

Recognition work in Denmark

Evaluation report

Nordic Recognition and Information Centres Network (NORRIC)

January 2006

Introduction

The Nordic Recognition and Information Centres Network (NORRIC) Evaluation Project is a joint initiative to bring together the principles and work of the five offices within the recognition field. All national recognition agencies will be studied and discussed in the project. The general aims and methodology of the project are presented elsewhere.

The NORRIC Evaluation Project seeks to establish transparency and produce insights into the modes of work of the different offices by focusing on core aspects of what they do. In addition to creating transparency, the method applied will suggest measures where possible for improving the quality delivered by the recognition agencies. As such, one aspiration is for the evaluation project to establish a platform for debate on common recognition standards and criteria.

To date in the project, the Danish Enic/Naric office – CIRIUS - has been studied along with the Icelandic, Finnish and Norwegian offices. The Danish office presented a self-assessment in mid February 2005 and a subsequent site-visit was carried out in March 2005. The team meet representatives from the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Science and Technology, higher education institutions plus representatives from other stakeholders. An interview protocol was prepared to guide and support the group's work. Programs for visit and interviews were documented as a base for reporting.

The evaluation team visiting CVUU had a broad representation from the Nordic offices: Anne-Marie Hetzlein (Norway), Tryggvi Thórhallsson (Iceland), Marketta Saarinen (Finland), Tuula Kuosmanen and Ulf Öhlund (Sweden). Professor Kauko Hämäläinen, University of Helsinki gave valuable support to the team as an independent expert.

I Presentation of the Danish Enic/Naric Office

The Danish Centre for Assessment of Foreign Qualifications (Center for Vurdering af Udenlandske Uddannelser/CVUU) is a Danish government authority. It was established on 1 January 2000 by the Ministry of Education to handle Danish integration policy.

Before then, recognition issues were largely the responsibility of education institutions, employers, the appropriate authorities and other bodies.

The Secretariat of Danish Rectors dealt with Danish Enic/Naric office matters.

The new unit initially fell under the Government Educational Grant and Loan Scheme Agency, but August 2002 relocated to the National Education Authority, the Ministry of Education. The Danish Enic/Naric office was eventually integrated into a new governmental agency that also included the Danish Centre for International Cooperation and Mobility in Education and Training (CIRIUS) in 2005. The office has a supervisory role in recognition of foreign qualifications and introducing fair and transparent procedures and best practices in this field.

At the same time as the office was reorganised, new laws regulating the assessment of foreign qualifications were introduced.

Although the Danish Enic/Naric office continued to refer to itself as CVUU in the self-assessment report and at the time of the visit by the evaluation team, at the request of the office we will use its new denomination, CIRIUS, in this report.

CIRIUS is fully funded by the government. Evaluations and information are free of charge. Individual findings or statements, are published in the form of individual assessments (searchable on the database) and standard assessments - the latter currently restricted to qualifications for the purpose of access to higher education.

CIRIUS participates in relevant national and international organisations.

Organisation, role and objectives

The core CIRIUS task is to assess foreign qualifications. As a member of the Enic/Naric Network the office has extensive information duties. CIRIUS also promotes recognition among educational institutions and other organisations and plays a supervisory role in the provision of recognition procedures and practices.

CIRIUS takes on an active role in cooperating on European education harmonisation and internationalisation – in the first instance, the Bologna and Copenhagen processes.

One specific characteristic of CIRIUS is that it is involved in both academic and professional recognition. CIRIUS conducts assessments of foreign qualifications and sets standards for academic and professional recognition evaluations performed by others.

The office deals with all levels of education.

Education institutions are responsible for academic recognition in Denmark. The primary responsibility for professional de facto recognition lies with the employer, unions, unemployment funds etc. Expert authorities deal with professional de jure recognition. However, when it comes to academic and professional de facto recognition, various parties, including the applicant seeking recognition, can ask CIRIUS to provide an assessment of their qualifications.

Relations among recognising agents are however quite complicated. Under the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications Act, competent authorities are obliged to obtain an assessment of an applicant's academic qualifications from CIRIUS, unless they give an immediate recognition of the applicant's qualifications. Assessments made by CIRIUS are in this respect binding for the competent authorities.

