Improving the Recognition of Qualifications in the Framework of the Bologna Process

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Setting the Scene: Recognition of Qualifications with a View to Creating a European Higher Education Area

Recognition of qualifications is an important component of the development towards the European Higher Education Area. One can argue that improving recognition of qualifications obtained in one of the Bologna process countries across all other Bologna process countries is a necessary precondition for establishing the European Higher Education Area. Several goals can only be reached if proper recognition of qualifications between States is ensured. This is a precondition to ensure free movement of persons, including the labour force. The goal of increasing competitiveness of European higher education on a world scale can also only be reached if qualifications awarded by European higher education institutions are recognised outside Europe — and this is hardly possible if they are not recognised in other European countries.

The adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, as acknowledged in the Sorbonne declaration of 1998 on the harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education systems, was an achievement on which to build: ‘The [Lisbon Recognition] Convention set a number of basic requirements and acknowledged that individual countries could engage in an even more constructive scheme. Standing by these conclusions, one can build on them and go further’. The relevance of recognition for the main action lines of the Bologna declaration ‘On the European Higher Education Area’ in 1999 (http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no) was discussed at the seminar on Recognition issues in Bologna process, Lisbon, 2002] and summarised as follows (Purser, 2002):

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees. Without better recognition procedures, citizens will not be able to use their qualifications, competences and skills throughout the European Higher Education Area, and this system will not bring the expected benefits;
- Adoption of a system based on two main cycles. Given the diversity of the academic offer currently available across Europe, recognition issues will be essential in helping to clarify the adaptation of undergraduate/postgraduate structures and facilitating different orientations and profiles of study programmes;
- Promotion of mobility. Ministers consider this to be of utmost importance and the full application of the provisions of the Lisbon Recognition Convention would be a significant step forward in pursuing the removal of all
obstacles to the free movement of students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff;
• Promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance. The seminar stressed the necessary links between quality assurance and recognition and the need for closer cooperation between actors in these two fields at institutional, national and European levels;
• Promotion of the European dimension in higher education. The correct application of recognition issues can play an important role in the development of partnerships and joint degrees;
• Lifelong learning. Prior learning assessment and recognition and the assessment of non-traditional qualifications are essential in facilitating lifelong learning opportunities and strategies;
• Promotion of the attractiveness of the European higher education area. Recognition can ensure greater attractiveness of European higher education for students from Europe and other parts of the world.

In their Berlin Communiqué of 19 September 2003 ‘Realizing the European Higher Education Area’ (http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Communique1.pdf), the European Ministers responsible for higher education ‘committed themselves to intermediate priorities for the next two years: to promote effective quality assurance systems, to step up effective use of the system based on two cycles and to improve the recognition system of degrees and periods of studies’. The ministers therefore asked the intergovernmental Bologna Follow-up Group to organise a stocktaking process and prepare reports on the progress in these three priority areas for their summit in 2005. They also stressed the importance of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which should be ratified by all countries participating in the Bologna Process and called on the Council of Europe/UNESCO European Network of Information Centres for recognition and mobility (ENIC) and the EU network of National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) and the competent national authorities to further the implementation of the Convention.

Acknowledging that more transparency and relevant information are needed, they also set the objective that every student graduating as from 2005 should automatically obtain the Joint European Diploma Supplement free of charge.

The Berlin Communiqué also addressed two more recognition issues. First, to engage at the national level to remove legal obstacles to the establishment and recognition of joint degrees and to support adequate quality assurance of curricula leading to joint degrees. Second, it urged higher education institutions and all concerned to enhance the possibilities for lifelong learning at higher education level, including the recognition of prior learning.

Definitions of Recognition
Recognition issues have come into focus in the Bologna process discussions with a wide range of stakeholders: policy makers, higher education staff, students, employers, different higher education related institutions, and society at large. These discussions were sometimes confusing because partners gave a different meaning to ‘recognition’.

While the term ‘recognition’ can have several more meanings², for the purposes of this article the most important are the following:
Recognition of a higher education institution. As a precondition to international recognition, an institution should first be recognised nationally. National systems for quality assurance are just emerging. Thus, when countries were asked to supply information on the nationally recognised institutions, compiling these lists could be a rather arbitrary procedure. The new types of higher education provision have changed the situation. Lists of nationally recognised institutions are often compiled on the basis of quality assessment, ranging from relatively ‘soft’ procedures to national accreditation.

