of institutions? How are older qualifications checked when the learning outcomes are not specified for older qualifications? Some disreputable applications might go undetected. What about fraudulent documents? Participants found important that new, systematic or automatic approaches to recognition should not make the traditional processes more rigid, as they will still be needed for cases that do not benefit from the automatic/systematic approach.
- The participants noticed that with such a model there is an additional responsibility on EQAR, whose basis is the ESG and the evaluation of the programme. One important question is how HEI's or employers can identify easily and quickly whether a programme has been subject to external quality assurance by a registered agency.

Recognition in Croatia

Croatia's legal framework and procedures for the recognition of foreign qualifications are currently being reviewed. The roles in recognition are divided between the competent bodies in the recognition process – national/central *agencies (Education and Teacher Training Agency, Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education and Agency for Science and Higher Education)* and individual *educational institutions*.

In higher education, the ENIC/NARIC office acts as a central applications office with a quality assurance role in the recognition process. The office is hosted by the Croatian Agency for Science and Higher Education, a national independent public institution responsible for external quality assurance in higher education and science, which is a full ENQA member and is listed in EQAR.



While the Croatian ENIC/NARIC office is responsible for recognition with the purpose of employment, recognition with the purpose of continuation of study is decided by education institutions. In order to simplify the current procedures and achieve a high level of quality assurance, changes will be introduced by a new act which is to include the recognition framework for all levels of education. Through the new Act, in the higher education area a stronger position of the Croatian ENIC/NARIC office as a quality assurance body in recognition is foreseen, introducing more transparent criteria for assessment with a stronger use of Bologna/EU tools, e.g. qualification frameworks.

Comments on the Croatian model

The following comments and participants' conclusions came up from discussions in the working groups:

The participants expressed a positive opinion on the preparation of the new act in Croatia. Croatia is strongly and extensively using the Bologna instruments. Further implementation of the Croatian Qualifications Framework provides more chances for the development of the quality assurance system, which will be further strengthened with the introduction of more transparent assessment criteria.

Legally binding and legally recognised decisions were considered useful by some participants as a way to protect the labour market from diploma mills and sub-standard qualifications. However, since decisions are legally binding, there is no possibility of adding any additional information which may be useful for employers, especially since only level is important, not content.

The procedure at ENIC/NARIC is really low-cost and efficient and an appeals procedure is possible, but in cases where the purpose for recognition is both employment and further study the existing parallel system at the ENIC-NARIC office and institutions makes the procedures longer and represents not only an administrative burden for institutions, but decreases mobility as well.

Higher education institutions in charge of recognition are very experienced in their work because they are responsible for academic recognition, but also were in charge of recognition with the purpose of employment before the establishment of the ENIC/NARIC centre. However, specific criteria for academic recognition have not yet been unified at all higher education institutions. Therefore, stronger guidelines from the national level might contribute to better consistency.

Since there is no comparison of the specific field of study, but only of the general level, an individual can obtain a positive recognition, no matter whether there is an equivalent programme offered in Croatia or not.

Further discussion and peer learning among other countries

Issues that came up:

- In a fragmented government structure it can be useful to have one central ENIC/NARIC centre, which has a strong role as a single national advisory body for recognition and can serve as a unique address point to all individuals.



- In most countries, academic recognition for the purpose of further studies is in the competence of HEI's themselves. There are differences as to how the national norms or guidelines are detailed, that HEI's must or can use. In some case, HEI's are bound by the national ENIC-NARIC's decision.

Some countries explained that they did not have legally binding decisions on recognition for the purpose of work. Private employers are generally not bound by the recognition result and some do not find it important. Some consider the **competences of a person are more important than a diploma on the labour market**. A diploma serves to reduce the number of job applications and qualifications are an entry point to the interview. The Europass tool is useful for employers, but it is not sufficient. Several countries maintain or plan to create a register of treated cases to enhance consistency and reduce the workload when assessing a similar case. In some cases HEI's receive a recommendation from the national ENIC-NARIC, whereas higher education institutions themselves finally decide about the level. In some cases there is an obligation to provide reasons if the ENIC-NARIC's recommendation is not followed.

In some cases there are long processes due to authenticity check. Some countries had cases of received documents being sometimes fraudulent, and therefore decided that each document has to be checked. Sometimes a preliminary decision is issued before receiving the answer from the institution. In the decision it is stated that it will be annulated if the received information from the institution is different.

While countries trust that EQAR-registered agencies demonstrate their compliance with the ESG in their 5-yearly reviews, there were some questions whether more needs to be done to ensure that they maintain the same level of quality between two periodical reviews.