In the case of professional recognition CIRIUS acts as a supervisory and coordinating body. As such, CIRIUS has overall responsibility for implementation and promotion of EU Directives on recognition of all forms of professional qualifications. CIRIUS has established a recognition framework supporting the national priorities in recognition (integration) and incorporating Denmark's international obligations (the Lisbon Convention and EU Directives).

As the coordinating body in the field of professional recognition, CIRIUS has drafted and agreed a service declaration with the relevant authorities (Anerkendelse af udenlandske erhvervs-mæssige kvalifikationer inden for lovregulerede erhverv – arbejdsdeling og servicemål). The declaration contains guidelines for assessments and a description of how the workload is to be divided between the relevant authorities and CIRIUS.

The office arranges annual seminars, conferences and meetings for information purposes with organisations involved in recognition of foreign qualifications. Where relevant the office holds ad hoc meetings with guidance counsellors, caseworkers, ethnic minority/integration-related organisations and other interested parties.

Staff, expertise and skills training

CIRIUS has developed wide-ranging expertise in credential evaluation. Along with the gradual expansion of tasks and authority, the number of staff has increased from an average of six full-time employees in 2000, to an average of fifteen employees in 2005, including two on a part-time basis, and one student on a 15 hours-a-week contract. Of these, seven are primarily engaged in credential evaluation for academic recognition and professional de facto recognition, and a further two primarily deal with professional recognition within the regulated professions. Two special advisers coordinate and assure the quality of the Centre's legal work and credential evaluation work respectively. One information officer is responsible for the Centre's information activities (www.ciriionline.dk, publications etc.) and ensuring that CIRIUS is up to date in the digital age. The office has a broad range of language skills.

The head of the office – the Director – is appointed by the government (Ministry of Education). The Director has the final say in organising, staffing and supervising the work of the office.

A secretary manages the registration of applications on a part-time basis. A student employee provides general support to the work done by the centre. Consultant services are also hired where necessary.

Except for the secretary and student employee, all employees are educated to Masters level, with three holding law degrees. However, a master's degree is not mandatory to work here with a first degree deemed sufficient.

Skills training is considered an important aspect of CIRIUS and plays an important role in quality assurance.

The development of assessment skills is given high priority - especially for the credential evaluators. On-the-job-training, i.e. processing of case files is the most common method. Other ways of supporting skills training include internal meetings and participation in seminars, study visits and international projects/co-operation.

Outcomes of recognition work

No direct measurement or evaluation of the effect of assessments and general recognition work of the CIRIUS has yet been conducted.

The self-assessment concludes that: "One pragmatic way of measuring the impact of the work of CIRIUS is that the Centre has continuously been given new tasks and areas of expertise since its inception".

In its own internal evaluations the office points to certain areas where it has made a difference. Generally the transparency of foreign qualifications has been enhanced, knowledge of the Lisbon Convention has increased among HE institutions and the work of the office have fostered a more flexible, uniform and coherent approach to recognition as well as greater synergy between academic and professional recognition.

The table shows the number of cases handled 2001 - 2003

	2001	2002	2003	change in the last year	
Number of assessments	791	989	1,282	293	29.6%

In 2003 65% of assessments were related to recognition for the job market. 60% concerned qualifications from non-Western countries.

Preliminary figures for 2004 suggest a stabilisation in the number of applications.

The most frequent country of origin was the former Soviet Union, accounting for 17.4% of all applications.

In its information capacity CIRIUS responds to enquiries from inside Denmark and abroad that are not directly linked to specific applications for assessment. In 2003 the office received 570 written enquiries – the vast majority of which were sent by email and another 4,200 enquiries by telephone.

In 2003 applications were handled – from reception to conclusion – in an average of 43 days. The self-assessment states that this is a little longer than in previous years but still comfortably within acceptable time limits.

2003 was also the first year Danish authorities were required by the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications Act to obtain assessments of foreign qualifications from CIRIUS. That year Danish authorities received 1,465 applications for recognition of foreign professional qualifications.

Assessment decisions focus on comparing foreign qualification with a corresponding Danish equivalent. Existing Danish qualifications are the sole basis for comparison.

According to the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications Act, other administrative body cannot appeal assessments made by CIRIUS. However, re-examinations are carried out on demand.

