

## **Conclusions of the Fifth Workshop of the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA)**

**Dublin, 1-3 June 2005**

### **1. Introduction**

The fifth workshop of the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA) was held in Dublin from 1-3 June 2005. ECA members and invited experts, speakers and observers enjoyed the hospitality of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC).

A first meeting between representatives of ENIC/NARICs in ECA countries and ECA members about possibilities for co-operation preceded the workshop. It was a successful meeting in which the participants agreed to meet regularly and to draft a joint declaration concerning the automatic recognition of qualifications. Representatives of the ENIC/NARICs would also be included as experts in working groups 1, 2, and 3.

### **2. Organisational issues**

The Conclusions of the Zürich Workshop were formally approved by the Consortium. It was confirmed that the next workshop will be organised by AAC and FHR on 7-9 December 2005 in Vienna. CTI expressed its interest in organising the end of 2006 Workshop in Paris.

The Management Group reported that it would explore the feasibility of European Commission funding for certain ECA projects, e.g. the information tool and pilot projects.

The Management Group asked members whether the provision in the Agreement of Cooperation that “decisions of the Consortium are based on consensus” should be clarified by adopting formal voting rules. From the discussion it emerged that more formal arrangements for voting of the Consortium were not considered necessary. Decisions should be thoroughly discussed and wide agreement sought but consensus does not require unanimous voting.

The Consortium approved the following composition of the Management Group:

- Five permanent members and one ECA Coordinator serving until the end of 2007. The five members are: Rolf Heusser who will act as Chairman of ECA, Karl Dittrich, Oddvar Haugland, Francisco Marcellán, and Seamus Purseil. Mark Frederiks will act as ECA Coordinator.
- Two temporary members who are responsible for organising the workshop in Vienna, namely Elisabeth Fiorioli and Kurt Sohm. These members will serve from 1 July 2005 (1/2 year before the Vienna workshop) until 30 June 2006

(1/2 year after the Vienna workshop). The members who organise the workshops in 2006 and 2007 will replace the temporary members following the same principle of joining ½ year before the workshop until ½ year after the workshop.

The composition of the Management Group will be confirmed each year by the Consortium.

There were no new membership applications. It was agreed that membership applications from experienced Central and Eastern European accreditation organisations would be welcomed. Co-operation with CEEN should also be encouraged.

The Chairman presented the road map to mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. The road map was discussed and accepted after some changes. This resulted in the road map that is attached as Annex 1 to these Conclusions.

The Bergen Communiqué was discussed. It was concluded that much progress had been made on quality assurance and the European Qualifications Framework. The encouragement for mutual recognition of accreditation decisions was particularly welcomed as support of Ministers for the work of ECA.

### **3. Principles for the selection of experts**

Almost from the start of ECA it was agreed that the selection of experts is a crucial stage in accreditation procedures. For the purpose of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions it is therefore necessary to agree on procedures and principles for the selection of experts and the composition of expert panels.

After thorough discussions on different drafts during the past Workshops the “ECA Principles for the Selection of Experts” were discussed by the Consortium in Dublin. The Consortium decided to adopt the Principles after a minor amendment (replacing the word “science” by “research” in the section on institutional accreditation panels). After this amendment the Principles were formally signed by the twelve members who were present at the end of the Workshop.

The signed ECA Principles for the Selection of Experts are attached as Annex 2 to these Conclusions.

### **4. Presentation by guest speaker**

Seán Ó Foghlú from the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland was invited to give an update on the developments with regard to the European Qualifications Framework. The discussion following the presentation touched on many interesting issues, such as the development towards learning outcomes, the distinction between Ordinary and Honours Bachelors in Ireland and the UK, and the linkage with secondary education from the perspective of lifelong learning.

It was also pointed out that the Bologna document advocates an important role for the quality assurance agencies in the self-certifying process.

Seán Ó Foghlú’s presentation “National Frameworks & International Frameworks” is attached as Annex 3.