Recognition of a higher education programme — National recognition of the institution does not automatically imply national recognition of all its programmes and qualifications. In a number of European countries, some programmes offered by recognised institutions may not lead to nationally recognised qualifications. In such cases, institutions often issue credentials ‘in their own name’ which usually have a different status from the ‘national’ qualifications. This makes recognition more difficult.

National recognition of an individual qualification. If both institution and programme are recognised nationally, the qualification awarded is also nationally recognised. It will also mean eligibility for jobs in non-regulated professions or jobs for which one must hold qualifications of a certain level.

Recognition of an individual qualification abroad. Ensuring that qualifications obtained in one part of the European Higher Education Area are valid for further studies and employment in other parts of the Area is crucial for European cooperation and the goals of Bologna process. Taking into account the wide European diversity and the aim of cross-border mobility for both study and employment purposes, a formal acknowledgement of a foreign credential is not sufficient. Credential evaluators must also assess the foreign qualification with a view to finding the right path for further studies or employment in the host country.

For the reasons discussed above, ‘recognition’ in this article will be understood as the assessment of a foreign qualification with a view of finding ways for its application for further studies and/or employment in the host country.

The International Legal Framework

Recognition is divided into two types — academic recognition for further studies and professional recognition.

Professional recognition which deals with regulated professions has its specific legislation in the EU and EEA — the directives for professional recognition. Starting with the EU enlargement on May 1, 2004, these directives will cover 29 out of the 40 countries involved in the Bologna process. So far, the EU system consisted of sectoral directives dealing specifically with the recognition in particular professions, such as e.g. several medical professions, and of General systems directives, dealing with all other regulated professions. Sectoral directives stipulate harmonisation of education for the particular profession across EU/EEA and
further automatic recognition between the Member States. The principle of the General system is that a qualification of a professional from another Member State is recognised unless there are substantial differences in the education and training. A proposal for a new directive that will merge both systems and all the existing professional recognition directives into a single text, but will not change the basic principles is being adopted by the European Parliament.

The main legal instrument for academic recognition in the European Region is the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education adopted in Lisbon on April 11, 1997 (the Lisbon Recognition Convention). Although formally covering academic recognition only, it can be and increasingly is also used for the recognition for the non-regulated sector of the labour market. In these cases, no official recognition is formally required. However, when considering a candidate with a foreign qualification, employers often wish to know to which qualification of their country the foreign one corresponds. In these cases, applicants seek a statement of academic recognition. The same applies when access to a profession requires a certain level of education without specifying the field.

The most important principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention are the following:

**Right for a fair assessment of foreign qualification.** The Lisbon Convention was the first international legal act to stipulate this right. Before its adoption, holders of foreign qualifications sometimes found that their credentials were not accepted for evaluation.

**Recognition if no substantial differences are evident.** The Lisbon Recognition Convention replaced seeking of a full equivalence of the foreign qualification to that of the host country’s to which the foreign qualification is compared by recognition of the foreign qualification if there are no substantial differences with the host country’s qualification. The Convention also established that, should the host country authorities consider non-recognition, they must demonstrate that the differences are substantial.

**Mutual trust and information provision.** Recognition under the Lisbon Convention is based upon mutual trust and provision of information between the higher education systems of the States that are parties to it. Hence, they must compile and publish lists of their recognised institutions and programmes and provide information on the qualifications, programmes and institutions.

The Council of Europe/UNESCO Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for Recognition was adopted by the Intergovernmental Committee of the Lisbon Recognition Convention on June 4, 2001. It was originally planned to help to ensure that similar recognition cases would be considered in similar ways throughout the European region. Drafting of the Recommendation was in progress when the Bologna declaration was signed, which allowed to also draw on the analysis of the recognition issues raised by the Bologna process (Bergan et al. 2000) and to adapt the implementation of the Convention accordingly.
The Recommendation shows that the principles of the Convention can also be applied to recognition for the non-regulated sector of the labour market;

- The Recommendation extends recognition to qualifications awarded after completion of transnational education that complies with the Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education;

- The Recommendation shifts the focus of credential evaluation from input characteristics of the programmes to the learning outcomes and competencies;

- it is stressed that, when analysing the differences, one should bear in mind the purpose for which recognition is sought. Given the wide diversity of programmes and qualifications in Europe, any foreign qualification will always differ from the one with which it is compared. The Recommendation calls for a positive attitude, asking whether the differences are so great that they cannot be used for the purpose for which recognition is sought and, if they are, whether an alternative or partial recognition can nevertheless be granted.

- by shifting focus from input characteristics to learning outcomes, the Recommendation also facilitates recognition of lifelong learning or other non-traditional qualifications.

