

Recognition work in Iceland:
evaluation of the Icelandic ENIC/NARIC –office.

Nordic Recognition and Information Centres Network (NORRIC)

October 2004

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.

The Icelandic Enic/Naric and the Finnish Enic/Naric were the first offices to be studied by the NORRIC Evaluation Project. The Icelandic office presented a self-assessment in mid April 2004 and a subsequent site visit was made in May. The group meet representatives from the Ministry of Education and other ministries as well as admission staff from different institutions of higher education and students. An interview protocol was prepared to guide and support the group's work. Programs for visits and interviews were documented and used as a base for reporting.

The evaluation team visiting the Icelandic Enic/Naric office had a broad representation from the Nordic offices: Helle Otte and Anne-Katherine Mandrup (Denmark), Markku Kokkonen (Finland), Anne Rovde (Norway) and Ulf Öhlund (Sweden). Professor Kauko Hämäläinen, University of Helsinki, provided valuable support to the team as an independent expert.

I Recognition in Iceland – basic conditions and principles

The institutional setting

Iceland's Enic/Naric office operates in a small environment. The academic community forms only a small proportion of the population and interesting to note, academics in Iceland are often trained abroad. This situation is however slowly but surely changing.

Since the late 1980s the number of Higher Education Institutions in Iceland has tripled, from three to the present nine/ten. Most institutions are modest with 300-1,000 students. All institutions have the same legal status i.e. as universities, and participate in the Icelandic National Rectors Conference. The Conference is organised at the University of Iceland (UoI).

The University of Iceland is the country's oldest and largest institution of Higher Education. It has a status as the national university and is expected to take a leading role in teaching, research and science.

The Enic/Naric office

The Enic/Naric office was established in 1990, in co-operation between the Ministry of Education and the University of Iceland, as a part of the administrative body of the University of Iceland.

Organisational changes within the university in 2000 led to a new administrative structure. All academic issues were allocated to a central administrative unit – the Office of Academic Affairs. The recognition part of Enic/Naric work is located in this office. The information duties are shared with another office – the Office of International Education.

Since late 2003 these functions are formally provided under an agreement between the university and the ministry. The contract runs to 2006.

The agreement includes:

- A distinction between academic recognition on one hand and supervision of student exchange schemes and student mobility on the other,
- Recognition issues are handled by the Enic/Naric office (integrated in the Office of Academic Affairs) while mobility issues became a responsibility of the University's Office of International Education.

Organisation, roles and objectives

The scope of the Enic/Naric informative duties is very wide. It provides:

- information and guidance on higher education in Iceland and current legislation,

- information on international agreements,
- on rules of academic (and professional) recognition and how to apply for recognition.

Professional recognition is regulated by law. The Ministry of Education is, as the National coordinator, responsible for professional recognition in cooperation with other relevant ministries.

There is no comparable legislation on **academic recognition**. However the Universities Act (framework legislation) states that the universities are to set rules on mutual recognition of parts of student programmes. The academic institutions themselves are responsible for the actual recognition. The Enic/Naric office is charged with providing advice through guideline statements and information on recognition issues as well as of international agreements and conventions.

Altogether five persons are involved in Enic/Naric operations in Iceland: a lawyer, two specialists in academic recognition and two information officers. They all work on a part-time basis and the Iceland Enic/Naric office does not have any full time staff.

No accurate statistics are available on the number of cases per year. This is because around half the requests are dealt with informally plus around 50 formal applications each year. Which puts the total number of recognition cases as an estimated 100 cases per annum. On the information side the Office of International Education receives about 5,000 inquiries each year, and its home page receives about 25,000 visits per annum.

In conducting its services the office is guided by the recommendations listed in the recently published Enic/Naric Charter. For the recognition process, use is also made of official data on academic courses in the countries concerned and of recognition developed by other Naric offices such as *CVUU* (the Danish Enic/Naric) and *UK Naric*.

The Enic/Naric office provides expert support to institutions and the ministry in international matters, such as the Bologna Process and implementation of the Lisbon Convention principles.

Information: tools and principles

A recently established management database serves as an instrument for (among other administrative duties) the registration and formal handling of recognition cases.