## 5. Working group 1 “Mutual recognition”

Mutual recognition requires at least mutual understanding of accreditation organisations. Profiles and observation reports of ECA members can enhance mutual understanding. It was agreed that observation should be encouraged and that the presented sample profiles should be developed for all members before Vienna. The two new members CTI and AHPGS would have to fill in the profiles themselves. The profiles and the observation reports will be published on the members website which is being developed. Working group 1 should consider whether further publication of these profiles would be useful.

Working group 1 presented the results of the survey with regard to cooperation activities between members. The mapping of cooperations was discussed. It was concluded that an updated map accompanied with recommendations about cooperation should be presented in Vienna.

The pilot project on mutual recognition between CTI and NVAO was presented. The assumption of both organisations is that mutual recognition is only possible with sufficient mutual trust. This requires a profound mutual knowledge of the systems and the conviction that the other system is sufficiently close to the own system to warrant recognition. The first phase of the pilot project had ended with comparative studies of the systems, engineering programmes, accreditation criteria and procedures. In addition, a workshop on the accreditation of engineering programmes was held. The second phase would involve mutual participation of observers (and experts) in accreditation procedures. Working group 1 invited other ECA members to start pilot projects as well.

The results of the survey on the implementation of the Code of Good Practice were presented. These results were discussed and clarified by the members. Much work still needs to be done on the internal quality assurance (standard 6). The NVAO therefore proposed to host a ECA seminar on internal quality assurance in October 2005. This proposal was accepted. A discussion emerged on the interpretation of standard 9 with regard to the publication of accreditation decisions. Some participants argued that publication “according to national regulations” (cf. reference point) is key. Following this argument only positive accreditation decisions need to be published if that is determined in the national regulations. Other participants believed that the European standard should be that both positive and negative accreditation decisions are published. They found support for this position in the two other reference points. The matter on publication of accreditation decisions was referred to Working group 3 for consideration. It was agreed that the implementation would be further monitored and discussed in Vienna.

Working group 1 presented a proposal for the external evaluation of compliance to the Code of Good Practice. The proposal was discussed and accepted by the Consortium with some minor amendments. It was perceived that the equivalence of the European standards for external quality assurance agencies and the ECA Code should be confirmed by ENQA. An inventory of the timing, underpinning “rules” and composition of the panels of upcoming national and international reviews was made at the meeting. It was acknowledged that setting up panels and determining their composition for national reviews is in many cases the responsibility of the national authorities.

It was agreed that Working group 1 will prepare the joint declaration on automatic recognition of qualifications in cooperation with the ENIC/NARICs. Questions were raised about the necessity of mutual recognition of both accreditation decisions and qualifications, once the Lisbon Recognition Convention was ratified by everyone, and the European standards for quality assurance, the European register for quality assurance agencies and the development of national qualifications frameworks linked to the European qualification framework were in place. The following answers were given to these questions.

First, the ENIC/NARICs had made it clear that ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention does not solve all the recognition problems. A case by case approach is still necessary and quality is an important “substantial difference” on which ground recognition can be denied. The introduction of European standards, a European register and national qualification frameworks are important developments which are expected to promote good practices in quality assurance across Europe. But it would take away neither the necessity of a case to case approach nor the denial of recognition on the grounds of substantial difference in quality. It is also clear that the implementation of these measures would take some years (the national qualification frameworks until 2010). In addition, the nationally based reviews and self-certifying processes in 45 Bologna countries would allow for a wide variety of national approaches and sincerity.

Second, recognition of foreign accreditation decisions and qualifications is ultimately based on the question whether there is sufficient trust in these accreditations and qualifications. For ECA members this process of trust building involves mutual understanding of systems, close cooperation and observation, as well as agreement on and evaluation of shared standards and procedures. At the end of this intensive process ECA members can wholeheartedly engage in mutual recognition agreements. In turn these agreements and the availability of fully transparent information on accreditation decisions will lead to the trust needed by the recognition authorities to automatically recognise the accredited qualifications in the ECA countries. This will truly contribute to the mobility aims of Bologna.