The Recommendation does not say that recognition should always be granted. Rather, it codifies the established best practice amongst credential evaluators and builds on this in suggesting further improvements.

The Council of Europe/UNESCO Recommendations for the Recognition of International Access Qualifications were adopted in 1999. This document addresses international secondary school leaving certificates such as the International Baccalaureate, the European Baccalaureate, etc. The Code of Good Practice for the Provision of Transnational Education was adopted in 2001.

Implementation of the Legal Framework for Recognition

A relevant legal framework is necessary to solve recognition problems across the European Higher Education Area and to a large extent the existing international framework for recognition is sufficient. Yet, another precondition is its proper implementation — both nationally and internationally.

The International Level

Signatures and ratifications of the Convention. The signature and ratification of the Convention by all the countries concerned are the first steps to improve recognition in the European Higher Education Area. This was stressed in the Berlin communiqué of ministers. The ministerial call has been heard — five more Bologna process countries ratified the Convention after September 2003. The total number of ratifications as of May 1, 2004 is 38 countries, 32 of which are participating in the Bologna process.

The covering of the Lisbon Recognition Convention is wider than the ‘Bologna’ group of countries and than geographical Europe. Belonging to the European
region as defined by UNESCO, Australia, Canada, USA, Israel and some other countries have also signed the Convention. This is very important because it stimulates the recognition between European countries and other parts of the world.

Four out of the 40 ‘Bologna’ countries (Germany, Italy, Malta, and The Netherlands) have signed the Convention and are in the process of ratification, but another four (Belgium, Greece, Spain and Turkey) have so far neither signed nor ratified it. Some of these countries are trying to implement its principles. As recognition is a priority issue of the Bologna process for the period until May 2005, more signatures and ratifications may follow before the Bergen ministerial conference.

**European Recognition Networks**

The ENIC and NARIC networks serve as the main agents for the implementation of the Lisbon Convention and, more generally, for better recognition within Europe (Reichert & Tauch, 2003). The Lisbon Recognition Convention stipulates that each State party to the convention shall establish an information centre for academic recognition and that the national centres shall together form the ENIC network. A narrower group of national centres of the EU/EEA forms the NARIC network which covers the specific tasks within the EU, including contact points in the framework of professional recognition. Thus, the national centres of the enlarged EU plus EEA countries participate in both networks.

**Analysing Recognition Issues and Preparing New International Legislation**

The ENIC and NARIC networks have established *ad-hoc* working groups which suggested measures to develop recognition system in Europe, e.g. the working group that developed the format of the joint European Diploma supplement, the one on Transnational Education, Recognition criteria and procedures and the group on Recognition issues in the Bologna process. The latter published a final report, *Recognition Issues in the Bologna Process*, in 2001 that serves as a guideline for further improvement of the recognition system.

The networks have drafted international legal documents that supplement the Lisbon Convention: the *Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications* and the *Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education* (both adopted June, 2001). Following the need to improve recognition of joint degrees, the networks prepared a draft *Recommendation for the Recognition of Joint Degrees* that was adopted in June 2004.

**International Information Exchange**

The networks’ centres supply recognition-related information upon the request of other centres. ENIC/NARIC centres supply each other with information on a particular qualification or status of a higher education institution/programme through the ENIC/NARIC listserver. The ENIC/NARIC website (http://www.enic-naric.net) contains descriptions of their countries’ higher education systems and other relevant information for recognition.
The National Level

One very positive aspect is that more and more countries have introduced the Diploma Supplement. Issuing Diploma Supplements is also helping national qualifications to be recognised abroad. The development is not equally quick when it comes to amending national legislation with view to ensure fair recognition of foreign qualifications.

National Legal Issues

The Ratification of the Lisbon Convention is not enough if its principles are not transposed to the national legislation and national procedures. Several countries in Europe that have signed and ratified the Lisbon Convention use a national procedure of ‘nostrification’. Analysis of the results of a Council of Europe survey on the implementation of the Lisbon recognition convention (Bergan, 2003) shows that (op.cit.): ‘... answers deal with recognition practice and attitudes toward recognition. They reveal a difference between those [countries] who primarily consider formal recognition criteria and seek to establish as close a resemblance as possible between foreign qualifications and those of the home country and those that move in the direction of seeking to assess learning outcomes. In shorthand, and at the risk of oversimplification, these different approaches may be termed ‘equivalence’ vs. ‘recognition’. It also leads to the conclusion that ‘some countries have yet to implement the main principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which point in the direction of an overall assessment of the level and profile of a qualification rather than a detailed comparison of contents’.