The office's own homepage explains the methods used in the recognition process, how to apply for recognition and what documents must be included with the application. The Enic/Naric office does not allow access to information on previous recognition cases. However whether a database on academic recognition should be established whilst further developing the university's IT system is currently under consideration.

Outcomes of recognition work

The Icelandic Enic/Naric office does not issue recognition statements, merely guidelines or advice on academic recognition. Formal letters issued by the office concerning academic recognition state what examinations have been presented for recognition, the official length of the period of study and whether the course of study is at the tertiary level of education. Finally, the office presents its recommendations regarding recognition in terms of comparable academic qualifications available in Iceland.

If an application for recognition is not recommended, i.e. if the Enic/Naric office considers that the qualification in question is not comparable with a specific qualification in Iceland, reasons are given for this advice.

A final decision on academic recognition is taken by HEI's as expert body. Appeals against recognition decisions made by the universities may be made to:

- the relevant university council, and if the applicant does not accept the conclusion reached within the university,
- the University Students' Appeals Committee, which operates according to provisions in the framework legislation on higher education. The Committee is empowered to resolve in cases where students in state universities or tertiary institutions feel unjustly treated.

The appeal option has been rarely exercised and few complaints/appeals have been submitted to the university councils and to the Students Appeals Committee.

Quality Assurance

As part of the internal quality assurance at the University of Iceland internal working procedures and external relations are subject to administrative evaluation. In addition to the internal quality assurance structures the Ministry of Education will evaluate the contract between the ministry and the University of Iceland concerning recognition of foreign education towards the end of the contract period (2005-2006).

The office works within relevant Nordic and European Networks, such as the Nordic Recognition Network, Enic/Naric and also has direct links to NUAS, NUS and EUA via its head of office. Via these kind of partnerships in international networks the work done by the office is observed and evaluated in a wider context. Again through the head, the office also has a direct link to the Icelandic National Conference of Rectors as he is the secretary of the Conference.

Skills training

Official policy states that employees in the office for Academic Affairs have the right to attend courses in the university's special education programme. This programme is aimed at the general need for the continuing education (qualification development) of university staff. Each employee's need for skills training is defined in annual staff appraisal interviews.

II Analysing recognition work in Iceland

Internal organisation of work, workload and expertise

The Enic/Naric office operates as a separate office within the University of Iceland. The credential evaluator does have additional duties however, and the head of the Enic/Naric office is also head of the Office for Academic Affairs. In legal matters the recognition function is supported by the university lawyer and the Office of International Education is another source of information. However integrated and interrelated, the workload and scope of work appear to be quite overwhelming. It must be concluded that the staffing situation is vulnerable and may even have reached its limits in order in terms of handling Enic/Naric tasks. This will become even more evident when the recently adopted Enic/Naric Charter is taken into consideration.

This is not to say that evaluation of foreign credentials in Iceland is haphazard. We estimate that recognition work, in spite of the high workload and division of responsibilities, functions quite well. Regarding such factors as the high level of information available, informal communication and the proximity of the different authorities, it is evident that these counterbalance the relative lack of manpower available to the office.

In addition Iceland has been able to take advantage of international cooperation and information gathering/processing in a very smart way. The use of modern information technology – i.e. making use of databases developed by other agencies – in finding answers to recognition questions, contacts with colleagues, websites and databases abroad are highly significant aspects of Icelandic evaluation practice.

The relatively limited size of the academic system in combination with the large number of Icelandic students abroad may have developed a strong focus on information work alongside traditional case management. It may be noted that such development is in progress, or at least in discussion, in almost every system of higher education in Europe.

The office puts substantial effort into the implementation of the principles of the Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region. An example is the Sigtuna Agreement and the subsequent Reykjavík Declaration. These are not international instruments in the same sense as the Lisbon convention although they cover much of the same ground within the Nordic sphere. Here Iceland has made a considerable effort to update the agreement.