Information: tools and principles

The information strategy of the office will be revised following the recent organisational merger with Cirius. For instance, the website (www.ciriusonline.dk) will be integrated into a new portal for the whole agency in 2005.

CIRIUS provides both written and internet-based information. The most comprehensive information appears on its website (www.ciriusonline.dk) which is regularly updated and acts as the main channel of information from CIRIUS. News in the field of recognition is increasingly provided by mailing list. In addition, guidance is also offered through direct individual contact with the Centre. Most information on the website and in print is available in Danish and English.

In the specific field of recognition CIRIUS has developed a strategy in line with the recommendations of the ENIC/NARIC Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Information.

As a special area of responsibility, information is handled by a specialist. This professional capacity is responsible for the CIRIUS website, databases, information standards and publications. All personnel are involved in the production and updating of information related to enquiries, web content, annual reports, project reports, presentations at external meetings, study visits etc. Three important development projects have high priority – the differentiation of information to meet various needs, the development of a Nordic Recognition website (NORRIC) and the implementation of a fully electronic application process.

Quality Assurance

CIRIUS employs internal and external Quality Assurance procedures. Particular attention is given to the composition and selection of staff and skills training in credential evaluation (see staffing).

CIRIUS bases its assessments on the principles and criteria laid down in the [Lisbon Convention](#) and the [Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications](#)¹. The Lisbon Convention was ratified by Denmark on 20 March 2003. Its principles and criteria are incorporated in the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications Act. Information on CIRIUS's recognition work is made publicly available on (www.ciriusonline.dk).

An employee manual (personalehåndbog) brings together the accumulated knowledge and best practice. The manual acts as a starting point for staff training and is a guarantee that cases are handled in a professionally consistent way. The assessment procedures for the various qualification recognition modes are described step by step. Other internal mechanisms are recurring evaluation seminars, checklists supporting the evaluation procedure and double-checking all statements. The filing of all incoming and outgoing mail supports the sharing of knowledge and information and consistency in assessments.

An annual "contract" between the Director and the Ministry's Board of Directors forms the basis of external QA. CIRIUS is responsible for preparing an annual report on the state of recognition work in Denmark. This report is submitted to the Ministry of Education and presented to Parliament (Folketinget) by the minister.

External experts (from institutions of Higher Education) are engaged in an ongoing dialogue on development of professional standards in different academic fields. CIRIUS has established five boards of experts, which provide assistance in preparation of standards for assessment of foreign qualifications on request and submit expert opinions on the assessment of the qualifications of holders of foreign qualifications.

¹ UNESCO/Council of Europe Recommendation on Procedures and Criteria for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications, Riga 6. June 2001

II Analysis of recognition work

The Danish situation – a political issue

In general terms the Danish office is far close to policy-making processes and is also a more directly political issue than in the other Nordic countries.

Obviously all the Nordic Enic/Naric offices in all are involved in integration policy in their respective countries. But while offices in the other countries are relatively autonomous, CIRIUS is much more closely associated with its ministries. On the other hand the Danish office has a far greater say in policymaking than any other the Nordic office. This is, as we will see, especially relevant when it comes to recognition policies and procedures.

One factor that severely complicates the analysis is that the two ministries (Education and Science Technology and Innovation) involved, apparently express quite different agendas for the future of higher education in Denmark, as far as recognition and quality assurance are concerned. This is a complication for the analysis and for the long-term function of the office. In interviews with the managers and personnel at the office this did not seem to be a problem however, at least not in the immediate future or in terms of day-to-day operations.

How then, do the differing ministerial outlooks impact on the Enic/Naric office? Is this good or bad for the office? Compared with other Nordic offices, do two separate lines of command restrict the work of the office or deliver added value?

From the interviews we conclude that the office itself views this situation as challenging. It forces the office to be flexible and open to dialogue towards the two ministries as well as towards institutions. The concept “service oriented authority” encapsulated the kind of values the office management wish to be associated with.

Clearly the office manoeuvres very well in this sea of interests. The interviews with ministry representatives revealed complete confidence in CIRIUS. It was also evident that institutions recognise the expertise of the office, although the evaluation team felt going deeper into the relationship between institutions and CIRIUS might have been of benefit had time allowed this.

Accordingly, the situation in Denmark must be viewed and analysed with this proximity to politics borne in mind. For one thing, this has lead to a radical conception of the role of the national recognition service. We will briefly comment on this in our concluding remarks.

