

Recognition work in Norway

Evaluation report

Nordic Recognition and Information Centres Network (NORRIC)

April 2005

Introduction

The Nordic Recognition and Information Network (NORRIC) Evaluation Project is a joint effort to bring together the principles and efforts of five offices within the recognition field. In the project all national recognition agencies will be evaluated and discussed. The general aims and methodology of the project are presented elsewhere

The NORRIC Evaluation Project aims to establish transparency and insight into the way the different offices work by focusing on core aspects of their operations. In addition to creating transparency, the method will seek to suggest measures to improve quality at recognition agencies. The evaluation project will therefore aspire to establish a platform for discussions on common standards and criteria in recognition.

The Norwegian Enic/Naric – NOKUT - Icelandic and Finnish offices the offices have been studied to date in the project. The Norwegian office presented a self-evaluation in mid October 2004 and a subsequent site visit was made in November. The evaluation team was given the opportunity to meet representatives from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour, the relevant authority for health professions and higher education institutions along with representatives from the national employment service, Oslo Adult Education and Guidance Centre, and applicants who have been assessed by NOKUT. An interview protocol was prepared to guide and support the group's work. Programs for visit and interviews were documented as a platform for reporting.

The evaluation team visiting NOKUT was broadly representative of the Nordic offices: Helle Otte and Anne-Kathrine Mandrup (Denmark), Tryggvi Thórhallsson (Iceland), Marketta Saarinen (Finland), Tuula Kuosmanen and Ulf Öhlund (Sweden). As an independent expert professor, Kaukko Hämäläinen, University of Helsinki provided valuable support to the team.

1 Presentation of the Norwegian office

The Enic/Naric-office

The Norwegian Enic/Naric office is a unit – the International Recognitions Unit – within the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT). It operates side by side with a unit for accreditation and another for evaluation and quality assurance.

The office was established on October 1st 1991 as the “National Academic Information Centre” (NAIC) on the University of Oslo campus. The office acted in an advisory capacity to the institutions with regard to recognition and information on international education.

Between 1999 – 2002 NAIC was based at the secretariat of the Network Norway Council which had been established as an advisory body to the Ministry of Education in 1998. The reorganisation followed NAIC’s appointment as the Norwegian Lisbon Convention Information Centre. Although recognition decisions mostly rested elsewhere (with the institutions or labour-market organisations) responsibilities were stepped-up considerably. Promoting and overseeing the implementation of the Lisbon convention in Norway was another new main role.

In 2003 recognition operations were transferred to the newly established Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT). NOKUT was also established as an independent state agency and its mandate formalised through a legal amendment in 2003.

Organisation, roles and objectives

Within the area of recognition, the international recognition unit shares responsibility for *academic recognition* with higher education institutions as regulated by the Universities and Colleges Act. The term academic recognition is used for recognition of foreign higher education qualifications compared with Norwegian higher education qualifications. This mode may be used for academic purposes or for the labour market as *de facto professional recognition*.

NOKUT issues general recognitions (general godkjenning) of foreign qualifications in terms of level and nominal duration of the qualification in relation to a Norwegian qualification and number of ECTS credits (studiepoeng). NOKUT decisions are binding for the institutions with regard to general degree level and credits, but higher education institutions may have additional requirements for admission, concerning the academic content. Higher education institutions can recognise foreign qualifications as academically equivalent (faglig godkjenning) to a degree, part of a degree or course offered by the institution. Decisions made by institutions are binding and recognition as academically equivalent to a Norwegian degree gives the foreign qualification holder the right to use the title established for the degree.

Decisions, whether they are by institutions or by NOKUT are subject to appeal. An appeal board deals with appeal cases. The appropriate authorities deal with applications for *de jure* professional recognition.

In addition to the core activity – credentials evaluation – the office interfaces with a wide range of national and international networks, through which it provides and receives support within the area of international education and recognition.

The duties of the international recognition unit are:

Academic recognition:

- Decisions on general recognition of foreign qualifications
- Provision of a national list of minimum admission requirements to higher education in Norway for applicants with foreign entry qualifications (GSU-listen), a database with structured information on degree systems and assessment standards in foreign countries and a database with information on previous assessments made by NOKUT and HE institutions (only accessible for institutions).

Professional recognition:

- NOKUT has no formal duties in relation to professional recognition, but acts as an information provider for the general system of professional recognition

National information centre ENIC/NARIC:

- Information provider on Norwegian and foreign access qualifications and higher education.
- Responsibility for monitoring the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in Norway.
- Development of the Norwegian recognition manual and annual recognition seminars.

