



Conclusions of the Sixth Workshop of the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA)

Vienna, 7-9 December 2005

Approved by the Consortium on 31st May 2006

1. Introduction

The sixth workshop of the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA) was held in Vienna from 7th to 9th December 2005. ECA members and invited experts, speakers and observers enjoyed the hospitality of the Austrian Accreditation Council (AAC) and the Fachhochschulrat (FHR).

A meeting between representatives of ENIC/NARICs in ECA countries and ECA members preceded the workshop. It was a successful meeting in which a number of the participants agreed on a joint declaration concerning the automatic recognition of qualifications. This was the follow-up to a first meeting which explored the possibilities for co-operation in Dublin on 1st June 2005.

2. Organisational issues

The Conclusions of the Dublin Workshop were formally approved by the Consortium. It was confirmed that the next workshop will be organised by NVAO in Bruges on 31st May to 2nd June 2006. CTI would organise the second workshop in 2006 in Paris on 6th to 8th December.

The Consortium had already determined the composition of the Management Group in Dublin. The Consortium confirmed the composition. Following the rules established in Dublin this means that AAC and FHR will stay in the Management Group until 30th June 2006. They will then be succeeded by CTI who will serve from 1st July 2006 until 30th June 2007. The mid 2006 workshop organiser NVAO was already represented in the Management Group.

A proposal for a revision of the working groups was discussed. The Consortium agreed that the merger of working groups 2 and 4 would be beneficial and reduce overlap. The tasks and composition of the new Working Group 2/4 "European Initiatives" would be decided by the Management Group in its next meeting.

A co-operation agreement between ECA and the Network of Central and Eastern European Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEE) was presented. It appeared that three ECA members are also CEE members. Helmut Konrad was delegated by the Board of CEE to speak on behalf of CEE. He explained the agreement and asked for the support of ECA members. The Consortium endorsed the agreement and mandated the Chairman to sign it on behalf of ECA.

The relationship between ECA and ENQA was discussed. Following a letter of Christian Thune on the proposal by some ENQA members to establish a ENQA standing committee on accreditation the Management Group had taken the following position:

- ECA will continue until the end of 2007 as agreed by its members in the Agreement of Cooperation and reconfirmed in a formal evaluation of ECA at the end of 2004.
- ECA is open to discussions about further cooperation with ENQA after 2007.
- It is up to ENQA to decide whether setting up a ENQA standing committee on accreditation in the near future has added value or not.

It was pointed out that this position was held by a majority of the countries represented by the members. Several members expressed their support for this position and stated that they did not feel the need for further discussions on this subject during the next year. But there were also some members who thought that a closer relationship with ENQA should be examined in 2006. In the end it was concluded that the Management Group would further discuss the matter in its next meeting. There was consensus on the fact that the Bologna mandate of ENQA meant that ENQA is the first platform to discuss political issues. ECA should concentrate on its aim of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.

The KPMG auditors report of the ECA 2004 financial statements was presented and the statements were adopted by the Consortium. The budget for 2005 was approved. With regard to the budget for 2006 questions were raised about the information and communication costs, the reserves and the annual membership fee. Some members thought that the membership fee could be reduced. It was decided that the different options would be considered and that a new proposal for the budget 2006 would be presented to the Consortium in Bruges.

The Management Group presented two positive recommendations on applications for ECA membership.

ASIIN had applied for membership on 8 April 2004. The Management Group had made a positive recommendation but the decision to admit ASIIN had been repeatedly postponed because of a dispute between German agencies with regard to the Washington Accord. The Akkreditierungsrat informed the Consortium that this issue would most likely be resolved at a meeting of the German agencies in the near future. The Consortium decided that ASIIN would be admitted as new ECA member on the condition that the representation of ASIIN in the Washington Accord would be resolved to the satisfaction of the Akkreditierungsrat.

The Polish State Accreditation Committee (PKA) applied for ECA membership on 20th October 2005. PKA is the official Polish accreditation organisation and functions independently. PKA is a member of CEE and has organised the Bologna seminar on accreditation. The Management Group had reviewed the application and supporting documents and concluded that PKA fulfils the membership criteria. The Consortium decided to follow the positive recommendation and to admit the PKA as new ECA member, on the condition that PKA will sign the Agreement of Cooperation and the Code of Good Practice.

3. Formal opening of the Workshop and presentation by guest speaker

The Chairman welcomed the participants and the Polish State Accreditation Committee as new ECA member in particular. There were now ten countries represented in ECA and it was evident that ECA is open to members from Central and Eastern Europe. The Chairman presented the road map to mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. This was visualised through a pyramid showing the “fundament of mutual trust”. He pointed at the increasing political support for the aim of ECA in the Bergen report, the recommendations of the European Parliament and Council, and the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education. These presentations are attached as Annex 1 to these Conclusions.

