

Mutual Recognition of Accreditation Decisions: A European Perspective

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1. Introduction

Mutual recognition of accreditation or other quality assurance systems is being discussed in several regions of the world. In Europe, this process is very much connected to the Bologna process leading to the introduction of bachelor and master programmes and stimulating accreditation in many European countries. As a consequence the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA) was established in November 2003.

This paper will address the following issues:

- The aims, membership and structure of ECA.
- The standards of the Code of Good Practice for accreditation organisations which have been adopted by ECA members as a first step towards mutual recognition,
- The way in which mutual recognition of accreditation decisions is linked to the Bologna process and the mutual recognition of qualifications.
- Further steps towards the aim of mutual recognition.
- A short reflection on similar developments around the world.

2. Aims, membership and structure of ECA

The organisations participating in ECA meet twice a year in plenary workshops. A first meeting was held in The Hague in June 2003. The Consortium was formally established through an Agreement of Cooperation in Cordoba in November 2003. In 2004, workshops were held in Bergen and Zürich. In 2005, meetings will be held in Dublin (June) and Vienna (December). The participants in the workshops are the members of ECA and the invited experts in the working groups. Observers from the relevant European organisations and guest speakers are also invited.

The Agreement of Cooperation states the aims of the Consortium. The ultimate aim of ECA is mutual recognition of accreditation decisions among the participants before the end of 2007. The members of ECA believe that mutual recognition of accreditation decisions will contribute to the recognition of qualifications in higher education and the mobility of students in Europe. It will also make life easier for institutions and study programmes operating across borders. In addition, it can be expected that the process and promotion of good practices resulting in mutual recognition of accreditation decisions will make the different national accreditation systems more transparent, and enhance trust in these systems. Thus, by

undertaking the necessary activities for mutual recognition ECA contributes to the achievement of the European Higher Education Area. The Consortium cooperates and has established links with other European organisations and initiatives, such as ENQA, the ENIC/NARICs, the Bologna Follow Up Group, the European Commission, the Central and Eastern European Network of quality assurance agencies (CEEN), the Joint Quality Initiative, EUA, EURASHE, ESIB, etc. In addition, ECA has established links with international networks such as INQAAHE, UNESCO/OECD, APQN, and RIACE. Further cooperation with these European and international organisations is one of the priorities for ECA in the coming years.

There are currently fourteen member organisations from nine European countries. The members of ECA are:

- Österreichischer Akkreditierungsrat, Austria
- Fachhochschulrat, Austria
- Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur (CTI), France
- Akkreditierungsrat, Germany
- Zentrale Evaluations- und Akkreditierungsagentur (ZEvA), Germany
- Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA), Germany
- Akkreditierungs-, Zertifizierungs- und Qualitätssicherungs-Institut (ACQUIN), Germany
- Agentur für Qualitätssicherung durch Akkreditierung von Studiengängen (AQAS), Germany
- Akkreditierungsagentur für Studiengänge im Bereich Heilpädagogik, Pflege, Gesundheit und Soziale Arbeit (AHPGS), Germany
- The Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), Ireland
- Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatie Organisatie (NVAO), The Netherlands and Flanders
- Nasjonalt organ for kvalitet i utdanningen (NOKUT), Norway
- Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación (ANECA), Spain
- Organ für Akkreditierung und Qualitätssicherung der Schweizerischen Hochschulen (OAQ), Switzerland

Membership of the Consortium is open to European organisations,

- which have been established by law as corporate bodies or are based on national or regional regulations or agreements
- which have accreditation as one of their principal functions; whether accreditation of programmes of higher education, accreditation of institutions providing higher education or the accreditation of accreditation organisations
- which contribute actively to the aims of the Consortium.

The annual membership fee is 5,000 Euro. Applications for membership can be sent to the ECA Coordinator. The Consortium will decide on membership following a recommendation by the Management Group of ECA. New members will have to sign the Agreement of Cooperation and the Code of Good Practice before their membership becomes effective. It is expected that new ECA agreements (e.g. on selection criteria and procedures for experts) will also have to be signed by new members. A strict application of these membership requirements is necessary because it builds the commitment and trust among members which is necessary for achieving mutual recognition agreements.

The Agreement of Cooperation stipulates the structure of the Consortium. The participants in ECA appoint the members of the Management Group of ECA. The Management Group shall elect one of its members to act as chairperson and another member to act as coordinator and treasurer of the Management Group and ECA. The participants in ECA decide upon the activities of the Consortium. Working groups with a specific mandate have been set up to carry out these activities. Members of these working groups are the participants in ECA. In some cases experts may be invited additionally.