Division of labour, workload and expertise

The founding of the new agency in 2000 started a dynamic era with regard to recognition in Denmark. The opportunity to start from scratch also provided the opportunity to go beyond merely transforming or integrating old ways of working, procedures and routines. After two or three organisational changes CIRIUS now feels it is on the right track.

Recruitments have given the office the strength and make up to deal with virtually any task it is called upon to handle. The personnel are on the young side and well educated. They also seem to have the skill and enthusiasm to have taken onboard international institutional know-how in their field. In terms of practical recognition work, the credential evaluators have developed their working processes in a systematic and efficient way. They have also developed information technology for practical use very effectively.

The personnel have a clear role. They know what they are required to do and what they are doing. They are surprisingly well adapted to rapid organisational changes.

There was a lack of the kind of uncertainty often seen during site visits even though the organisation was once again undergoing considerable changes. The staff had a very positive attitude to their work and believed in themselves and each other. They have also internalised the common values presented by the leadership. In CIRIUS the evaluation team found an office with strong potential and a good basis for future development of credential evaluation and recognition.

It must be pointed out that the opinions about staff training and skills development varied somewhat between the director of the unit and staff. While management felt quite satisfied with the expertise and capacity of the staff, staff members expressed the need for more precise training and skills training in interviews. In new fields of work such as professional recognition in particular, the staff asked for more training. There may also be a need for more manpower as the volume of work is growing.

Although the evaluation team could sense a slight anxiety in the group related to the new tasks that are being transferred to the unit, we consider that the capacity and expertise is adequate to deal with these new tasks. In certain areas – perhaps especially in the implementation process for the new Directive – there will be more demand for coordination, information and training from different organisation in the country.

The internal work of the office seemed uncomplicated to us as outsiders. The evident lack of prestige has fostered good relations, fine cooperation and effectiveness. As the organisation for the agency was not yet fully finalised at the time of the site visit, cooperation with (other) parts of CIRIUS was not fully developed. The work being done indicated good organisation on the whole, the different processes were well defined and professionalism in academic recognition very evident. Good planning, documentation and organisation of the work are areas of quality work any office needs and it also says something about good management and working structures.

One of the interviewees reflected on the state of organisation and warned that too much reorganisation might have an adverse effect despite the best intentions. If the substantial efforts taken on organising and establishing transparent rules are maintained in the future, it may well show that the work could become too well organised to support active involvement from institutions of higher learning and other stake-holders or from the office's own staff. This is certainly not apparent

at present, but a piece of friendly advice from the evaluation team would be to guarantee enough freedom for the staff to use their own creativity and initiative.

Recognition work and Quality Assurance

We have already mentioned that good management, good planning, documentation and organisation are elements of an internal quality structure in the office.

Sufficient security checks seem to be in place: double checking by one special consultant inspector, regular seminars on recognition principles and discussions of specific recognition cases. The inspector has been recruited from the Danish Evaluation Agency with the express intention of safeguarding quality when developing the new office. In some of the Nordic offices the practice of having one special inspector for outgoing statements is employed in particular when issuing binding decisions as an expert authority. This ensures much better control and to guarantee equivalence and conformity in decisions on diplomas from different countries.

Even if such checks may seem somewhat overkill at first glance given the capacity and expertise of the staff, the motivation for having a high level of quality control is excellent, especially in the early years of an organisation. In discussing the issue of statement quality assurance the evaluation team came to the conclusion that quality control also was a quality dimension in recognition work. When recognition values and principles are set and confirmed in practice, the means of inspection may be worth considering (delegation, sharing etc.).

Another aspect of quality in recognition is transparency – in mandate, in principles, in recognition procedures and methods. Here the Danish Enic/Naric office has an advantage as most of the guiding principles are set out in law. Danish legislation clearly distinguishes between the responsibility of the central recognition office (CIRIUS) and the institutions.

In one area the team became slightly confused. In their decisions the appropriate authorities could give a higher evaluation of a foreign diploma than CIRIUS, but not a lower one, provided of course, that CIRIUS had produced a previous statement. On the other hand, in academic recognition the universities can award fewer credits than CIRIUS. It is not therefore easy to understand what the actual status is of evaluations made by different authorities. The principles in this field must be expressed unambiguously to avoid misinterpretations and misunderstandings. If the evaluation team had problems understanding, institutions and individual applicants may do so too.