National Setting and Procedures for Recognition

At the national level, the recognition decision is usually taken either by higher education institutions (for academic purposes), by employers (for employment purposes in the non-regulated sector of the labour market) and by professional bodies or other nationally appointed competent authorities (for pursuit of regulated professions). The survey also showed that the national situation of the ENIC/NARIC centres can differ. In most countries, the expertise and knowledge of foreign educational systems are concentrated at the ENIC/NARIC centres, which evaluate the credentials and give advice to the different decision-making bodies. Cooperation may be organised in different ways — in some countries the higher education institutions only apply to the ENIC/NARIC centres for advice in more complicated cases, in others, every holder of a foreign qualification must receive a statement from an ENIC/NARIC centre.

While this is the situation in many European countries in which the ENIC/NARIC centres are well equipped and staffed and are capable of fulfilling all the tasks (international and national information exchange, evaluation of individual credentials, consultancy to all stakeholders etc.), in others the ‘recognition information centre’ may be a single ministry employee appointed as a national contact who may have several other duties. In the latter case, the ENIC/NARIC usually serves as an information provider, but does not deal with the recognition of individual qualifications or individual information requests — which would also mean that the assessment of foreign qualifications by numerous individual higher education institutions takes place in an uncoordinated way.
Institutional Recognition Procedures — Are They Sufficiently Developed?

Given that higher education institutions are the final instances which decide upon recognition for further studies, their awareness of the principles of international legislation for recognition and the existence of institutional policies and procedures for recognition are of crucial importance for the implementation of the international legal framework. What is the situation? To quote the Trends 2003 report ‘it is clear that there is room for improvement, in particular in certain countries’ (Reichert & Tauch, 2003).

According to the Trends 2003 report, when asked about the awareness of the provisions of the Lisbon Convention within their countries, almost 60% of the heads of higher education institutions thought that their staff was either not very aware or almost completely unaware. About half the student organisations thought the same about their institutions. As regards institutional procedures for recognition, ‘The answers to the questionnaire demonstrated, that the weakest point seems to be institutional procedures for recognition of foreign degrees: only 58% of higher education institutions declared they had an institution-wide procedure for this issue, ranging from as many as 83% down to 13% in different countries. As for the students, more than a third thought their institutions had no institution-wide recognition policy but were taking decisions on a case-by-case basis’.

Concerning the recognition of study periods abroad, the situation is better — some 82% institutions have procedures. This is probably related to the use of ECTS in the framework of the Socrates-Erasmus programme. Still, there seems to be evidence of cases where, even after a study period abroad in the Erasmus programme, the credits earned are assessed looking for full coincidence with the home courses to be replaced.

In the vast majority of countries, higher education institutions can receive qualified consultancy and assistance in recognition matters from their national ENIC/NARIC centres — but are they seeking that assistance? The Trends 2003 report shows that ‘only 20% of the higher education institutions (27.5% of universities) report a close cooperation with their NARIC/ENIC. 24% regard their cooperation as limited and almost one quarter indicated that there was no cooperation at all.’

Recognition Issues and Solutions in the Bologna Process

A study carried out by an ENIC/NARIC working group sought to identify the recognition issues that were essential for the Bologna process and the steps to be taken to solve them (Bergan, 2003). Progress in the Bologna process in the last few years has clarified some of the issues, some achievements are visible and some new problems have been identified.

Recognition and the Reform of Degree Structures

The reform of degree structures and the movement towards a two-tier structure across the European Higher Education Area have an impact on recognition. The harmonisation of degree structures will benefit transparency and comparability. But the introduction of a flexible bachelor/master structure will also lead to more diversity (Divis, 2003). In January 2001, the Bologna seminar on bachelor degrees established a common framework for their workload and level. But it also con-
cluded that ‘programmes leading to the [bachelor] degree may, and indeed should have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs’ (http://www.aic.lv/ace/bologna/hels_bac.html).

As regards the master degrees, the Trends II report (Haug & Tauch, 2001, page 28–29) indicated that, in Europe, they had at least seven different purposes and that the introduction of two-tier structures in the non-university/professional stream of higher education was increasing this diversity. The European University Association (EUA) report on Master degrees in Europe (Tauch, 2001) confirmed this. The Helsinki seminar on master degrees in March 2003 concluded that ‘diversification of contents and profile of degree programmes calls for a common framework of reference of European higher education qualifications in order to increase transparency’ (http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Results.pdf).