The self-evaluation underlines the importance for the Icelandic office of following the recognition principles suggested in the Enic/Naric charter. This is a bold strategy, but it seems to be somewhat of a “kamikaze commitment” under the given circumstances. How is it possible to make those principles operational without substantial extra funding? As the contract with the ministry under which the unit is working, will not be assessed and renegotiated until 2005/2006, it is doubtful that new resources will be available before that date. On the other hand it gives the office time to think and act strategically. The situation creates an opportunity to set up priorities, milestones and even to have an open discussion with the ministry and the institutions about strategy and funding.

We have already implied that there are very highly qualified employees in the office where credential evaluations are dealt with. It is also clear that employees are encouraged to attend

relevant courses offered by the university to enhance their expertise. At annual staff appraisal interviews the management seeks to meet individual needs. It may therefore seem contradictory to raise the question of staff skills. Nevertheless the question is pressing and better opportunities to develop skills within the field was frequently mentioned in the interviews. General initiatives to keep the agency up to date regarding new developments within the field of recognition of foreign qualifications (conference attendance, membership of domestic and international organisations, partnerships and networks) are continually under consideration but actual attainment is scarce. Examples emphasised included opportunities to attend conferences such as EAIE more frequently, taking part in study visits to other agencies and contribute to seminars and sessions arranged by international organisations and authorities abroad. As we all know, the importance of good contacts and good knowledge about educational systems and developments within this field cannot be overestimated. Such measures are especially important in a small office with few internal opportunities to discuss various questions concerning recognition.

Profile and availability

It has already been stated that the Enic/Naric office's way of work and actions has quite a high profile. This is especially evident in its international work, relations with national authorities and with other offices within the university. Here again it must be stressed that the recognition work they do is successful.

The close relations with the University of Iceland may however pose a problem in relation to other institutions of higher learning. As these have grown in number considerably over the last ten years being sited within one institution could be questioned. None of the other institutions complained about the close relationship in the interviews, although it was evident that some institutions have little knowledge about what Enic/Naric does. Strong action should be taken to ensure all institutions have equal access to Enic/Naric services.

Interviews and other evidence suggest that it is relatively easy to contact the Icelandic recognition and information service. The office is open for informal contact.

In fact the office claims that much of its work is done through informal contacts - on campus, over the telephone etc. Informal contacts are often linked to the people doing the work rather than the office and such contact might prove difficult to transfer to new recruits. Another problem with informality in public organisations is that information is seldom or never documented. Given a situation where standards may vary over time, it might be impossible to quantify how earlier rulings were made and this could lead to inconsistencies and the risk of arbitrary decisions being made. Indeed the self-assessment made by the office suggested this was possible.

The evaluation team strongly recommends the introduction of administrative principles, for instance a recognition database, where important formal and informal communications concerning recognition are documented.

Much of the formal information duties for both Icelandic and foreign students are shared with the Office of International Education. Although the level of availability is claimed to be a relevant factor we could see an emerging problem during the interviews: the growth of universities and other institutions of higher education in Iceland poses, in connection with the relatively low staffing of the office, a threat to both the availability of information and recognition services within the system.

Another problematic aspect of the organisation's work is the relative grey area when dealing with international issues. For an outsider it is not clear where the boundaries lie in terms of which office deals with what (the Naric and the Office of International Affairs). Establishing a balance between these two offices in terms of tasks, responsibilities and workload seems to be imperative. Reorganisation may solve the profile problem and perhaps also expand the number of staff working with recognition issues. Such measures may also create a platform for developing a service for responding to questions from both the general public and institutions.

The university's own long-term plan points in the same direction: It states that a strong expansion in numbers of foreign students at the university will take place in next few years, which, of course, will put more stress on the recognition function.

Information and position in the system

Even if the number of recognition cases and information requests from institutions are limited (due to the size of the academic system) the office appears somewhat vulnerable in terms of how the office is staffed and organised. The head of office has many other tasks to perform as do his fellow workers. No one works exclusively on Enic/Naric business, even though the prime responsibility for recognition is delegated to one member of staff. The evaluation team feels there should be a greater focus on recognition.

Vulnerability, especially in information matters, may also be a consequence of where the office is physically based. We have already stressed that the growing number of institutions may lead to difficulties for the HEIs to obtain relevant and up to date information when the information source is located inside one of the institutions, an institution that also does not have the resources to deal with a wide range of issues, including recognition and information on recognition.