International activities:

- Diploma supplement promoter
- International co-operation.

Personnel and statistics

The International Recognitions Unit has a head of office and 8 employees. The unit has no secretarial staff, but may second NOKUT technical and administrative personnel on request. Generally, a master degree or equivalent is required to work in the office. Five different nationalities (and languages) are represented on the staff.

There has been a manifold increase in the number of applications since the Norwegian ENIC/NARIC office was founded in 1991. In that first year, the office dealt with fewer than 200 cases. By 2003 the number of applications for general recognition had risen to 1,139. In the first 9 months of 2004 there were 1,434 applications. There are over 4,000 phone or mail enquires each year, and about half that figure again in terms of advice and information to non-applicants. Around 400 applicants make personal visits to the office every year (see table 1 below).

Table 1. Annual enquiries 2003

<i>Type of enquiry</i>	<i>Advice/inf. to institutions</i>	<i>Advice/inf. to non-applicants</i>	<i>Phone/email to and from appl.</i>	<i>Applicants visiting the office</i>
<i>Annual enquiries</i>	1363	2091	4139	399

Source: Norwegian ENIC/NARIC Internal study protocol

Information: tools and principles

The main instruments for providing information are the agency website, databases, printed material, seminars and training sessions.

The website information – generally available in Norwegian and English - contains information on different types of recognition, NOKUT and other appropriate authority procedures for recognition, recognition criteria, laws and regulations as well as application forms. There are also links to various other information sources dealing with recognition issues and a small database that provides structured information for employers on degree systems in a small number of countries. A database on previous recognition cases is under construction. The site also includes a national list of entrance qualification requirements from different countries (the GSU list).

The unit has developed a Recognition Manual to help higher education institutions and other recognition authorities. Information is also provided through an annual training seminar and conferences.

The development of databases for external use has also simplified communication with other organisations and stakeholders and even, when appropriate to obtain relevant expertise for special assignments.

The development of the NAG database will have a considerable impact on recognition work in Norway. The office has already noted some as yet not confirmed consequences of the more than 2,600 cases available on the database.

In cooperation with other immigration and integration organisations, the Norwegian Enic/Naric-office provides expert support in seminars and conferences, skills training and knowledge updates with UDI staff (Norwegian Immigration Directorate) in the field.

Outcomes of recognition work

Changes in organisation, mandate and modes of work have led to considerable difficulties in assessing the importance of the offices' work. There is so far no systematised documentation of the effect. There is in the self-evaluation attempts at a descriptive analysis of what the unit has accomplished, especially before 2004. The following signs of growing importance has been noted:

- An increase in the number of cases processed by the credential evaluators
- Fewer and more complicated cases from the institutions are forwarded to the unit for assessment
- An increase in the outside (national and international) demands for information
- Reciprocal information exchange: The unit gives information through a set of channels, but also receives information through the relations established in the process.

Quality Assurance

A quality assurance system for the whole NOKUT family was introduced in 2004. As part of this, the three NOKUT units all follow an annual quality assurance cycle and document ongoing quality developments. Each unit has to report on its quality assurance efforts at the end of the QA cycle. An internal network for methods and skills development is responsible for monitoring annual quality assurance cycles.

The international recognition unit has developed its own QA procedures as described in the document *Kvalitetssikring i Seksjon for utenlandsk utdanning*. This document explains in detail the categories being addressed and lists the procedures and measures for each category. The 6 main categories are:

1. *Processing of requests and applications concerning individuals* (telephone and email requests, applications for general recognition, handling forged documents, appeal cases, advice to the higher education institutions)
2. *Guidance and training for higher education institutions* (quality assurance of recognition work at the institutions, training seminars and conferences)
3. *Enhancing the unit's expertise and specialised library* (individual skills training, general skills training for the unit and developing the library)
4. *External relations: Written and oral participation and contributions* (standard lectures and presentations, dissemination of information, development projects, international email lists)
5. *Internal cooperation within NOKUT and within the unit* (Information sharing and cooperation within the unit and across the units)
6. Investigations/detail studies/projects.

The recognition unit receives regular feedback from applicants, institutions and others. Such feedback has not been systematised. However, a customer satisfaction study, focusing on individual applicants, institutions of higher education and employers, has been initiated (report scheduled March 1, 2005).

