



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

Bruges, 31st May – 2nd June 2006

Approved by the Consortium on 6 December 2006

1. Introduction

The seventh workshop of the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) was held in Bruges from 31st May to 2nd June 2006. ECA members and invited experts, speakers and observers enjoyed the hospitality of the Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie (NVAO).

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. A roadmap towards a qualification area had been developed, including recognition profiles, observation reports and a pilot project on a Dutch-Flemish qualification area. The report of the recognition bodies can be downloaded from the ECA website: <http://www.ecaconsortium.net/index.php?section=content&id=14>

2. Organisational issues

The Conclusions of the Dublin Workshop were formally approved by the Consortium. The end of 2006 Workshop will be organised by CTI on 6th to 8th December in Paris. The German Accreditation Council (GAC) on behalf of all German ECA members offered to organise the mid 2007 Workshop in Berlin. The offer was gratefully accepted.

The tasks and composition of the Working groups were approved. A new Chair for Working group 2 would have to be found because Francisco Marcellán had been appointed to a senior position in the Spanish ministry.

Different models for the relationship with ENQA after 2007 were discussed. A few members felt that integration within ENQA would be beneficial because of avoidance of duplication of work done on the European level. Other members argued that there was no duplication; ENQA is the political forum for European quality assurance whilst ECA is a project of accreditation organisations working at specific goals, i.e. mutual recognition. These goals have a much higher likelihood to be achieved in an autonomous project organisation with financial independence. A plea was made to maintain an independent forum for discussions on accreditation. There was agreement that the envisaged relationship between ECA and ENQA could be specified in a letter to the ENQA Board but that there was no necessity to come to a formal (signed) memorandum on the relationship. It was also felt that there seemed to be little benefit in obtaining an affiliate or associate ENQA membership status. It was concluded that the Management Group would prepare a paper for the next

Workshop that would clarify objectives, goals and challenges for the continuation of ECA after 2007. The paper should elaborate on mutual recognition, the link between accreditation and recognition of qualifications, and the connection with the wider European agenda.

The annual account 2005 was adopted by the Consortium. The ECA budgets for 2005 and 2006 were accepted, including the reduced membership fee of 4,000 euro (8,000 euro for NVAO) for 2006. With regard to the amount of the membership fee for 2007 it was agreed that this would be decided on at the Paris Workshop. Some agencies asked attention for the fact that accounting rules may prohibit a possible refund of reserves not used in 2007. Furthermore, a plea was made to consider an increase in the ECA contribution to the Paris Workshop.

The Consortium decided to follow the recommendation of the Management Group to introduce a membership stop until the end of 2007. The reason for the membership stop is that it is difficult to imagine that new members can be fully included in the ongoing process of mutual recognition at this stage. It would be wiser to wait after the "first wave" of mutual recognition agreements has been signed before admitting new members who most likely cannot be part of the first wave anyway. If ECA would continue after 2007 then that would be a more appropriate time to discuss membership applications. The consequence of the membership stop is that the pending and new membership applications are "frozen" until the end of 2007.

The co-operation agreement between ECA and the Network of Central and Eastern European Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEEN) had been discussed by CEEN. This resulted in some proposals for minor modifications. The modifications were presented and approved by the Consortium. The co-operation agreement was now ready for signing by the Chairmen of ECA and CEEN.

3. Opening of the Workshop and presentations by guest speakers

The participants were welcomed by Karl Dittrich, Chairman of the host organisation NVAO, and by Rolf Heusser, Chairman of ECA who gave a short presentation of the achievements thusfar and the expectations for the Bruges Workshop.

The participants were officially addressed by Dirk Van Damme, Director of Cabinet of the Flemish Minister for Work, Education and Training. The reasons for the introduction of accreditation and the developments in higher education policies were described. Six challenges facing accreditation were presented:

1. Bureaucracy and costs and the counterargument that quality has its price.
2. The importance of internationalisation for accreditation.
3. The emergence of private accreditors and institutional pressures on the accountability function of accreditation.
4. How to cope with the need for diversity and innovation in accreditation systems?
5. The importance of a focus on learning outcomes for generating trust in accreditation systems.
6. The "illusion" that institutional accreditation will be cheaper and lighter.

Some of the conclusions were that accreditation systems should be responsive to criticisms and challenges, and that a comprehensive concept of quality should be defended, above labelling and window-dressing.

Guest speaker Ko Scheele, former Inspector of Education in the Netherlands, presented an overview of international developments in accreditation. Some possible

pitfalls were identified, related to the question whether accreditation facilitates diversity in higher education. His presentation was followed by responses of Rolf Heusser and Guy Haug, who showed that the growing emphasis on quality assurance and accreditation in the Bologna process was remarkable since it did not get much attention of the Bologna Ministers in 1999.

