



Conclusions of the Ninth Workshop of the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA)

Berlin, 13 – 15 June 2007

Approved by the ECA Management Group, 20 September 2007

1. Introduction

The ninth workshop of the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) was held in Berlin from 13 to 15 June 2007. ECA members and invited experts, observers and guest speaker enjoyed the hospitality of the German Accreditation Council and the following accreditation agencies: Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute (ACQUIN), Accreditation Agency for Study Programmes in Special Education, Care, Health Sciences and Social Work (AHPGS), Agentur für Qualitätssicherung durch Akkreditierung von Studiengängen (AQAS), Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA), and Zentrale Evaluations- und Akkreditierungsagentur Hannover (ZEvA).

A meeting of representatives of ENIC/NARICs in ECA countries took place in parallel to the ECA business meeting. The results were presented to ECA members at the Workshop. An update was given on the road map in which ENIC/NARICs were involved. More would be done to disseminate the road map and engage other ENIC/NARICs. The Joint declaration (Vienna Sententia) and the information tool would be especially emphasised in these dissemination efforts. The pilot project between the Netherlands and Flanders on establishing an open qualifications area would be intensified, and the issue of the recognition of qualifications from third countries would be included in the pilot project. Furthermore, a project to report on recognition methodologies would be proposed for EU funding. ENICs/NARICs would also actively contribute to the ECA dissemination conference in Barcelona.

2. Organisational issues

The Conclusions of the Paris Workshop were formally approved by the Consortium. It was confirmed that the next ECA Workshop will take place in Barcelona on 12 December 2007. This Workshop will follow after the ECA Conference on 10 and 11 December.

A survey of ECA members had been held to hear their opinions about the future of ECA after 2007. The Chairman had interviewed ECA members from 9 countries. All ECA members surveyed wanted to continue with the ECA activities after 2007. The majority of ECA members wanted ECA to continue as an independent project organisation, with continuation of the affiliated membership of ENQA. A more intensified communication with ENQA was also mentioned. The primary focus should stay on mutual recognition and accreditation, including accreditation like practices. ECA should also continue to function as a platform for methodological exchange, and

create innovative projects on top of this platform. ECA should be open to other accreditation organisations but maintain strict admission criteria. A discussion emerged in which different views emerged on how to proceed with these results of the survey. It was concluded that the Management Group would draft a proposal for the future of ECA including the goals and objectives of ECA, the admission criteria, the strategy, partners, etc. This proposal would be discussed in full at the ECA Workshop in Barcelona on 12 December.

An update on developments within the different accreditation systems was given by ECA members. Significant changes in the regulatory frameworks for accreditation had taken place in Germany, Spain and Switzerland. Changes in systems were or would be discussed in some other countries, e.g. Austria and the Netherlands.

3. Opening of the Workshop and presentation by guest speaker

Achim Hopbach addressed the participants on behalf of the German organisers and the new Chairman of the Akkreditierungsrat who had been elected just a few weeks ago.

Rolf Heusser gave an overview of the achievements of ECA, including the acknowledgement of the work on mutual recognition in the London Communiqué and the lessons learned by ECA. He also brought the expectations for Berlin and the outlook to Barcelona to the attention of the participants.

Dirk Van Damme, Chief of Cabinet of the Flemish Ministry of Education, was the guest speaker. He gave a speech on diversification on higher education and the future of accreditation. He made very interesting and discussion provoking observations on different practices aimed to stimulate diversification and its implications for accreditation. The presentation can be downloaded from the ECA website:

<http://www.eaconsortium.net/index.php?section=content&id=14>

4. Working group 1 “Mutual recognition”

The draft agreement on mutual recognition of accreditation decisions and results was discussed. There was consensus on the principles that these would be bilateral and voluntary agreements; that ECA would provide a model that could be adapted by the signing parties if needed; that it would be signed by ECA members “within their own competences”; and that there would be a provision for stepping out of the agreement.