Third, mutual recognition of accreditation decisions, followed by automatic recognition of qualifications, would solve many problems that institutions and students are experiencing with cross-border cooperations. It would prevent that joint programmes and joint degrees need to be accredited and recognised in each of the participating countries. And that would make it easier for institutions and students to participate in these cross-border programmes which by definition increase mobility.

Finally, it was agreed that Working group 1 should investigate the common accreditation areas, i.e. the standards and criteria in the accreditation frameworks that are shared by members.

## **6. Working group 2 “European Qualifications Framework”**

Working group 2 drew to the attention of the Consortium to the European framework which was adopted by the Bologna Ministers and the proposal from the European Commission for a European qualifications framework in the context of lifelong learning. The Consortium felt that the attention should be focused on the Bologna European framework and the development of the national qualification frameworks.

Working group 2 announced that a survey with regard to the legal aspects of accreditation and qualification frameworks would be held. The survey would also concentrate on the legal aspects and possible obstacles for the accreditation of joint degrees.

## **7. Working group 3 “Information Tool for accreditation decisions”**

Working group 3 presented a first proposal for setting up the Information Tool. The proposal was also based on the results of a questionnaire among the members. It emerged that the accreditation organisation, programme, institution, and accreditation period would certainly be among the core parameters. Some members also plead for the inclusion of the country and website of members as parameters. Other (secondary) parameters as the title, name of the programme in English, ECTS, teaching language, and teaching location could also be considered.

The Consortium confirmed its support for the development of the Implementation Tool. It was decided that an elaborate proposal on the design of the Information Tool would be presented in Vienna.

## **8. Working group 4 “European Initiatives”**

Working group 4 had reflected on its agenda for 2005 and presented its thoughts to the Consortium. The follow-up to the Bergen Communiqué would be very important. An important task is the preparation of the ECA report for the London 2007 Ministers meeting. Topics for the London 2007 report should be proposed in Vienna. ECA members should also be involved in the implementation of the European standards and Register. Not only in the decision-making but also in the technical domain. It was agreed that the participation of ECA members in the relevant ENQA working groups should be encouraged. At the same time it is clear that the first priority for ECA is the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.

The Bergen Communiqué stressed the doctoral programmes as third cycle in the Bologna process. There are a few ECA members (e.g. ANECA and NOKUT) which accredit doctoral programmes. These organisations could bring their experiences to the Bologna process.

On the one hand cooperation with other networks around the world was not perceived as a priority for ECA. On the other hand cooperation with networks with similar aims (e.g. in Latin-America and Asia-Pacific) could be beneficial for all. Low scale cooperations could take place.

The communication with stakeholders was seen as an important activity for Working group 4. Communication with students (ESIB) deserves more attention. One question is how students can be involved in transmitting the benefits of accreditation to their institutions. Another question is how students can be involved as active parts of the accreditation processes. ANECA announced that it would host a seminar on student involvement in the Autumn of 2005.

It could be investigated whether some of these activities would qualify for funding by the European Commission.

## **9. Working group 5 “New developments in accreditation”**

Working group 5 presented some questions related to the suitability of programme and institutional accreditation approaches in the context of mutual recognition.

Working group 5 also presented a proposal on the equivalence of institutional and

programme approaches. Some of the assumptions in the proposal were questioned. The ESIB representative pointed out that students need information on programmes and that therefore programme accreditation is desirable. It was also argued that ENIC/NARICs prefer information on programmes. The question was raised whether the fundamentals of programme and institutional accreditation are similar enough to be declared equivalent. But it was also pointed out that in practice programme and institutional accreditation become more mixed. Several interesting experiments and developments are taking place. It was decided that Working group 5 would present a new proposal on the equivalence of programme and institutional accreditation for agreement in Vienna.

The UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provisions in Cross-border Higher Education were presented. It was decided that an update of developments in this matter would be presented in Vienna.

## **10. List of Annexes**

1. ECA road map to mutual recognition
2. ECA Principles for the Selection of Experts
3. Presentation Seán Ó Foghlú