These political initiatives and the European developments in accreditation and mutual recognition were also reflected on in the official addresses of Friedrich Faulhammer, (Director General for Higher education, Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Culture), Hannelore Weck-Hannemann (President of AAC) and Kurt Sohm (Managing director of FHR). The presentation of Mr Faulhammer is attached as Annex 2 to these Conclusions.

Guest speaker Yves Beaudin (National Coordinator of the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials) delivered a speech on higher education, mutual recognition and accreditation in Canada. It became clear that the Canadian provinces are very autonomous and that there is a wide variety in accreditation and recognition practices between provinces and professions. Some of the challenges are not unlike those experienced between European countries. The discussion following this interesting presentation focused on the autonomy of the provinces and universities, the large influence of professional bodies on programme accreditation, responses to GATS, and attempts to introduce a common policy on quality assurance and accreditation in Canada. The presentation of Yves Beaudin is attached as Annex 3 to these Conclusions.

4. Working group 1 “Mutual recognition”

The joint declaration concerning the automatic recognition of qualifications which resulted from the meeting with the ENIC/NARICs was presented to the participants. The text was discussed and some amendments were made. The final joint declaration was signed by the ENIC/NARICs of Austria, Flanders, the Netherlands and Norway and by ECA members AAC, FHR, NVAO, NOKUT, OAQ, and ANECA. There were indications that a number of ENIC/NARICs and ECA members from other countries would sign the joint declaration in the future (perhaps in Bruges or Paris). This means a significant step forward towards the mutual recognition of qualifications following the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. The joint declaration is attached as Annex 4 to these Conclusions.

The accreditation profiles of nearly all ECA members were completed and presented to the Consortium. It was agreed that updated profiles and profiles of new members should be send to the ECA Coordinator. All profiles are accessible through the ECA members website.

The updated mapping of co-operation activities between ECA members was presented and discussed. It was agreed that future updates should be send to the

ECA Coordinator. The co-operation map is accessible through the ECA members website.

New observation reports of HETAC and NVAO procedures were presented. There were now observation reports of three ECA members available on the ECA members website. Working group 1 encouraged members to participate in observations because such practical experiences can facilitate mutual understanding and enhance trust. New observation reports should be sent to the ECA Coordinator.

An overview of the current state of affairs with regard to the pilot projects on mutual recognition was given. There were now pilot projects between CTI and NVAO, ANECA and CTI (with envisaged participation of NVAO and OAQ), and a planned pilot project between NVAO and OAQ. Learning experiences from these pilot projects would be presented in greater detail in Bruges. Other pilot projects between ECA members were encouraged.

The results of a survey with regard to criteria used by members in institutional and programme accreditation were presented. This amounted to an update of the previous survey by Ton Vroeijenstijn. The results of the survey and the discussion in Vienna confirmed that there were no major differences in the criteria used by ECA members. Some members asked attention for the growing importance of criteria related to learning outcomes and the danger of too much criteria and standardisation. Working group 1 had also asked members which rules for making accreditation decisions were used. Responses to this question were still limited; more responses were needed to draw conclusions about similarities and differences in decision making rules. This would be reported on in Bruges.

The updated overview of the implementation of the ECA Code of Good Practice was presented. Some members announced that a few changes in the overview would have to be made. It was decided that members should send any updates to the ECA Coordinator. An updated overview of the implementation of the Code would be presented in Bruges.

The revised outline for the external evaluation of compliance to the Code of Good Practice as it emerged from the discussions in Dublin was presented to the Consortium. The ENQA Board had recognised "the correspondence between the European standards for external quality assurance agencies and the ECA code". It was acknowledged that determining the composition of panels for reviews of ECA members is in many cases the responsibility of the national authorities. The discussion focused on the international representation in panels. The Consortium agreed that panels with a mixed composition of national and international members are preferred.

Opinions on the necessity of guidelines for the self-evaluation and the experts varied. Some members would appreciate such guidelines whilst others stated that the national reviews provide these. It was decided that Working group 1 would present guidelines for the connection between national reviews and the Code of Good Practice in Bruges.

Finally, the Consortium agreed that the accreditation of joint degrees is an important topic that should be prepared by Working group 1 and discussed in full in Bruges.

5. Working group 2 “European Qualifications Framework”

Working group 2 had held 2 small surveys with regard to the national qualifications frameworks in use and the regulation and accreditation practices with regard to joint degrees. It appeared that most countries are in the process of developing a national qualification framework and that some have incorporated the Dublin descriptors or an equivalent set of descriptors in their frameworks. It also appeared that most countries neither have legislation on joint degrees nor rules regarding the accreditation of joint degrees.