This means that there may be huge differences between degrees that bear the same name in terms of admission requirements, content, learning objectives and function, as well as in the rights they confer. Thus, the harmonisation of degree structures will lead to greater transparency, but not to ‘automatic recognition’ (Divis, 2003). The need for individual recognition will still be there: while, in an ideal case, the level of the foreign qualification could be recognised more or less ‘automatically’, the main emphasis in the credential evaluation will be on interpretation of the foreign qualification in the context of the host country’s higher education system and/or labour market.

Quality Assurance — a Necessary Precondition for Recognition

The acceptance of close links between quality assurance and the recognition of institutions and study programmes on the one hand and individual qualifications on the other have a major importance in improving recognition of qualifications across the European Higher Education Area. At the time of adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 1997 the discussion was still ongoing in Europe as to whether quality assurance was needed as a general norm. Not all countries that were parties to the Convention had established quality assurance systems at that time. Thus, while the notion of the importance of quality and quality assurance in the recognition of qualifications appears several times in the Convention text, it was not yet possible to link recognition of individual qualifications to quality assurance of the awarding institutions/programme as a necessary precondition.

Politically, the close link between quality assurance and recognition was underlined in the Prague communiqué of ministers (May 2001). Since spring 2002 common issues of recognition and quality assurance have been analysed by a joint ENIC/ NARIC working group with the European Network of National Quality Assurance Agency (ENQA) (http://www.enqa.net). In their statement on the European Higher Education Area (Vaduz statement) adopted at their joint meeting May 18-2003, the ENIC and NARIC networks fully supported the principle that the recognition of qualifications be made contingent on the provider of education having been subjected to transparent quality assessment.

Should the recognition of individual qualifications be directly linked to quality assurance of the institutions/programmes in question, it must also be ensured that the education providers have adequate access to quality assessment, regardless of whether they are public or private, part of a national higher education system.
or not, leading to a full qualification or not. Having access to assessment is especially important for serious transnational education providers and ‘international’ institutions that do not belong to any of the educational systems of the countries in which they operate. Here one should also consider the providers of ‘non-degree programmes’ or modules for the needs of lifelong learners, i.e. the learning that does not lead to higher education final qualification, but which is of a level and quality that give one the possibility to claim credits for higher education. Another issue that is still awaiting solution is that of non-accredited/ non-quality assessed programmes provided (in many cases legally) by recognised higher education institutions. The above means that accredited/non-accredited does not necessarily mean good/bad (Divis, 2003). There are too many students in Europe today who study in valuable but non-accredited/ not officially recognized programmes to simply declare them ‘outlaws’ when it comes to recognition.

In the case of recognition of individual qualifications abroad, the outcomes of quality assessments must be made public, whenever possible, in a widely-spoken European language so that international evaluators can easily access and use them. There is also evidence that information on quality assurance outcomes is provided in a structured way, especially for the needs of recognition for the labour market, information on quality from other countries needs to be properly channelled or ‘translated’ (Divis, 2003).

Knowledge about the standard of institutions and the programmes they offer is of utmost importance for credential evaluation. Yet one must bear in mind that, while quality assurance is a necessary precondition for the recognition of individual qualifications, it is not enough in itself (Divis, 2003). To position a credential correctly in the education system or labour market of the host country, one needs a thorough knowledge of the system that conferred it (Rauhvargers, 2003a). As shown in the previous section, this will not change with the introduction of the two-cycle system.

**Progress in Transnational Education, Joint Degrees and Lifelong Learning**

*Transnational Education*

The growing phenomenon of transnational education globally and in Europe has raised a number of issues. One is the recognition of its qualifications. Recognition problems are often caused by the fact that its programmes are not quality-checked by the host country and are concealed from the quality assurance system of the sending country. The main concerns reported by the host countries are the following: doubts about the proficiency of the staff involved in the provision of transnational education, evidence that the transnational programmes are sometimes very different from those provided in the awarding institution and their qualifications are sometimes ‘easy’ — i.e. either the study time is shorter or the admission/ graduation requirements are lower (Rauhvargers, 2002). A detailed study on transnational education was funded by the EU and administered by the EUA (Adam, 2001).

All outcomes confirmed that the main recognition problems of transnational education qualifications were rooted in lack of transparency and proper quality assurance, especially that of the education provision in the host country, often obscured by the lack of clarity of the division of responsibilities between the
mother institution, the providers abroad and the agents acting between both above 
parties and the officials of the host country.