Skills development

Skills training for the unit as a whole is discussed at annual seminars, and individual needs are discussed in annual staff assessment interviews with the head of unit. Skills are developed in many different ways including through participation in and giving presentations at seminars and conferences. Other and/or international bodies.

Staff members also attend international conferences such as NAFSA, EAIE and AACRAO and take part in study visits.

II Analysis of recognition work

Recognition work in Norway

Numerous organisations are involved in recognition work in Norway, as in the other Nordic countries. NOKUT and higher education institutions share responsibility for academic recognition and the appropriate authorities handle professional de jure recognition. The international recognition unit has no formal obligations relating to professional de jure recognition, however the unit provides information and links to other recognition authorities and information on different types of recognition on its website.

However clear the division of work between the different authorities may be, accessing recognition work in Norway can be confusing to applicants. From the interviews it is clear that holders of foreign qualifications find it difficult to navigate the routes to recognition and to obtain adequate information. The evaluation team therefore recommends that one single entrance point to all types of recognition be established with the purpose of facilitating transparency and access for users. The many gateways to the system are by no mean a solely Norwegian problem. Nordic countries have traditionally had this same difficulty. However there is a precedence for resolving this as some Nordic countries use the ENIC/NARIC office as an information centre and/or single entrance to recognition.

The international recognition unit's mandate focuses on academic recognition. However, as mentioned above, the unit also provides information about professional de jure recognition. Further, the unit advises individuals with foreign teaching qualifications to apply for a general recognition certificate. Such certificates can help the decision-making process for professional de jure recognition done by individual schools. The evaluation team recommends that the unit's activities related to recognition transparency be reflected in the NOKUT mandate.

Responsibility for academic recognition – shared between NOKUT and higher education institutions – is covered by the Universities and Colleges Act. General recognition – issued by the international recognition unit– compares a foreign qualification with a Norwegian equivalent in terms of level and ECTS credits. Information on subject content or area is not included in the statement, nor is the foreign qualification compared in general to a Norwegian degree (subject). Subject specific recognition - done by institutions – recognises foreign qualifications as academically equivalent to the corresponding Norwegian qualification.

The international recognition unit deems statements of general recognition to be sufficient for use on the job market. This point of view was not generally supported in the interviews. It was felt that information about comparability to specific Norwegian qualifications - as given in former advisory recognition statements produced before the change in legislation – is valuable on the job market and hence supportive of the possible application of foreign qualifications in Norway. The evaluation team shares the opinion that to support de facto professional recognition on the job market, a third type of recognition statement is needed. Such a statement should compare foreign qualifications with the Norwegian equivalent based on academic achievement or achievements in other learning paths. Statements that acknowledge that the same profile or learning outcome can be reached in different ways.

It is recommended, that the system of general recognition be changed to enable information to be provided on content and comparability to specific Norwegian qualifications. It is not clear to the evaluation team whether this can be done within the present mandate.

Division of work, workload and expertise

Since its inception, the international recognition unit has catered for both individual applicants and institutional users. The unit's responsibilities and services have grown from primarily giving advice to both types of users to issuing binding recognition statements to applicants and providing standardised and internet-based information and training to institutional users such as higher education institutions, other recognition authorities and job market organisations. At the same time the unit's workload has greatly increased in terms of both the number of cases and enquiries from applicants and the information provided to institutional users. Since 1991, the staff has grown from 2 to 8.5 full time equivalent employees.

Generally speaking, the unit performs very well thanks to qualified staff, internal quality assurance and established recognition routines. The databases, standardised country information, training seminars and information on the Lisbon Recognition Convention provided by the unit in particular, are of very high standard. The information underpins and supports the recognition related needs of institutional users.

The unit takes many months to process individual cases, in some instances longer than the four months recommended by the Lisbon Recognition Convention. This extended processing time is unsatisfactory for the individual applicant and Norwegian society, as well as for the unit itself. To a certain extent this may be a consequence of the organisational changes within the office – recognition takes time and is resource intensive, which leads to delays. However, this is not the sole cause.

From interviews with staff and management, the group gained the impression that the way work is structured can add to the extended processing times. Recognition work is organised in different ways in the Nordic countries and the evaluation team does not wish to recommend any specific organisational or procedural changes.

In the self-assessment report and at the time of visit the prospect of two additional staff members and a new database supporting the unit's case processing were mentioned as initiatives to cut down processing time. The evaluation team welcomes these initiatives but also suggests that a thorough investigation into the unit's work processes be performed in order to achieve better results.

