

ECA and the work on mutual recognition

The European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) consists of 16 accreditation agencies in 12 European countries. ECA is affiliated with ENQA and has cooperation agreements with the worldwide QA network INQAAHE and the Central and Eastern European network CEENQA. ECA was founded in 2003 and has mutual recognition of accreditation and QA decisions as a primary aim. This mutual recognition should facilitate the recognition of qualifications and thereby enhance mobility. The principles for mutual recognition as applied by ECA can be summarised as follows:

1. External review of agencies is a necessary first step to know that agencies comply to minimum quality requirements. ECA requires of its members to fulfil the ECA Code of Good Practice¹ and/or the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) as should be evident through an independent external review of the agency. Most ECA members are both ENQA full member and listed in EQAR.
2. Mutual recognition requires trust in the decisions of other agencies. These decisions have a procedural and a content dimension. The procedural dimension is e.g. about whether the agency has an internal QA system or the agencies' QA procedures include a site visit. These procedural aspects are covered in the ESG and the ECA Code. The content dimension is about the outcomes of the decisions: It is possible to fulfil all procedural requirements in the ESG but still accredit or positively review programmes and institutions that are seriously lacking in quality. The ESG do not provide a threshold for the quality of the education. The assessment of learning outcomes by QA agencies is also not included in the ESG.
3. The trust in the content dimension of agencies' decisions should be gained by other means. ECA has developed an approach of mutual cooperation, comparisons of frameworks and observations of each other procedures. Particularly observations are important as these provide insight in how not only the agency but also the experts work. As the assessments by experts form the core of external QA it is crucial to see how the reviews are carried out in practice and how the assessments are made. Based on this approach ECA member agencies have signed bilateral mutual recognition agreements in 2007.
4. It is the experience of ECA that mutual recognition is most beneficial for joint programmes as the institutions that provide joint programmes are operating in multiple countries, and have to undergo multiple QA and recognition procedures. Therefore, ECA has developed a multilateral mutual recognition agreement for joint programmes (MULTRA) in 2010. The MULTRA is currently signed by seven agencies in Austria, Denmark, France, Netherlands and Flanders, Poland, Spain.

¹ The ECA Code of Good Practice was signed in 2004 and has inspired these (the ESG were completed in 2005). Part of the Code was that agencies should be externally reviewed on fulfilment of the Code by 2006. The Code is similar to Part 3 of the ESG as has been acknowledged in a letter by the ENQA Board. In the meantime the ESG have of course become the main reference point.

5. In addition to MULTRA, ECA has developed a methodology for carrying out single accreditation procedures for joint programmes, and is currently establishing a European coordination point for external QA and accreditation of joint programmes. The coordination point will function as an information centre for joint programmes, agencies and ENIC-NARICs, and will provide assistance with regard to the organisation of single accreditation/QA procedures for joint programmes.
6. ECA has cooperated with ENIC-NARICs to enhance the connections between accreditation and recognition of qualifications. In 2005 accreditation agencies and ENIC-NARICs in six countries agreed on the conditions² for “automatic recognition”³ of qualifications based on mutual recognition of accreditation decisions or results. ECA is also cooperating with ENIC-NARICs in the EU funded JOQAR project to facilitate fair recognition procedures of qualifications awarded by joint programmes. As with ESG and EQAR in the field of QA it should be acknowledged that the Lisbon Recognition Convention and compatible NQFs are necessary but not sufficient to reach mutual recognition of qualifications.
7. ECA will make a plea towards governments and recognition authorities to ensure that the outcomes of mutual recognition initiatives in QA are used to smoothen the recognition of qualifications. If there is trust in each other’s QA arrangements, as exemplified by mutual recognition agreements, then this should be taken as the basis for the recognition of qualifications. All stakeholders should be involved to ensure mutual recognition of qualifications: governments, QA agencies, ENIC-NARICs, HE institutions (which are also recognition authorities), and students as the main beneficiaries of mutual recognition of qualifications.

² The conditions are: the agencies in the countries concerned recognise each other’s accreditation decisions or results; the NQFs of the countries concerned are compatible with the overarching European Qualifications Framework (self-verification completed); the Lisbon Recognition Convention is entered into force in the countries concerned.

³ The concept of automatic recognition is presented here as recognition without invoking the substantial differences provision under the Lisbon Recognition Convention regarding the quality and the level of the qualification.