The UNESCO/Council of Europe Working Group studied the specific recog-
nition issues of transnational education and elaborated a Code of Good Practice 
for the Provision of Transnational Education that was adopted in June 2001. It 
established that the awarding institution was responsible for the provision of 
transnational education, including the quality of programme delivery at the pro-
viding institution, the requirements for admission and graduation as well as the 
actions of the agents and the information they give to the students or the host 
country's officials. The provision of transnational education should comply with 
the national legislation in both host and sending countries. Academic quality and 
standards, as well as requirements regarding staff proficiency should be compara-
table to those of the awarding institution as well as to those of the host country. 
The admission of students, the teaching/learning activities, the examination and 
assessment requirements, academic workload for transnational study pro-
grames should be equivalent to those of the same or comparable programmes 
delivered by the awarding institution. Special attention is paid to transparency of 
the delivery of transnational education and provision of full and reliable informa-
tion upon request of the host country's authorities. The qualifications issued 
through transnational programmes, complying with the provisions of the Code, 
should be assessed in accordance with the stipulations of the Lisbon Recognition 
Convention.

Thus, the international legislation for the recognition of transnational higher 
education qualifications from bona fide providers is in place. The transnational 
education providers, as well as those who receive transnational education qualifi-
cations for assessment (especially the credential evaluators based in higher educa-
tion institutions), are not always aware of the existence of the Code. Transnational 
education providers are reluctant to submit information about the education they 
provide, while national authorities sometimes still attempt — directly or indirectly — 
to outlaw the phenomenon as such, or who simply avoid a dialogue with 
transnational education providers active in their countries. While some transna-
tional education providers deliberately stay in the ‘grey zone’ and are not willing 
to undergo the quality assurance of the host country, it is not sure that a transna-
tional education provider who seeks to be legally established in the host country 
will easily have access to quality assurance.

A joint OECD/UNESCO project was launched in spring 2004 to establish 
guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education.

Joint Degrees

Establishing programmes leading to joint degrees is seen as a useful tool on the 
way to the European Higher Education Area. A seminar on joint degrees was held 
in Stockholm in May 2002. It indicated some problems that pointed to the need 
to amend national legislations in order to make joint degrees a reality (http://
EUA Joint degrees survey published in September 2002 (Rauhvargers, 2002b), 
work on joint degree programmes stimulates the implementation of the Bologna 
declaration action lines by establishing joint quality assurance, improving
recognition, stimulating employability of graduates across Europe, mobility of students and teachers, etc.

The main obstacles for establishing joint degrees are a lack of appropriate provisions in the national legislation and the fact that current international legal framework for recognition applies only to national qualifications, while joint degrees in the strict legal sense do not belong to a single national higher education system (Rauhvargers et al. 2003). As regards amending the national legislations, in their Berlin communiqué, the European ministers agreed to engage at the national level to remove legal obstacles to the establishment and recognition of joint degrees. The EUA conference on Joint degrees in Cluj, Romania in October 2003 led to practical recommendations with regard to cooperation among partners in establishing joint degrees (http://www.eua.be).

A major development under the EU SOCRATES programme is the Erasmus Mundus programme which assists in establishing joint degrees and contains specific provisions for improving recognition of joint degrees between the partner institutions and countries (http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/mundus/index_en.html).

In order to improve the international recognition of joint degrees, ENIC and NARIC networks drafted a Recommendation that will be submitted for adoption by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Intergovernmental Committee in June 2004. The Recommendation extends the main principles of the Convention to joint degrees, stipulating that holders of a joint degree have a right to a fair assessment of their joint degree, establishing that a joint degree is recognised unless substantial differences can be clearly demonstrated between the joint degree in question and the host country’s qualification. The Recommendation also sets requirements that should be fulfilled as a precondition for applying the Lisbon convention principles to a joint degree: each part of the joint curriculum has to be quality assessed or be part of a recognised national qualification, if the joint degree in question is awarded in the name of a larger consortium, care should be taken that each consortium partner is a trustworthy institution, the Diploma supplement and ECTS should be used as transparency tools, and the joint character of the award should be clearly indicated and described.

Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning has been addressed in all the Bologna process political documents starting from the Bologna declaration itself. Indeed, lifelong learning activities are very widespread and growing. However, a full integration of lifelong learning into regular higher education activities with a view to defining alternative study paths for lifelong learners that would allow them to reach regular higher education qualifications is an issue yet to be solved. A Bologna Seminar on recognition and credit systems in the context of lifelong learning, held in Prague in June 2003, addressed the issues of integration LLL into higher education activities and defining learning paths. The seminar recommendations also encourage higher education institutions to adopt internal policies to promote the recognition of prior formal, non-formal and informal learning for access and study exemption; reconsider skills content in courses and the nature of their study programmes, while the national authorities should ensure the right to fair recognition of qualifications acquired in different learning environments.