This is not to say that the processing of individual recognition statements is not done well. On the contrary, it is our estimation that the unit makes good recognition decisions, and that the staff are highly qualified. Further, the measures taken to improve expertise and the quality of support are valuable and successful. In the interviews we found evidence that they were regarded as effective in meeting the needs of staff.

Recognition cases are allocated according to country specialisation. This ensures a high level of country specific knowledge and specialisation. In the interviews with the staff, more time to specialise in and research countries/country specific information was sought. It was felt that the present workload did not give sufficient opportunity to develop expert knowledge. In the

interviews, the unit's institutional users pointed to the fact that the generalized information offered in the new country-database in general was sufficient to meet their information needs. Detailed information on specific aspects of a particular foreign degree was hardly ever needed. From the evaluation team point of view recognition work contains an inherent risk of being too specific and detailed. Country specific knowledge should be obtained in order to qualify case processing rather than for its own sake.

The evaluation team sees a dichotomy between the staff's wish to enhance the unit's expert role and delivering value for money to the individual applicant and society. Both roles are essential for successful credential evaluation and for the vast information duties of the office. The relative importance of the different roles must nevertheless be subject to constant scrutiny. The evaluation team recommends the unit broadens its focus from being an organisation of experts to that of an information and service organisation, which caters to the needs of individual and institutional users.

Recognition work and Quality Assurance

The quality assurance system developed for the entire NOKUT organisation and for the international recognition unit is very impressive. The unit's QA system is divided into 6 main categories. Within each category important procedures/tasks have been identified. How each task is quality assured and documented is explained together with how often or when the quality level of the task is to be reported and by whom.

As the QA system was first used in 2004, experience of the system is limited to date. However, the evaluation team feels that the system covers the unit's recognition work very systematically, and the group hopes that the NORRIC network will be kept informed of the future performance of the system and the unit's experience with the system in general.

The unit's recognition work is divided into two processes a) registration and checking of applications and b) investigation and drafting of recognition statements. While the registration and checking of applications is done by one person, investigation of cases and drafting of recognition statements are a team effort. The head of unit checks all recognition letters and co-signs them together with the staff member in charge of the case. At weekly unit meetings cases and other aspects of recognition work are discussed.

All information belonging to a case is filed in a filemaker database accessible to all staff members. Depending on the case one of three types of recognition letter is written based on the information registered and standard letter formulations in the database. All requests for information, external activities and minutes of unit meetings are also logged in the database, and all documents of interest to the unit are saved in a common recognition folder on the NOKUT server. As mentioned above a new database is being developed, which is expected to assist the processing of cases and possibly cut processing times. The evaluation team is impressed by the unit's structured and transparent approach to recognition and the high level of information documenting a case.

Transparency

The international recognition unit's way of working and actions are very transparent. This is especially the case for work with higher education institutions and other institutional users for which the unit provides a whole range of services and sources of information. The unit has established good relations and co-operation with these users. The unit has also a very good reputation internationally and participates in networks, projects and working groups. An ever-increasing number of applicants are also seeking general recognition.

Within NOKUT, the international recognition unit operates as a separate office alongside the offices for accreditation and quality assurance. In NOKUT's publications and vision, the recognition unit has a standalone relationship with the other two units. From the interviews it is evident that the unit has limited co-operation and communication with the two other units in general. Co-operation is primarily centred on NOKUT's internal quality assurance procedures. In the Nordic countries, different types of organizations host the ENIC/NARIC offices and the evaluation team has no recommendation as to the localisation of the international recognition office.

Information and Lisbon Recognition Convention

The European processes (Lisbon and Bologna) have stressed the information aspects in Higher Education. This has given NOKUT's recognition unit a central position in the interface between the Norwegian system and other national systems. The improvement of standards, criteria and procedures as well as information about changes is becoming more and more critical. As the central point in this, readable and transparent information is essential for the recognition process between national systems as well as for the public.

The international recognition unit utilises a whole range of information sources to inform applicants and institutional users on issues related to recognition. From both self-assessment report and the interviews it is evident that information provision is given very high priority. The general feedback from users – especially institutional ones – was that the information is of a very high standard in term of both content and form and the supply/diversity of information. As pointed out in the interviews, the information targeted to individual applicants could be improved. At present the information is highly technical and is not focused on the needs of individual applicants.