In a later communication CIRIUS provided material to complement the self-assessment report and the information gathered in the interviews:

“CIRIUS acts as a central gateway to professional de jure recognition. If a relevant authority cannot grant immediate recognition, when considering applications for entrance to a regulated profession, the authority is required to obtain an equivalence assessment from CIRIUS. The equivalence assessment is (usually) based on the expert opinion of an educational institution and normally includes an assessment of the possible supplementary subjects and practical training periods needed to equate an individual’s foreign qualification with a given Danish qualification. The assessment is binding for the relevant authority, but the authority might include work experience in its assessment. The CIRIUS equivalence assessment is send to the relevant authority. The authority then sends the decision to the applicant.

In relation to academic recognition, CIRIUS issues comparative assessments of foreign qualifications in terms of the Danish qualification system. These assessments are binding for admission to higher education institutions at ordinary degree level, but higher education institutions may have additional requirements for admission concerning the academic content. CIRIUS has an admission hot line for HE institutions, which offers case by case information concerning degree level in addition to the admission manual on our website. In most cases institutions do not require an assessment from CIRIUS to admit a person with foreign qualifications.”

Special information was also given to applicants with upper secondary qualifications.

For information to applicants, CIRIUS includes a paragraph concerning the relationship between a CIRIUS statement and admission/credit transfer to educational programmes when a) a foreign qualification is not assessed to be comparable to the level of a full Danish degree, b) the applicant has indicated further studies as the purpose for the application and c) the comparable Danish degree, in general in Denmark is used as a basis for further studies for example a bachelor's degree.

CIRIUS is the appropriate authority in the recognition of teaching professions.

According to the EU Directives you should be able to appeal against decisions made by such authorities. This seems not to be the case with the professional recognition of teachers in Denmark. The self-assessment report mentioned that CIRIUS decisions cannot be appealed. Other authorities reported that their decisions can be appealed. As such, this cannot be against Danish legislation. CIRIUS should therefore arrange for appeals to be permitted against decisions concerning teaching applications, as it does in the area of academic recognition. Such an open and flexible approach to its work and role could be introduced as CIRIUS is engaged in the creation of a new governmental agency on recognition, transparency, mobility and international cooperation.

In general the evaluation team had the opinion that the appeal system should be reconsidered in some way. Without pointing out exactly what to do, the main opinion of the team was that the existing system was very complex and would benefit from being more compact, less complicated and more transparent. Perhaps information could overcome such shortcoming. What the evaluation team found was that applicants were not aware they could appeal to a court of law. The information material provided by the office makes no mention of possible appeals. In the opinion of the evaluation team this should be stated in the information material and in assessment statements. For the Danish statements of teaching qualifications, this kind of information is an absolute necessity, given the fact that CIRIUS is the expert authority in this field.

The contribution of CIRIUS to policy and policy-related duties is hard to evaluate. In some interviews and as a reaction on the team's summary of the site visit, there was a tendency to regard this as something not to be touched by the evaluation. The team may have agreed to that had not the office itself stressed this function in its self-assessment.

“CVUU has proved a highly adaptive organisation which as a matter of course puts its expertise to as much use as possible where and whenever requested. CVUU is fully aware of its role as an authority which is first and foremost a service provider, is accountable and has a natural inclination to foster and support a culture of quality. CVUU does what it does well, and this quality of performance is demonstrated by the will and capacity to take on new tasks in a continually changing environment. Against this background CVUU considers itself a reliable and capable partner for a wide range of stakeholders....

At the same time CVUU's close association with the actual development of policy – in the field of recognition as well as in related subject areas, nationally as well as internationally,

puts it in a position where it is able to contribute proactively and coherently to the broader internationalisation of education and the increased movement of labour and knowledge”.

This statement made by the office in the self-assessment report may be true. The question here is not whether it is true, but how we could know it to be true. And the problem is that we cannot establish this as fact by common quality assurance methods. Here quality assurance measures are replaced by political or quasi-political rhetoric.

It is of course always up to the Ministry responsible to decide to what extent the national Enic/Naric office should be involved in policy-related issues or how much it will use the expertise of the office when preparing national policy. Of course utilising the broad international knowledge of the office offers many benefits.