The reflections of Working group 2 members on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) were presented to the Consortium. The experts gave an outline of the EQF. They concluded that the EQF contains level descriptors which are completely different from the Dublin qualification descriptors. Other questions raised included the relationship between EQF and the Bologna qualifications framework, tensions between ECTS and EC VET, the input of the sectoral level in EQF, and the elaborate principles on quality assurance in the EQF. ECA members were asked to consider a joint input to the EQF consultation process. The Consortium agreed that time was too short to decide on a joint response and that this matter would be discussed further by the Management Group.

The Consortium had decided that Working group 2 will be merged with Working group 4. The topic of qualification frameworks will be handled by the merged Working group 2/4. It was proposed that the accreditation of joint degrees will be dealt with by Working group 1.

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

Working group 3 presented an elaborate proposal for setting up the Information Tool. The main aim of the Information Tool is to present the qualifications provided by programmes and institutions accredited by ECA members. These qualifications are presented in the perspective of the higher education system of which it is part (its National Qualifications Framework) together with information on the relevant accreditation organisation and recognition authorities. The users of the Information Tool will be recognition authorities, students, employers and institutions who seek information on the qualifications provided by accredited programmes and institutions. These users currently have to search through multiple websites with different formats, information and languages. With the Information Tool they will be able to get quick access to the information they need through one well-structured database driven website in English.

Questions were raised about the links with existing national databases and websites. It was agreed that an inventory of these databases and websites would be made. Some technical details should also be discussed further within the Working group. One ECA member argued that qualifications from countries outside of ECA would be most relevant. However, the UNESCO initiative to create a database of recognised institutions might be more appropriate for this purpose. The Information Tool is primarily meant to provide transparency on the qualifications of ECA accredited programmes and institutions. A future expansion to other countries could be considered at a later stage.

The aim and the development of the Information Tool were supported by the representatives from the ENIC/NARICs and ESIB. A plea was made for the involvement of students and employers in the development of the Information Tool.

It was decided that these comments would be taken into account by Working group 3 and that a revised proposal should be presented in Bruges.

7. Working group 4 “European initiatives”

Working group 4 explained that there was a need to clarify both contents and objectives of Working Group 4, especially after the merging with Working Group 2. The topics that were discussed in Dublin were reconsidered. The following reflections by the Working group were given:

- A deeper involvement in the debate on national and European qualification frameworks is needed. However, this may exceed the competences of some members.
- Establishing contacts with EUA in the field of accreditation of post-graduate (doctoral) degrees is perceived as favourably.
- Recommendations from the European Council and Parliament and feedback to the Bergen Communiqué are a key source of information for the ECA report for London 2007.
- A sort of analysis and follow-up action concerning the fulfilment and/or the advances accomplished regarding the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the mutual recognition issue could be fruitful.

Members responded that the focus should not be too broad and not too political. The aim of ECA, namely the mutual accreditation of accreditation decisions, should always be kept in mind. It was decided that the Management Group would further discuss the task and composition of the merged Working group 2/4. Meetings of Working group 2/4 were envisaged in Bruges and Paris and in April and October 2006.

8. Working group 5 “New developments in accreditation”

Working group 5 presented a proposal for establishing the equivalence between institutional and programme accreditation. A general requirement should be that assessments must be carried out according to ECA guidelines (Code of Good Practice and Principles for the Selection of Experts). The following recommendations were given for institutional accreditations:

- There should be a focus on internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions.
- It should be based on the ENQA standards and guidelines.
- Sufficient and reliable information about the quality of educational provisions should be made available.

The following recommendations were given for programme accreditations:

- The assessment should be based on explicit standards.
- Information about internal quality assurance processes should be made available.
- Internal quality assurance processes should be based on ENQA standards/guidelines.

Some questions were raised about the validity and applicability of these recommendations. From the discussion it emerged that a formal policy on the equivalence between institutional and programme accreditation was not needed. It was argued that the differences between institutional and programme accreditation would have to be tackled when mutually recognising the assessment results. Pragmatic solutions might also be found in bilateral pilot projects between institutional and programme accreditors.

Working group 5 presented some relevant trends in higher education systems as they emerged from recent papers. Future developments in higher education were linked to possible consequences for accreditation systems. From the discussions it emerged that the following issues would merit the attention of Working group 5:

- The impact of distance learning on accreditation; do we need separate guidelines for accrediting distance learning providers?
- The growing importance of learning outcomes and its impact on accreditation procedures and frameworks.
- There were signs that the number of accreditation and degree mills are increasing. More information on accreditation and degree mills and how to handle these is needed.

It was concluded that these three topics should be presented by Working group 5 in Bruges.

9. List of Annexes

1. ECA road map to mutual recognition
2. Presentation Friedrich Faulhammer
3. Presentation Yves Beaudin
4. Joint declaration concerning the automatic recognition of qualifications