These assumptions are however counterbalanced by the office's self-perception and expressed self-reliance. They admit to a high workload and that recognition work has been expanding, but informal relationships within a limited organisational setting, good and amicable relationships with authorities and a good atmosphere within the office itself are given as the reasons why the service functions so well.

The evaluation team recommends the Enic/Naric office should consider how to provide accessible information on recognition issues and e.g. to consider how to raise the profile of the Enic/Naric office within the existing structure such as through a separate website, and by publishing recognition standards for the most common countries etc.

End results of recognition work

No information is available on the end results of the Enic/Naric office's recognition work. Hitherto, the Enic/Naric office has not systematically produced statistics on its work. It should however be stated that the office has been helping Icelandic students studying abroad for many years. At present around 25% of Icelandic students are educated abroad. A small but growing number of foreign students need to have their credentials recognised before entering Icelandic educational institutions. The ratio of foreign students at the University of Iceland is 6%.

It is clear from the interviews with different stakeholders that the office's results are highly appreciated in wide circles – management of cases is fast and clear, its advice is followed in virtually all cases, institutions and other clients are very satisfied with the work of the office. Altogether these qualitative indices represents an important result in itself.

An external point of view has already been noted in the report: the office makes skilful use of available international information (international networks, databases etc.) and delivers modern recognition work.

The newly established institutions may differ from this view mainly because the office's work and end results are not yet fully acknowledged.

II Summary: strengths, weaknesses and recommendations

Recognition work in Iceland draws support and strength from powerful social and cultural undercurrents rather than from any one organisation. The organisational structure is supported by a very professional and efficient team of employees with good networks.

It has been noted that the small size of the community served by the Icelandic Enic/Naric office is both a strength and a weakness. As noted in the introduction, one of the consequences of this is that the office works in far closer contact with the HEIs than would otherwise be the case. This is in our view an indisputable advantage.

On the other hand it means that the office does not have the equivalent human resources as offices in larger countries, and therefore has to rely more on international co-operation. In particular, the Icelandic Enic/Naric office has sought to work closely with Enic/Naric offices in the other Nordic countries to this end.

While functioning quite satisfactorily, the Icelandic Enic/Naric office does have the potential to be even more effective. Given the anticipated future expansion of foreign students in Iceland and Icelandic students abroad – there will be a need for a stronger information and recognition service. The personnel situation – in terms of both headcount and skills training opportunities - is vulnerable and may even have reached its limits in handling Enic/Naric tasks. This will become even more evident when the recently adopted Enic/Naric Charter is taken into consideration.

A merger or a closer and more clear-cut co-operation between the Office of International Education and the Enic/Naric office may solve the problem of profile and availability and perhaps also broaden the staff working with recognition issues.

The office's self- assessment and the evaluation team both see the a need to introduce new and transparent administrative principles, e.g. a recognition database, where recognition cases and information are documented. By organising information and recognition on a more formal basis it will be possible to search for previous cases of individual degrees and qualifications. Such changes will give the unit a "collective memory" and may also, if it is made accessible to the public, create a base for the development of a response service for both institutions and the public in general.

The close ties between the Enic/Naric office and the University of Iceland, may seem to indicate bias, compromising the interests of other universities in the country. The official policy is that this has never been an issue. The arrangement is considered to be a financially advantageous solution for the needs of the Icelandic educational system, benefiting all stakeholders. According to some of the interviewees, this is something of a national myth. Some institutions know little, if anything, about the work performed by the Enic/Naric office. For future work the office must be given a more distinct profile. This may be arranged either by informative measures or by changing the organisation to a more visible and independent status.

To date, the Icelandic Enic/Naric office has fulfilled its duties as an integrated part in the University of Iceland's Office of Academic Affairs. It can also be argued that it has functioned well. Regarding the challenges that can be foreseen in the near future, the evaluation group found evidence that the way recognition work is organised and staffed has reached its limits. The evaluation group believes that the minor changes and alterations that have been proposed in this report may be helpful to future recognition work in Iceland.