Even so, this is an extremely important and interesting question. The evaluation team strongly recommends that the CIRIUS put considerable effort into developing measures to assess the quality of the policy-related duties it commands.

Profile (and availability)

Our main impression is that CIRIUS has a high profile and is available to relevant ministries and institutions within the Danish system of Higher Education. It performs well-defined and much appreciated work. We found evidence that both ministries and institutions value the office's expertise highly. In its new capacity as part of CIRIUS the unit is not yet well recognised in everything it does, but in our opinion, it is just a matter of time until this new office will be as well-known in wide circles (nationally and internationally) as the old CVUU.

A special aspect of profile is evident here. As in many cases when new institutions or agencies are under development, the Danish Enic/Naric office has put its name on the map internationally. Through active and intensive involvement on international work parties, European projects and international conferences/seminars, CIRIUS is widely known. For colleagues within the recognition community the Danish office is both high profile and available through its personnel, website and information databases.

CIRIUS has been given a central position in Danish integration policy. The agency's relationships with other organisations and stakeholders in the integration process were not clear to the evaluation team however.

We did not get the opportunity to meet representatives of employers, trade unions, job agencies or other organisations interfacing between higher education and jobs. We were therefore not able to find out more about these organisations. Nor was it possible to assess the effects of the office on integration, although it would be interesting to delve deeper into this area. The few impressions we did get pointed to few relationships outside Higher Education. What role do, for instance, student and employment market organisations play in recognition and integration processes?

More consultations would be needed here to find out more about the interface between CIRIUS and the employment market, students and society in a wider sense, but nevertheless our observations suggest this is an area where its profile could be improved and perhaps also an area where more and deeper co-operation could lead to the office succeeding even better in its integration efforts.

Important questions to be answered here are for example: Are relationships limited because they are regarded as less important, as important but not a legitimate area of work, or are they very important but not yet developed?

Position in relation to higher education institutions/Vulnerability

Laws and regulations have a central role in the Danish system of higher education.

The Danish office is in the most powerful position in relation to institutions of all the national offices within the Nordic region. This power manifests itself in two different dimensions – the right to issue binding recognition statements and the way laws concerning recognition are developed.

The Assessment of Foreign Qualifications Act gives CIRIUS the power to issue binding decisions in the following areas:

- admission to a publicly recognised educational institution
- admission to unemployment funds
- appointment of personnel to public authorities
- access to regulated professions (on decisions made by the appropriate authorities)
- reduction in the length of study programs (on rulings by a professional committee or by the Council for Agricultural Education).

The evaluation team initially had difficulty understanding the concept of binding decisions in the Danish setting. However, material received from the office subsequently explained this:

“it does not mean that e.g. CIRIUS decides on admission to educational institutions or unemployment funds, or is involved in the employment process of public authorities. However, such authorities must accept the level or equivalence assessment provided by CIRIUS. This means, for example, if CIRIUS assessed a foreign qualification as comparable in level to a Danish first degree, an educational institution or unemployment fund cannot reject an application if the admission criteria is a first degree with no specified content where admission is by level of degree.”

In this meaning binding decisions are comparable to the Norwegian general recognition statements, and Finnish de jure professional recognition assessments.

We have already commented on the process that establishes rules for recognition in Denmark. According to interviews with the staff, these are formulated by the legal expert(s) in the office, negotiated with the ministries by the office director, and resolved on by parliament. Eventually the office then applies and implements this legislation.

This pattern is not found in the other Nordic countries. The recognition offices there cannot claim similar rights in the legislative process. Even if they do usually play a substantial consultative role in the development of laws, ordinances and regulations within their respective countries and professional areas, the initiative in the process rests solely with the ministries.

The evaluation team were somewhat split over this. On the one hand laws constitute a powerful but rigid tool. Changing legislation takes time and the process is not always smooth. In practice, this may become a disadvantage in such a dynamic area as recognition. On the other hand we usually

require laws to be clearly worded and transparent in meaning. Clarity in form and content is a powerful advantage. The evaluation team had some difficulty fully comprehending Danish practice in terms of the development process for laws.

Although important and interesting, the legislative process is not a core focus in this evaluation. The main question is how legal ramifications affect how an office operates, i.e. how well the office works with the legislation.