The goals for recognition work clearly relate to the principles of transparency, predictability and non-discrimination in the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and the international recognition unit has been actively promoting the convention in Norway through e.g. the recognition manual and training seminars/conferences for higher education institutions and others.

The NAG database could also prove to be an important instrument for the implementation of the convention. As all recognition decisions whether issued by the international recognition unit or higher education institutions are logged in the database, the database is used to disseminate assessment standards from NOKUT to higher education institutions as well as between higher education institutions. Furthermore, the database can be used – in due course – to assess recognition standards across higher education institutions and with it the implementation of the convention in Norway.

III Summary: strengths, weaknesses and recommendations

Throughout the report we have commented on different aspects of Norwegian recognition in theory and practice and even delivered some recommendations. In this section we wish to conclude by highlighting some of our findings and recommendations we find most urgent.

There is no doubt that the Norwegian Enic/Naric office holds a central position in the national system of higher education with regard to questions concerning international education, credential evaluation and recognition.

The expertise of the staff is outstanding from a national perspective and is also utilised by international organisations and authorities. Throughout this report we have argued that a high level of factual knowledge and skills in credential evaluation are possessed and that further skills training should focus on information gathering and management.

Additional capacities and capabilities in this field, where the Norwegian office already has an excellent base, would add to its status and standing nationally and internationally.

Within the academic system in Norway the office has been able to build good relations with institutions and with other stakeholders. There is plenty of well-received co-operation. The Enic/ Naric-office also has an excellent and smooth relationship with political and academic decision-making bodies.

Among decision-makers we found respect for the relative autonomy of both the evaluation and for the international engagements. The Norwegian Enic/ Naric office can count on the full support of politicians policy for its actions.

The Norwegian Enic/Naric office has expanded considerably over the last decade, and there has been a tendency to add tasks on an ongoing basis. This is fine and the office has shown that it has been able to handle new and more advanced challenges. One problem however is that the office's mandate is not completely clear to "outsiders". For the sake of transparency it would be advisable for the governing authorities to update and rephrase that part of NOKUT's mandate that particularly addresses the recognition unit. It is unclear to the evaluation team whether this would be possible within the present legal framework – the Universities and Colleges Act. If not, a separate legal framework for recognition could be considered.

Although most institutions and stakeholders felt quite satisfied with the information service from the office and the way their needs were dealt with, part of the information material was perceived as being too formal and bureaucratic and thus rendering the material less useful. A clear recommendation here is to revise the printed and internet-based material provided by the office to make it more readable and user friendly.

A specific issue here are the statements of general recognition. The problems referred to were related to the wording and lack of information concerning comparability to a Norwegian degree (subject). At present, the statements do not seem to fulfil individual needs in relation to job seeking and the employment market. Making them clearer, more comprehensible and more useful on all levels must be given the highest priority to the office.

We have pointed out the long processing times as the Achilles heel of the Norwegian Enic/Naric office. We have noted that additional manpower reinforcements are in progress to alleviate this. However this should have been addressed earlier.

We recommend therefore that the NOKUT executive, in parallel with the impressive quality assurance system they have built up, develop measures to guarantee swift adjustments where necessary to keep processing time within acceptable limits. We may conclude that such measures should be considered in a broader perspective. In addition to enlarge the staff, discussions and negotiations about the tasks and duties (the mandate) and revising/simplifying recognition methods and procedures should be taken into consideration.

The new agency – NOKUT – boasts an impressive array of knowledge and skills. Without doubt the agency represents Norway's best expertise in strategic fields such as quality assurance, accreditation and recognition. We could not however detect the systematic use of such expertise across the units. If this observation is correct the obvious recommendation would be to arrange internal skills and knowledge seminars to make the expertise possessed within the office to be available to everyone, as a first step towards full utilisation of the agency's potential.

As in most countries recognition services are spread across many authorities. There are strong arguments for such a structure, but it cannot be denied that this division of labour leads to difficulties and makes it almost impenetrable to outsiders. Here the evaluation team recommends the establishment of one national access point to all different kinds of credential evaluation in Norway.

A final recommendation may be offered to the personnel. The evaluation team fully understands and supports the need for skills development and expertise. It is however in our view important that expertise be developed in the dynamic aspects of information and intelligence, rather than in the static areas of knowledge of HE systems in other countries.

As we have argued in this report future recognition work has much more to gain from expertness in gathering, processing and disseminating intelligence, than from detailed and very specialised knowledge of international education. And so has the Norwegian Enic/Naric office.