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In the terms of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, lifelong learning paths would then be a part of the higher education systems of party States, which also means that the qualifications thus earned would be considered for recognition on par with the same qualifications earned through more traditional higher education paths. A second issue is how these learning paths could then be adequately described in transparency instruments like the Diploma Supplement, the ECTS and possibly a lifelong learning portfolio (Bergan, 2003).

The seminar in Prague concluded that on the international scale it could be desirable to seek to develop international good practice to promote the recognition of qualifications earned through lifelong learning paths, using the provisions and principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention; if feasible, to develop international instruments to facilitate such recognition; bring together existing experience with national qualifications frameworks with a view to facilitating the development of further national frameworks as well as a qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area that would encompass lifelong learning (http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/recommendations.pdf).

A major development in the integration of LLL into the regular higher education activities should be expected, together with the establishing of the national qualifications frameworks that, according to the request of ministers in their Berlin communiqué, should seek to describe the qualifications in terms of their level, workload, learning outcomes and profile, and ‘encompass the wide range of flexible learning paths, opportunities and techniques and to make appropriate use of the ECTS credits’.

**Focusing on Learning Outcomes — High Expectations from Qualifications Frameworks**

To place a foreign qualification in another country’s system, the focus of credential evaluation should be shifted from input characteristics to learning outcomes and competencies earned. Assessing learning outcomes becomes even more important in the less traditional cases — evaluation of transnational education qualifications, joint degrees, and (parts of) studies pursued in the framework of lifelong learning. Moreover, when assessing qualifications for the needs of employers, ‘what the holder of the qualification can do’ is highly important, while the information on the number of study hours in each course or which textbooks have been covered may appear of very limited importance.

However, ‘assessing learning outcomes’ is easier said than done. The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and the Diploma supplement are very useful and facilitate recognition, but they do not provide a description of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes. ECTS allows for a shift from study time to actual student workload. According to the conclusions of the Zurich seminar on Credit transfer and accumulation, October 2002 (http://www.ects-conference.ethz.ch/index.asp), ‘when used as an accumulation system, ECTS credits are used to describe entire study programmes’ and ‘the basis for the allocation of credits is the official length of the study programme. Credits can be obtained only after completion of the work required and appropriate assessment’. The Diploma supplement contains indications of the purposes for which the qualification be used in holder’s further studies or employment in the country where it was issued —
it is a highly useful information for credential evaluators abroad, yet, it is a too
general indication of learning outcomes.

Thus, while the main accent at learning outcomes rather than duration of
studies and other input characteristics was fully acknowledged in the Lisbon
Recognition Convention and especially in its subsidiary texts, until recently there
were very few attempts in Europe to start describing qualifications in terms
of learning outcomes. For this reason, so far credential evaluators could only
attempt to estimate the learning outcomes knowing the contents and duration of
programme.

The Joint Quality Initiative is a useful attempt to assign general learning
outcomes to first and second cycle qualifications (http://www.jointquality.org). From
the recognition point of view these bachelor and master descriptions can be
useful only as a very general guide, much more detailed descriptions of outcomes
are still needed for assessment of individual qualifications. Another recent and
highly valuable initiative — the Tuning project (http://odur.let.rug.nl/Tuning-
Project/) seeks to establish learning outcomes along subject lines.

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outcomes to first and second cycle qualifications (http://www.jointquality.org). From
the recognition point of view these bachelor and master descriptions can be
useful only as a very general guide, much more detailed descriptions of outcomes
are still needed for assessment of individual qualifications. Another recent and
highly valuable initiative — the Tuning project (http://odur.let.rug.nl/Tuning-
Project/) seeks to establish learning outcomes along subject lines.

The most important initiative with a view to overall improvement of recogni-
tion across the European Higher Education Area is the national qualifications
frameworks. ‘A national qualifications framework is nothing more than a precise
description of the structure of national qualifications system, indicating the work-
load, level and learning outcomes of each qualification and the sequence in which
the qualifications follow each other’ (Adam, 2003). Although one could argue that
each country already has some kind of a national qualifications’ framework, the
first systematic attempts to describe qualifications in terms of level, workload,
profile and learning outcomes are just emerging. A satisfactory definition of
learning outcomes is one of the major challenges the Bologna Process will face,
and it is an area in which the concerns of policy-makers, recognition specialists,
quality assurance agencies and other stakeholders come together.