The following five working groups are currently in place to carry out the activities of the Consortium:

1. Mutual recognition; this working group prepares much of the “groundwork” to come to mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.
2. European Qualifications Framework; the proposals to establish a European Qualifications Framework for higher education, including the Dublin descriptors for bachelors and masters, are looked at with a view on its implications for accreditation.
3. Information tool for accreditation decisions; the purpose of this working group is to set up a search engine on the ECA website so that all interested parties can search for accredited programmes and institutions in the ECA countries.
4. European initiatives; this working group will look at and respond to papers and initiatives from other European organisations. The working group has prepared a report for the meeting of the Ministers of Education in Bergen in May 2005 and will prepare further contributions to the Bologna process.
5. New developments in accreditation; this working group operates as a “think tank” by studying new developments and focusing on the (dis)advantages of different approaches in institutional and programme accreditation.

3. Code of Good Practice

The members of ECA have agreed on a joint “Code of Good Practice”. This Code was formally signed in Zürich in December 2004. The Code guarantees comparability of accreditation procedures throughout Europe and defines the internal quality assurance measures of accreditation organisations. The Code contains 17 standards with correlating questions and points of reference. Relying on concrete evidence, the reference points will illustrate how the standards can be implemented by the various accreditation organisations. The Code has been developed with a view to similar initiatives, e.g. the INQAAHE Guidelines and the ENQA Standards. The Code is fully compatible with the ENQA Standards for External Quality Assurance Agencies.

The Code consists of the following standards:

The accreditation organisation

1. Has an explicit mission statement.
2. Is recognised as a national accreditation body by the competent public authorities.

3. Must be sufficiently independent from government, from higher education institutions as well as from business, industry and professional associations.
4. Must be rigorous, fair and consistent in decision-making.
5. Has adequate and credible resources, both human and financial.
6. Has its own internal quality assurance system that emphasises its quality improvement.
7. Has to be evaluated externally on a cyclical basis.
8. Can demonstrate public accountability, has public and officially available policies, procedures, guidelines and criteria.
9. Informs the public in an appropriate way about accreditation decisions.
10. A method for appeal against its decisions is provided.
11. Collaborates with other national, international and/or professional accreditation organisations.

The accreditation procedures

12. Accreditation procedures and methods must be defined by the accreditation organisation itself.
13. Must be undertaken at institutional and/or programme level on a regular basis.
14. Must include self-documentation/-evaluation by the higher education institution and external review (as a rule on site).
15. Must guarantee the independence and competence of the external panels or teams.
16. Must be geared at enhancement of quality.

The accreditation standards

17. Must be made public and be compatible with European practices taking into account the development of agreed sets of quality standards.

All members of ECA must fulfil the standards and will have to review their procedures regularly against the Code. The standards of the Code should be implemented by the end of 2006. External evaluation of the accreditation organisations is necessary and will guarantee that they fulfil the requirements of the Code of Good Practice. These external evaluations will take place in 2007.

4. Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions and degrees

The Berlin Declaration of the European Ministers of Education (19 September, 2003) reads as follows: “The quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area.” Ministers “commit themselves to supporting further the continued development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level”. It has been agreed “that by 2005, national quality assurance systems should include the following: (...)”

- Evaluation of programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results,
- A system of **accreditation**, certification or comparable procedures (...)”

Accreditation procedures have become an important method for external quality assurance in Europe and throughout the world. Accreditation decisions facilitate international recognition of degrees and are important for regulating trans-border

higher education. Therefore, it can be expected that accreditation will become even more significant in the future.

The terminology of external quality assurance is anything but unified. Terms like external evaluation, review, audit and accreditation are being used at random. In the international debate on quality assurance, accreditation is increasingly defined as every formalised decision by an appropriately recognised authority as to whether an institution of higher education or a programme conforms to certain standards. ECA defines accreditation as “a formal and independent decision, indicating that an institution of higher education and/or programmes offered meet certain standards.” This definition also covers some quality assessments that are described as “accreditation like procedures”.

Accreditation is achieved through a multi-step process: self-evaluation or documentation submitted by the unit undergoing accreditation; external assessment by independent experts; and, the accreditation decision. The accreditation decision depends upon a quality assessment based on internationally accepted quality standards. The accreditation decision itself is authoritative in nature and results in a “yes” (with or without conditions) or “no” judgment with a limited validity. Accreditation procedures contribute to the continued quality development of the accredited higher education unit. Institutions may receive advice about quality improvement throughout the accreditation process, which may extend beyond the “yes/no” decision itself.

ECA believes that accreditation should be an essential part of the recognition of both public and private higher education institutions and programmes. It is equally essential for mainly privately financed programmes of public higher education institutions. Accreditation procedures should respect diversity and enable innovation in higher education. Accreditation organisations should be independent and willing to adapt their procedures to new developments (e.g. accreditation of study programmes offered in the area of distance learning). And accreditation organisations should make sure that the cost of accreditation and the bureaucracy associated with the process do not unduly burden the unit being accredited or outweigh the advantages of accreditation.