Here we are in no doubt whatsoever that the Danish office acts in accordance with the law and with the ministries. The question we must ask ourselves is what proximity to higher authorities and policy means in terms of strengths and weaknesses.

On one hand the Danish office has a relatively more powerful position than its other Nordic counterparts. Relationships with institutions seem to be more authoritative and decisions are of a more binding character. On the other hand it was felt that the other offices had a greater degree of relative autonomy, had more equal and co-operative relationships with institutions, and in that sense were stronger. It may be possible to conclude that the Danish office is more powerful and more authoritative in everyday contexts, but also more vulnerable in relation to changes in the political arena, particularly in terms of political power and agenda.

This became very clear in the interview with the representative from the Ministry of Science and Technology. In his mind we were approaching a transition period in credential evaluation and recognition of foreign higher education. His vision was that central recognition services would soon be redundant. In ten years time the Danish system of Higher Education would consist of at most three universities. But these would be of the highest class internationally. By then they would also have the capacity and the motivation to handle academic recognition, while employers were to be given full responsibility for the assessment of professional qualifications.

Information

CIRIUS aims to be a modern information recognition office. Conscious development and dissemination of knowledge and means for the production and dissemination of such are planned to be at the core of the office. Throughout its lifetime the office has produced information in printed form and databases intended to be in the first line of recognition agencies in Europe. It has therefore also taken part in international projects and working parties in the broader field of HE development. CIRIUS has been actively and effectively engaged in distributing information gained in such circumstances to Danish universities and to relevant authorities in the country.

Even if information will always be a field open to gradual improvement the evaluation group felt that CIRIUS has developed appropriate information channels. It also handles information and the technology that accompanies recognition where appropriate. As a mark of its importance, specialist information management expertise has been recruited to fill advanced needs in this field.

Information co-operation between some universities and CIRIUS was discussed in certain interviews. We touched upon this earlier but some of the institutions are still unsure of and insecure about the role of the office. The notion of binding decisions was especially frustrating. Here the team sensed that this was an area where clarification was needed.

It is obvious that the Danish office, in spite of its special status, struggles with the same problem as elsewhere in the Nordic countries: Students send their applications to many universities. As some

universities apply more demanding criteria than others for entrance, students try to find the best “offer”. This is a problem from both a legal and a practical point of view.

One of the recommendations given to all Nordic offices is to work for a recognition system with as few entrance gateways as possible. A comparison between Nordic practices puts Denmark at the forefront of such practice. With its central position in evaluating Higher Education credentials, the Danish office could perhaps be able to further develop this as an example for the other countries.

III Summary and recommendations

CIRIUS can look back over a five-year dynamic period of construction and development. In terms of the mandate given and central tasks required of it, the office has undoubtedly been very successful. The personnel are expert, insightful and flexible – and also valuable in fields outside the core task of credential evaluation. Through the development of sound methodologies, working knowledge of systems of higher education in the world at large and information technology applied specifically for its purposes, the office has received growing support from other organisations in the field. It is by now a solid and well-recognised office within the Danish government structure.

Although occupied with quality and having ambitions to develop a quality culture, the office has not explicitly and systematically outlined a program for quality assurance. The evaluation team could find that parts of such a program were in place, especially those related to the methodology and procedures in credential evaluation, but a quality assurance structure for the whole office was lacking.

Again, this is not to say that the organisation, recognition work and its effects are of poor quality. On the contrary the team felt that CIRIUS was doing a very good job in all these aspects, but nonetheless recommends the office develop quality indicators and bring them together into a comprehensive quality assurance programme.

CIRIUS is a very high profile office and very active on the national and international scenes. While not having much substantial evidence for this, the evaluation team gained the impression that the office has close relationships with the ministries, but few connections to some of the other stakeholders in the recognition arena. Building relationships with employer organisations, employment agencies etc should boost the evident strength and profile of the office.

The Danish office has put a great deal of effort into the development and management of information. Considering the relatively short period the office has been in operation in its present form this demonstrates quite an impressive way of dealing with modern information technology, although the office itself claims that there is still room for improvement.

As we have already mentioned, a set of core values has been key to the development of the office. These are well known and cherished by the staff, but unfortunately they are not very transparent or well documented by CIRIUS. A minor matter perhaps, but if the principles and core values are clearly presented in office publications, the office would surely reach out to institutions and other stakeholders faster and more effectively.