The discussions at the Copenhagen seminar on qualifications frameworks
on March 27–28, 2003 demonstrated that their introduction should substantially
help recognition of qualifications across the European Higher Education Area —
because the ‘new type’ description of qualifications through level, workload, learn-
ing outcomes, and profile, provides exactly that information about qualifications
that was missing so far and that allows to find out how a foreign qualification can
be used in the context of the host country. Following the Copenhagen seminar
recommendations, the ministers in their Berlin communiqué ‘encourage the mem-
ber States to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications
for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in
terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile. They also
undertake to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the Euro-
pean Higher Education Area’.

The group discussing the impact of the emerging qualifications frameworks on
recognition formulated a rather idealised vision: national frameworks will describe
qualifications in terms of learning outcomes and the quality assurance mechanisms
will ensure that the stipulated outcomes can really be reached when studying in
the programme in question. Thus, credentials’ evaluators will use the European
qualifications’ framework to interpret the orientation, profile and main learning
outcomes of the foreign qualification in their own system and will thus be able to
find the correct place of the foreign qualification in their country’s education and/or employment system (Rauhvargers, 2003b).

Conclusion

The international legal framework for recognition in the European Higher Education Area is to a large extent established. The international ‘recognition community’ follows the developments and elaborates new international legal tools to cover emerging needs.

For the recognition of qualifications in the European Higher Education Area it is essential that the Lisbon recognition convention is ratified in all the Bologna countries — and this process is progressing notably. However, the national and institutional implementation of the legal framework for recognition seems to be a much weaker point. We are approaching the limits of what can be done at European or international level. The further success requires involvement of national authorities, and, what is much more difficult to achieve — all levels of higher education staff. A major effort and intensive information campaigns should be made in all Bologna countries with a view to:

- embed the principles of the Convention into both national legislation and institutional policies,
- substantially raise institutional awareness at all levels regarding recognition issues and the international legal framework,
- create and implement institutional recognition practices,
- last but not least, create a positive attitude towards foreign qualifications and willingness to find the way how they can be used it in the host countries.

The introduction of the two-tier degree structure across Europe will benefit transparency and comparability, but will also create greater diversity, which means that it will not lead to automatic recognition between different parts of the European Higher Education Area.

Linking recognition of individual qualifications to the information on quality is widely accepted — but it is also an indication that such information should be available in a form that is useful for the assessment of individual qualifications. However, knowledge of quality (and accreditation) alone is not an adequate basis for evaluating a credential — a thorough knowledge of the system that conferred the qualification is also necessary.

As regards recognition of lifelong learning, emphasis should be put on establishing learning paths that allow reaching higher education qualifications in an alternative way. Once the lifelong learning studies have resulted in a regular national higher education qualification, the international recognition is not the most complex issue.

The importance to assess learning outcomes and not input parameters at recognition of qualifications has been stressed already in the framework of the Lisbon Convention. The Bologna process and the emergence of various types of non-traditional qualifications strengthen the need. At the same time, while the transparency of qualifications in general is growing, the qualifications at the current practice are not described in terms of learning outcomes. The commitment to establish national qualifications frameworks describing qualifications in terms
of level, workload, learning outcomes and profile, — and one overarching for European Higher Education Area at large — is an opportunity for substantial improvements in understanding between the European higher education systems and, as a consequence, recognition of qualifications.

The most important conclusion is that the international preconditions for improving recognition across the European Higher Education Area have been created. The next challenge is to bring it all ‘down to institutional reality’ — or fail.

NOTES

1. The author has chosen to use ‘qualifications’ as the generic term used in the Lisbon Recognition Convention to cover all kinds of educational credentials: degrees, diplomas, certificates, etc.
2. e.g. recognition of a programme by a national or international professional association leading to admission of graduates to exercise particular profession(s), recognition of an institution or programme by a kind of international body/association of a certain type of institutions or programmes, etc.
3. While the term ‘recognition of diplomas’ is used in the directives, the definition of ‘diploma’ also includes all the additional training, practical placements and other requirements that a holder of an educational credential has to fulfill before being granted the right to practise the profession, cf. directive 89/48/EEC, art. 1 http://europa.eu.int/smartapi/cgi/sga_doc?smartapi!celex-api!prod!CELEXnumdoc&lg=EN&numdoc=31989L0048&model=guichett
4. All the international legal texts mentioned in this article can be found at http://www.aic.lv/ace/ace_disk/
5. An ongoing UNESCO working group on transnational education had major difficulties in receiving information from providers even when addressing them directly (The Working party will report on its results at the ENIC/NARIC Joint meeting in Strasbourg, June 2004).

REFERENCES


