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

Paris, 6 – 8 December 2006

1. Introduction

The eighth workshop of the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) was held in Paris from 6 to 8 December 2006. ECA members and invited experts, observers and guest speakers enjoyed the hospitality of the Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur (CTI).

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. Since the last meeting in Bruges the ENIC/NARICs had filled in recognition profiles for recognition bodies in nine of the ten ECA countries. These recognition profiles could be included in the Information Tool for accreditation decisions. ENIC/NARICS would also start with writing observation reports. These observation reports and the revised road map towards acceptance will be discussed at the next meeting in Berlin.

2. Organisational issues

The Conclusions of the Bruges Workshop were formally approved by the Consortium including a small addition with regard to the organisation of the Berlin Workshop. It was confirmed that the next ECA Workshop will take place in Berlin from 13-15 June 2007.

The proposed composition of the Management group in 2007 was confirmed by the Consortium. The composition is published on the ECA website.

The estimated realisation of the ECA budget for 2006 and the proposal for the budget of 2007 were approved by the Consortium. Members agreed with the proposed new membership fee of 2 000 euro for 2007. This reduction by half which was made possible by using the reserves from previous years was much appreciated.

The outline of the ECA report for the London meeting of the Bologna ministers was approved. The Management group will prepare the London report.

With regard to the letter of the ENQA Board on a possible affiliated membership it was agreed that the Management group should send a formal application for affiliated membership to the ENQA Board. Although there was no necessity for such

an affiliated membership it would help to clarify the relationship with ENQA and the communication to third parties about this relationship.

3. Opening of the Workshop and presentations by guest speakers

The speakers were introduced by the CTI organiser of the Workshop René-Paul Martin. Bernard Remaud, Chairman of CTI, explained the history, features and current issues of CTI accreditation.

Rolf Heusser presented the objectives of ECA and the approach to mutual recognition that was shifting from equivalence to acceptance. The ideas behind and developments towards acceptance were explained by Marianne Cox. The ENIC/NARICs experiences were very helpful for the efforts of ECA.

Professor Eric Froment, representative of the French Ministry of Research and Higher Education, highlighted the inclusion of quality assurance in the Bologna process and his view on important topics for the London meeting of the ministers.

Professor Giuliano Augusti, Chairman of ENAEE (European Network for Accreditation in Engineering Education) presented the EUR-ACE label project, a quality label for engineering programmes in Europe. ECA members raised questions about the added value of this label and asked how national accreditation organisations would be involved. It became clear that continued information exchange between these and other disciplinary networks would be useful.

4. Working group 1 "Mutual recognition"

The draft agreement towards mutual recognition of accreditation decisions and results was discussed. It was agreed that the word "procedures" created confusion regarding the exact meaning and its implications. It would be replaced by "tools and instruments". A preamble to the agreement would be added. The preamble should give information on what ECA has done and will do. A draft had already been discussed in WG 1.The Management group should ensure that the text will be finalised and included in the report for the meeting of the Bologna Ministers in London.

Christoph Demand presented the concept of substantial differences from the viewpoint of the ENIC/NARICs. From the discussion it emerged that observations could highlight more differences than envisaged but that one should focus on the question whether such differences are substantial, i.e. hindering mutual recognition. The concept of acceptance highlights that one should not emphasise the differences. Those differences can be accepted when one is confident that the outcomes (decisions) are the same even if the procedures to come to those outcomes are different.

With regard to the observation reports the TEAM template and the need for everyone to participate in observations were agreed. Furthermore, it was concluded that WG 1 should analyse the observation reports and comparisons between agencies. If any substantial differences are encountered then this will be reported to the Consortium after the ECA member concerned has had an opportunity to give a response.

With regard to the implementation of the standards of the Code of Good Practice everyone was confident that the standards had been (almost) implemented by each organisation. The two members who had not filled in the questionnaire on implementation would do so shortly. With regard to the planning of external evaluations of the implementation of the ECA standards it seemed that everyone would have finished its external evaluation by the end of 2007.

A presentation was made on the bilateral projects with special reference to the project of CTI and OAQ. The analysis of the results of the survey on decision-making was also presented. The discussion centred around the question whether a very different approach on decision-making could form a substantial difference. The tendency was that this would not be the case as long as there was trust that a similar outcome could be reached in spite of different approaches in decision-making. To make it transparent decision-making should be included as an item in the template for observation reports.

The proposed procedure for the external evaluation of compliance to the ECA Code of Good Practice was adopted by the Consortium.

5. Working group 2 "European Initiatives"

Working group 2 presented the results of a survey on joint programmes. This provided useful information on how joint programmes are included in accreditation procedures in different national settings. There clearly is variety, and the topic of joint programmes and (joint, multiple, double) degrees awarded is a complex one. Nevertheless, the survey showed very clearly the unanimous opinion that joint programmes could and should be part of mutual recognition agreements. This goal was shared and confirmed by the Consortium.

Working group 2 had drafted Principles for accreditation procedures regarding joint programmes. These Principles state that accreditation decisions regarding joint programmes are subject to the relevant agreements on mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. In order to increase mutual trust and transparency, ECA members should take into account these principles when accrediting joint programmes. The Principles were discussed and some questions were raised. One of the questions referred to a possible role of ECA in providing some kind of quality seal for joint programmes. It was agreed that the draft Principles would be further developed by Working group 2 and presented to the Consortium in Berlin.

6. Working group 3 "Information Tool for accreditation decisions"

Funding by the European Commission has been obtained for the TEAM project (Transparent European Accreditation decisions and Mutual recognition agreements). Working group 3 presented the TEAM project and its close relationship with the main ECA activities. The proposal for bilateral projects in which comparisons between ECA members and mutual observations will take place was discussed. The revised scheme for the bilateral projects would be send to the partners in the bilateral projects.

An important part of TEAM is the development and implementation of the Information Tool for accreditation decisions. The request for proposals with the specifications for the Information Tool had been discussed with stakeholders, the ECA members in

WG 3, and within the TEAM Steering Group. This would result in a revised request for proposals to be sent to selected companies in December 2006. Proposals should be submitted by mid February 2007 after which a selection of proposals will be made by the TEAM Steering Group.

7. Working group 4 "New developments in accreditation"

Working group 4 presented a position paper on European Quality Labels. There were now nine European label initiatives supported by the European Commission. Some possible strengths and weaknesses of this label approach were discussed. This amounted to the following ECA position that was endorsed by the Consortium. The strengths and effective operation of national accreditation systems should not be undermined by the emergence of all kind of labels. There is concern that European Quality Labels could erode responsibilities on national levels without creating a credible and widely supported European alternative. In addition, the quality labels will contribute to a more competitive environment for quality assurance. It will be more challenging to maintain standards and guarantee consumer protection in such a competitive environment. There is the possibility though that domain specific standards developed from labels initiatives will supplement the generic quality standards applied now. It was concluded that the development of labels should be monitored.

Working group 4 also presented a paper on learning outcomes. Following the overarching Qualification Framework adopted in Bergen the national qualifications frameworks should be based on learning outcomes. This means that ECA members should develop learning outcomes oriented accreditation systems. An example of how the American engineering accreditation organisation ABET uses learning outcomes as a central element in its procedures was given. It was proposed and endorsed by the Consortium that ECA should hold an international conference on learning outcomes. The conference should be organised by OAQ on 3 and 4 September in Zürich. Working group 4 would prepare this conference and present it to the next ECA Workshop in Berlin.