The present concept of accreditation in the area of higher education serves to assure and develop quality: it can focus on institutions, constituent parts thereof, and study programmes, in order to:

- ensure or facilitate recognition of “credits” and degrees in an academic context, such as, for example, when changing from one institution of higher education to another, in order to promote mobility
- inform current and prospective students on the value of certain study programmes (consumer protection)
- allow employers to check the value and status of qualifications
- give institutions of higher education the opportunity to demonstrate appropriate allocation and use of public funds.

In order to facilitate international acceptance of higher education institutions, degrees and study programmes, it will be necessary that future accreditation decisions in one country will also be recognised in another country. Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions has been defined by ECA as “a formal acknowledgement of accreditation decisions in one country by competent authorities in another country”.

Transnational recognition of accreditation decisions should be based upon Europe-wide consensus with regard to generic quality criteria for awarding degrees. ECA agrees that common descriptors such as the “Dublin descriptors” provide a basis for distinguishing between the various Bologna degrees. They must be calibrated with efforts to draw up national and European “qualification frameworks” as proposed in the recent report on the European Qualifications Framework.

It is clear that one of the most important reasons to strive for mutual recognition of accreditation decisions is to promote international mobility of students and staff, which is the underlying motive of the Bologna process. To facilitate mobility it is necessary that the bachelor and master degrees (introduced through the Bologna process) are recognised in all the Bologna member states. Accreditation has an important role to play in this process because the recognition of degrees is mostly connected to the accreditation of these degrees. By mutually recognising accreditation decisions the mutual recognition of degrees, and increasing mobility, is also promoted. ECA acknowledges that it is important to involve the recognition authorities (ENIC/NARICs) in this process.

With a view to this connection between mutual recognition of accreditation decisions and degrees, the ECA members have called upon the European Ministers for Education to decide on the following in the Meeting of Bergen 2005:

- Governments of Bologna signatory states should recognise the accreditation decisions in all member states where an underlying agreement on common guidelines, practices and standards exists between the accreditation organisations.
- In accordance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and its subsidiary texts, accreditation decisions should be incorporated into the national recognition procedures of degrees and qualifications in the domain of higher education.

Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions is also important for institutions and programmes that operate across borders. The joint master programmes in the Erasmus Mundus scheme (a student grants arrangement funded by the European Commission) are just one example. Transnational institutions, joint, double and multiple degree programmes have to deal with various accreditation procedures in the countries in which they operate. These multiple accreditation requirements produce additional cost and efforts, and make life difficult for transnational institutions and programmes. Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions can prevent this; if an institution or programme is accredited in one country then this accreditation is also recognised in the other countries that have signed the mutual recognition agreement.

5. Further steps towards the aim of mutual recognition

ECA is in the process of developing a “road map” that will contain the necessary steps to achieve mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. This road map is still preliminary and will be discussed at the plenary next meeting in Dublin in June 2005. The road map consists of the following five steps:

1. Mutual recognition of accreditation procedures
 - a. Code of Good Practice
 - b. Selection criteria and procedures for experts
 - c. Information tool for accreditation decisions
 - d. Common themes/standards in accreditation

2. Mutual recognition of accreditation organisations
 - a. Profiles of accreditation organisations
 - b. Inventory of mutual cooperation between members
 - c. Observation reports
 - d. Pilot projects for achieving mutual recognition
3. Mutual recognition of assessment results
 - a. Implementation of the European Qualifications Framework (including the Dublin descriptors) in assessments
 - b. Assessments of joint, double and multiple degree programmes
 - c. Assessments on different (programme and institutional) levels
 - d. Formal agreement on the mutual recognition of assessment results
4. Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions
 - a. Different national regulations and any remaining legal obstacles with regard to (mutual recognition of) accreditation decisions
 - b. Statement of ECA for the meeting of the Ministers in London 2007
 - c. Formal (bilateral?) agreements on mutual recognition of accreditation decisions
5. Mutual recognition of degrees based on accreditation decisions

The Agreement of Cooperation states explicitly that the Consortium desires “to contribute to the realisation of the European Higher Education Area” and that mutual recognition of accreditation decisions is aimed at “in order to facilitate student mobility”. Mutual recognition of degrees is indispensable for both the European Higher Education Area and for promoting student mobility. It is therefore necessary to promote the connection between the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions and the mutual recognition of degrees. This might lead eventually to the establishment of a “European Recognition and Accreditation Area” being part of and supplementing the European Higher Education Area.

6. Similar developments around the world

Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions is discussed or aimed at in different parts of the world, e.g. in Latin America and the Asian-Pacific region. ECA has recently started to meet with representatives of APQN and RIACE. It is important to strengthen the links between these regions in order to exchange experiences and learn from each other. Perhaps in the future connections between mutual recognition areas in different regions would be possible in order to promote global mobility. It would also be worthwhile to explore other models (e.g. of American accreditation organisations) in which recognition of degrees and accreditation are linked.

In any case, establishing contacts and cooperation with international organisations with similar aims is one of the priorities for ECA in the coming years.

For more information on ECA:

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