In conclusion: CIRIUS – the policy and the future

To varying degrees, all social institutions foster their own self-conception and self-esteem, including the role they hold in society and history, and what relationships they may or may not have with other institutions etc. This seems to be especially evident with fast developing and rapidly changing organisations. Such institutional ideologies take different forms, but one that has been very widespread over the last two or three decades is that the work they are conducting will eventually disappear through the development and implementation of standards, development and dissemination of information etc. In these new situations that arise, such work will be taken over by core institutions with clearly focused instruments and capacities.

It was quite clear that such a scenario was favoured by some of those we interviewed. One of the representatives from the ministries, the head of the new organisation and of the recognition unit, suggested that recognition services as a government organised and controlled activity was in its end game. This opinion would conclude that henceforth for the need for specialised expertise, organisations and authorities in recognition and quality assurance would disappear.

In the interviews we also found another, surprisingly very different, set of expectations about the future need for CIRIUS and its role as a service system for individuals, institutions, policy makers and the national job market. This opposite opinion was shown by a growing sense of trust in CIRIUS as is among institutions, and firm support for expanding its scope from the representative for the Ministry of Education. The view here is that that CIRIUS will become even more important in the future, thanks to implementation of new EU Directives, growing number of foreign students and new tasks (international commitments, assessment of prior and experiential education etc.). From this perspective, the role of CIRIUS will also be important in dealing with individual cases, where universities are too narrow and when institutions fail to follow EU Directives e.g. in assessing experiential education and practical experience. The last issue is one of the development areas the office's self-assessment report pointed out as strategically important.

A third scenario could be seen in some of the interviews. This represented a view somewhere between the opposing views above, where many of the traditional credential evaluation tasks in the future would be taken over by institutions and employment market forces. Society would however still be in need of international education expertise, working more with information and supporting different organisations than on individual assessments.

Given all this, it will not be easy to manage the future of CIRIUS, in particular when the office itself seems to partly sympathise with the idea of making its role redundant. As it is, the personnel continue to manifest a pioneering spirit but a situation of permanent insecurity may well develop into something less productive. It cannot be motivating to work in an atmosphere where management forces are telling you that your work will soon become irrelevant or redundant. It remains clear for many reasons that recognition work as such will continue to be needed in the future. In some areas, such as professional recognition and information to employers and enterprises expertise in credential evaluation will be sorely needed.

The alternative to the present system for recognition work is of course to transfer the mandate for professional recognition to private institutions, and the responsibility for academic recognition to the universities. The problem is that the experiences we know of suggest a different story. Such

changes do not automatically lead to better practices. On the contrary they often result in a decrease in the quality of credential evaluation expertise, unequal treatment of applicants and poorer service.

The future role for higher education in Denmark seems to be a subject of strident debate. In interviews, the ministry directors questioned both the role and the number of universities. What happens in the political arena, will therefore be very important, not only for the universities but also for CIRIUS.

The office itself fears a threat to it may arise from the division of authority in the Danish system of tertiary education. Under the guise of increasing internationalisation, the office made the following observation:

“the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation may wish to consider alternatives to relying on an agency under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. Inherent in this situation lies the risk that the new government agency in which CVUU has just been included may be detached from policy development in the most important sector, namely the university sector.”

The question here is about the future role of CIRIUS and how active it should be in policy-making processes. CIRIUS is willing to have an active role. In the other Nordic countries there is a strict demarcation between the ministries and agencies like CIRIUS. To put it bluntly, ministries deal with policy and budgets, agencies with people and implementation of policy in specialised areas such as quality assurance and recognition.

In interviews representatives from the ministries seemed to favour the same idea: Policy should be the domain of ministries.

In the mind of the evaluation team this is also the best solution, and the subsequent recommendation is then to accept and even seek a mandate that confirms CIRIUS as an agency of expertise with relative independence from policy. Such a division of work would give the office more time and capacity to focus on the implementation of policies and principles of integration and recognition, to build and maintain powerful networks with institutions and other stakeholders within its areas of action and to find forms to advance expertise within them.

It would also put CIRIUS more on a par with its fellow offices in the Nordic countries and further facilitate Nordic co-operation in credential evaluation and recognition.