The presentations of Dirk Van Damme, Ko Scheele, Guy Haug and Rolf Heusser can be downloaded from the ECA website:

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

4. Working group 1 “Mutual recognition”

A first draft for a mutual recognition agreement was discussed. It raised many interesting questions, both with regard to the wording of the draft and issues concerning the timing of signing the Code (is December 2006 too early?), preconditions for signing the agreement (does the Code need to be fulfilled or are the co-operation projects at least as important?), and whether joint degrees and different legal requirements can be part of it. It was agreed that Working group 1 would prepare a new draft for discussion in Paris.

An updated map of co-operations between ECA members was presented. Members were asked to send updates to the ECA Coordinator.

An observation report of a AAC procedure (by a staff member of OAQ) had been completed. Many more observation reports were being prepared. It was agreed that Working group 1 should provide an analysis of the observation reports in Paris.

ECA members reported much progress with the implementation of the standards of the Code of Good Practice. Members were asked to send updates on the implementation of the Code to the ECA Coordinator. The standards should be implemented by the end of 2006 and externally evaluated in 2007.

The planning for the external evaluations of ECA members was discussed and updated. Experiences of HETAC and OAQ with their external reviews were shared which was very useful for other members.

Several co-operation projects were presented: the multilateral project ANECA-CTI-NVAO-OAQ, and the bilateral projects NVAO-OAQ; OAQ-CTI; CTI-NVAO; ANECA-CTI. Other co-operation projects, such as between NOKUT and NVAO were also in preparation. Much had been learned from these co-operations, especially when the co-operation consisted of comparisons of standards and procedures, as well as observations. The co-operations have enhanced trust and a focus on learning outcomes was highlighted as a way to come to mutual recognition between accreditation organisations with different approaches (programme vs. institution).

The results of a survey on decision-making rules for accreditation decisions applied by ECA members were presented. This resulted in an extensive overview of current practices in decision-making which showed the variety but also quite some commonalities. It was agreed that a follow-up to the survey would be held focusing on specific questions relevant for mutual recognition.

A presentation on joint degrees/programmes showed that there are a number of different definitions, perspectives, and experiences. Three possibilities for dealing with the accreditation of joint degrees/programmes were given. It was decided that

Working group 2 would look into depth into the accreditation of joint degrees/programmes and how it can be included in mutual recognition agreements.

5. Working group 2 “European Initiatives”

Working group 2 had struggled with establishing a new working agenda because of the merger between former Working group 4 and 2. In addition, Francisco Marcellan had left as Chair of Working group 2. An agenda for the second half of 2006 had been developed focusing on the accreditation of joint degrees. A position paper would be developed for discussion in Paris. Working group 2 would also give input to the ECA report for the Bologna Ministers in London.

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

Working group 3 presented the results of a short survey on the databases with accreditation decisions used by ECA members. More in-depth information would be needed for the development of the Information Tool. The survey also contained a question relating to the proposal for setting up the Information Tool. The answers showed support for the proposal and highlighted some relevant issues which will be taken into consideration. ESIB supported the proposal wholeheartedly and requested to include some additional information for students.

The project proposal “Transparent European Accreditation decisions and Mutual recognition agreements” was submitted to the European Commission with the request for funding under the Socrates Programme Higher Education Reform. The proposal contained the implementation of an information tool on qualifications from accredited programmes/institutions of ECA members; the introduction of an Accreditation Supplement in English to the published accreditation results; and the dissemination (including a conference and publications) of information regarding mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. At the time the Commission’s decision on the proposal was still unknown.

7. Working group 4 “New developments in accreditation”

Working group 4 had carried out 3 surveys on the following issues: distance learning and e-learning; poor quality institutions (“degree mills”); and learning outcomes. Thirteen out of the fifteen members had responded to the surveys. The results of the surveys were presented and discussed. It provided very interesting information on how members deal with these issues in their procedures and frameworks.

It was concluded that there was only limited experience of ECA members with distance and e-learning. It was pointed out that this was also the case for the recognition bodies which could create problems with the recognition of qualifications obtained through distance and e-learning.

It appeared that not all ECA members had experiences with private providers. Little information on accreditation and degree mills was available. Several pleas were made to share that information among members.

The survey showed that learning outcomes are of growing importance for accreditation organisations. Members agreed that a ECA seminar on learning outcomes to be organised in 2007 would be very useful. One should not focus too much on the European Quality Labels but it would be interesting to look at the disciplinary initiatives to develop common standards.