CONCLUSIONS

1. In general, there is high consideration of Bologna tools. The NQF, EQF and QF-EHEA can significantly contribute to the recognition process and increase trust and efficiency, but a strong quality assurance system is crucial because trust very much depends on the internal or external approval or accreditation process for programmes.
2. The national qualifications frameworks can be the easiest and most important tool in recognition level to level and, together with QA, also in promoting and building trust.
3. New, automatic or systematic approaches to recognition should be a “fast track” alternative to make life easier for students, recognition bodies and HEI's. Other, existing approaches will still be needed and should not become more complicated or burdensome in turn.
4. It is important to be clear what we are talking about, especially regarding “automatic recognition”. Recognition is distinct from admission, and not everyone with a degree that is recognised will be admitted to a certain programme or job – like not everyone with the required degree from the same country would be admitted.
5. The DS is a helpful, but not an indispensable instrument. In some countries employers do not even know about it and students do not recognize its use. Other countries, like Flanders, have introduced a



compulsory diploma supplement and recommended it as a tool. Accuracy has been recognized as a critical point for diploma supplements: providers often make mistakes and they are issued in different forms.

6. The ECTS are regarded as an added value to other tools which need improvement and revision.
7. The EQAR is recognised as a reliable tool providing assurance of the quality of QA agencies and their processes. It is robust and efficient enough to be used in the recognition procedure. We should consider whether any additional procedures are needed if EQAR registration has a more direct role in recognition.
8. Not all instruments deployed by EQAR are well-known. An example is the complaints policy for stakeholders, which should be more transparent.
9. The ESG, which is currently under revision, is expected to become more easily applicable and understandable and is useful as a basis for recognition based on the EQAR agency's decision. At the institutional level, proof of the internal quality assurance procedure (ESG) is a highly regarded criterion.
10. The communication between the ENIC/NARIC offices is important for increasing the quality of work.
11. Establishing an information system that would include all previously recognised qualifications can be very useful.
12. The fragmentation of the roles of authorities at the institutional level is a crucial problem.
13. Capacity building of authorities involved in recognition is required. The European Area of Recognition (EAR) manuals are a useful resource and reference document for ENIC/NARIC offices and higher education institutions.

PART TWO – cross-border quality assurance in higher education

The second part of the seminar was dedicated to quality assurance systems in higher education. The Lithuanian and Austrian models of quality assurance in higher education were presented.

The Lithuanian evaluation of higher education consists of an institutional review and study programme evaluation and accreditation. According to the Law on Research and Higher Education (2009), external evaluation of study programmes can be performed by the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC) or another agency for quality assessment in higher education which is listed in the EQAR.

Thus far, 36 programmes of one Lithuanian higher education institution were reviewed by an agency other than SKVC. SKVC summarised its experience with those cases and had some concerns regarding the evaluation reports, which contained, for SKVC's expectations, too many identical parts for different programmes. There might, however, have been reasons for that, such as the same staff or a similar institutional context. Also, the evaluation scores, which are part of the Lithuanian criteria used by foreign agencies, were not always clear. In order to build mutual trust, SKVC considers it advisable to have observers from a local agency or other official authorities for the first evaluation.

The Austrian model of quality assurance in higher education was presented from the perspective of the University of Graz. Universities in Austria need to develop their own quality management systems. The implementation of such a system at the University of Graz required effort because all staff needed to be convinced of its benefits.

For public universities and established universities of applied sciences, external quality assurance takes place in form of an audit of the institution's quality management system. The institution can choose the auditing agency and might turn to the national Agency for Quality Assurance Austria (AQ) or to an agency that is experienced in auditing, with competent peers and registered in the EQAR. The audit should be critical and give recommendations for development, taking into account the Austrian specifics and addressing a set of issues as defined in the corresponding law.

From the perspective of the Austrian university, trust from the ministry in internal quality management was highlighted as an important element. However, the participants were keen to know on which core elements the trust from the ministry and the public is based. The University of Graz representatives underlined that the ministry receives reports, which are also made public. Besides, the auditing agency checks whether the institution has an effective quality management that safeguards quality of its degrees and is in line with ESG standards as well as the Austrian national framework, regardless of the seat of the agency.

The seminar participants were interested in the negative points or negative auditing reports. It was explained that the university can continue to operate, but a re-audit has to be performed three years later. Furthermore, a failed audit would be regarded as a problem in the regular re-negotiations between the institution and the ministry on their performance agreement and funding.



GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

- The Bologna Process has successfully established an EHEA infrastructure that contains the necessary instruments (ESG, NQF, ECTS, DS, EQAR) that can make recognition of qualifications easier or even “automatic”, and that can serve as a basis for recognising QA decisions and results of agencies from other countries, thus enabling cross-border QA.
- It seems that the existing instruments strike a good balance between providing a clear common framework as a basis for trust, on the one hand, while preserving and promoting diversity between countries, regions and autonomous institutions, on the other hand.
- An increase in procedures for recognition – of qualifications as well as quality assurance decisions – relating directly to European tools or bodies (e.g. QF-EHEA, ESG, EQAR) will have an impact on their roles and responsibilities. EQAR, for instance, might be held accountable (in public perception rather than formally) for the quality of reviews, evaluations or accreditation decisions by registered quality assurance agencies.