Several comments were made with regard to the text of the agreement:

- including a reference to the NQFs and Bologna EQF in the Introduction;
- significant instead of substantial differences in the Agreement section;
- communication of major changes in accreditations systems;
- giving access to documents underlying accreditation decisions/results;
- better formulation of the possibility to terminate the agreement.

These comments would be included in the revised draft of the agreement.

Furthermore, a table for the inventory of mutual recognition agreements was presented and it was announced that ECA members would be asked to fill in this form before Barcelona.

Seven bilateral comparatives of the frameworks and standards of ECA members had been completed. Most of these had been funded by the TEAM project. The main conclusions were presented to the participants. There were no substantial

differences emerging, although in some cases it was said that additional observations would have to be carried out to reach a final conclusion.

Two new observation reports had been completed and many more were expected as part of the TEAM project. An overview of the bilateral cooperations and how these are linked to each other was presented. It became visible that all ECA members, except for three agencies who still had to carry out comparisons and observations, were linked to each other through these cooperations.

The planning for the external evaluations of the ECA Code of Good Practice was presented. The Management Group would discuss the external evaluations and make recommendations to the Consortium at the Barcelona Workshop.

5. Working group 2 “European Initiatives”

Working group 2 presented the draft principles for accreditation procedures regarding joint programmes. A discussion emerged in which it was clarified that these principles would become part of the mutual recognition agreements, i.e. that mutual recognition of accreditation decisions or results would also apply to joint programmes. The principles stipulate what ECA members can do to increase mutual trust and transparency when accrediting joint programmes, also in the case of institutional accreditation. The principles were approved by the Consortium and would be signed by the Chairman on behalf of ECA members.

It was also advocated and agreed that Working group 2 should elaborate a strategy for applying these principles where non-ECA members are involved in the accreditation or quality assurance of joint programmes.

6. Working group 3 “Information Tool for accreditation decisions”

An update on the development of the information tool and the TEAM project in general was given. Since the Paris Workshop the company Resilion was chosen to develop the information tool after a thorough selection process. The name Crossroads had been adopted for the information tool after an extensive discussion of the available options. Stakeholders had given their feedback to the information tool and this feedback had been taken into account. The current state of the information tool was presented, including the graphic design, data model, and project planning. Members of the Consortium expressed that they liked the design. Members would be asked to use the ISCED fields of study classification, to provide annotations concerning accreditation decisions, and to transfer data in xml format to Crossroads.

The draft programme for the dissemination conference in Barcelona was presented. The programme would be elaborated further.

7. Working group 4 “New developments in accreditation”

Working group 4 had discussed the European label initiatives. Some action lines that were suggested for national agencies included:

- Provide links to NQF (ownership)
- Institutional assessments should include examinations at programme level
- Negotiate with trust worthy label initiatives at individual level
- Exchange with professional associations.

Working group 4 had also discussed a number of issues concerning programme accreditation and institutional assessments. Some observations that were made:

- Students and the labour market prefer programme accreditation
- Profession-oriented programmes need accreditation „stamp“
- Institutional assessments shift the burden of programme evaluation to higher education institutions
- What is the value of self-accreditation of higher education institutions at the programme level for the international recognition of qualifications?

A survey on institutional and programme assessments in Europe had been carried out. The results were still preliminary and include:

- Growing importance of institutional assessments in Europe
- Heterogeneity of methods
- Legal basis in most cases
- Whole institutions assessed and reassessments typically after 6 years
- Institutional assessments include examination at programme level
- Broad range of examination areas

After the completion of the survey and a validation of the responses a conference on institutional assessments will be planned.

Finally, the ECA conference on learning outcomes organised by OAQ on 3 and 4 September in Zürich was brought to the attention of the participants. The objectives are to understand and discuss the change of paradigm; to learn how to design and assess learning outcomes; and the exchange of good practices. ECA members were encouraged to participate and to disseminate the information on the conference to their national stakeholders.