

# **Recognition work in Sweden**

Evaluation report

Nordic Recognition and Information Centres Network (NORRIC)

May 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.

The Swedish ENIC/NARIC was the last of the five Nordic offices to be studied by the project. The Swedish office presented a self-assessment at the beginning of October 2005 and a subsequent site visit was made in late October 2005. The evaluation team met representatives from the Ministry of Education, higher education institutions, the Swedish Integration Board, employment offices and a professional organisation as well as applicants and the national union of students. An interview protocol was prepared to guide and support the group's work. Programmes for visits and interviews were documented as a basis for reporting.

The evaluation team visiting Sweden had a broad representation from the Nordic offices: Anne Rovde (Norway), Thordur Kristinsson (Iceland), Marketta Saarinen (Finland) and Anne-Kathrine Mandrup (Denmark). Professor Stephen Adam of the University of Westminster gave valuable support to the team as an independent expert.

## **I Presentation of the Swedish ENIC/NARIC**

The Swedish ENIC/NARIC office – the Department for Evaluation of Foreign Higher Education – is part of the National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket), which was established through a merger of independent authorities in 1995. Besides credential evaluation, the Agency performs the following tasks:

- Quality audits and assessments of higher education
- Supervision of higher education institutions
- Review and analysis of the higher education system
- Educational renewal and development
- Information on study programmes and encouraging student enrolment.

Credential evaluation – conducted by national authorities – started on an experimental basis in 1985 at the National Swedish Board of Universities and Colleges and became a permanent task in 1987. With the establishment of the National Agency for Higher Education (the Agency), credential evaluation became part of the remit of the International Department. A separate department for credential evaluation was not created within the Agency until in 2000.

### ***Organisation, role and objectives***

In the Order with instructions for the national agency it is stated that the agency shall conduct evaluations of foreign higher education and teacher training qualifications and further, shall ensure the implementation of directives and conventions concerning evaluation of foreign higher education in Sweden.

Each year, the government sets out the duties of the agency in the budget document for the agency. According to the budget document for 2005 agency duties shall include:

- “Contributing to the increased integration of persons with foreign higher education qualifications into the Swedish employment market.
- Assisting universities and university colleges with expert knowledge on the recognition of foreign higher education.”

The department’s primary responsibility lies in professional recognition. The department evaluates foreign higher education programmes for employment purposes in Sweden (de facto professional recognition) and is the expert authority for certification of persons with foreign teaching credentials. The department also supervises the application of the EC directives in Sweden and acts as contact point for the directives. Apart from the Order and the annual budget document, there is no regulation for professional de facto recognition.

Higher education institutions decide on academic recognition of foreign higher education qualifications. The department notifies HE institutions of foreign education systems and good practice and principles of recognition. Sweden ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 2001 and the Agency was nominated as the Swedish ENIC information Centre.

### *Staff and statistics*

The Department for evaluation of foreign higher education has a head of department and 20 employees of which 16 are credential evaluators working either primarily with professional de facto and academic recognition or recognition of foreign teaching qualifications. Two employees (a senior adviser and a project manager) work with general and international issues in relation to recognition and two have administrative duties. All evaluators have a Bachelor's Degree, which is a minimum qualification for employment. Half the staff has been working with credential evaluation for more than ten years, and the department often recruits staff from HE institutions or agencies with similar tasks. There is a broad range of language skills. Apart from English, German, French and the Nordic languages including Finnish, the agency deals with documents in Spanish, Russian, Polish, Turkish, Chinese, Japanese and Arabic.

The number of applications for professional de facto recognition has increased from 1,200 in 1995 to approximately 2,600 per annum (see table below). Approximately 35% of the applications do not result in a statement but in a letter of refusal or are referred to other authorities. The primary countries of origin in 2004 were former Soviet Union, Iraq, USA, UK, Iran and former Yugoslavia

*Table 1 Number of cases for professional de facto recognition.*

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Number of applications</i> | <i>Statements</i> |
|-------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1995        | 1200                          | -                 |
| 2002        | 2612                          | 1732              |
| 2004        | 2607                          | 1813              |

*Source: Swedish ENIC/NARIC self assessment report.*

Higher education institutions seek advice in relation to admission to and transfer of credit to Swedish higher education programmes for persons with foreign higher education qualifications. And also employers and individuals ask questions regarding recognition of foreign qualifications. Questions and answers may be forwarded by email, letter, fax or phone. In 2003 the department changed the registration of questions from HE institutions and others. Until 2003 general questions regarding foreign and Swedish education as well as questions regarding recognition issues were registered, but from 2003 the department primarily registers questions concerning academic recognition. The change in registration practice can explain the decline in the number of questions and answers, see table 2 below.

*Table 2 Number of questions and answers in relation to academic recognition*

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Number of questions</i> | <i>Answers</i> |
|-------------|----------------------------|----------------|
| 2002        | 1049                       | 1061           |
| 2003        | 983                        | 931            |
| 2004        | 561                        | 567            |

*Source: Swedish ENIC/NARIC self assessment report.*

Persons with foreign teacher qualifications can either apply for certification (professional de jure) or for an evaluation statement (professional de facto, equivalent to the professional de facto statements in table 1). Approximately half the applicants apply for certification.

Table 3 Number of applications, statements and certificates for foreign teacher qualifications

| Year | Number of applications | Statements | Certificates |
|------|------------------------|------------|--------------|
| 2002 | 1069                   | 422        | 260          |
| 2003 | 1040                   | 399        | 214          |
| 2004 | 925                    | 394        | 180          |

Source: Swedish ENIC/NARIC self assessment report.

### **Information: tools and principles**

The main channel for information on recognition is the agency's web site ([www.hsv.se](http://www.hsv.se)), which provides comprehensive information about the recognition process in Swedish and English. Applicants can find application forms, download all printed information material and access a database with previous evaluations for reference.

The agency also publishes an extensive range of brochures and information booklets on recognition related topics such as the brochure about assessment of foreign qualifications printed in seven languages. Seminars and meetings for relevant stakeholders are another way of providing information on recognition issues.

### **Outcomes of recognition work**

The department issues recognition decisions for teaching qualifications. The recognition decision enables applicants qualified to work as a teacher in Swedish primary and upper secondary schools. Rejections are fully explained and can be appealed against in a Swedish district court. The department did some research into these rulings after the first two years and in 2005 the department is conducting a major study involving many stakeholders with the purpose of reviewing the effects of the evaluations and the certification process.

As a means of supporting the integration of persons with foreign qualifications into the Swedish employment market, the department issues advisory recognition statements. The statements serve as advice and guidance to employers and higher education institutions. If the department is unable to issue a recognition statement, a letter of refusal is sent to the applicant setting out the reasons for this. The assessments cannot go to appeal but re-assessment can be done on request.

The department has not yet evaluated the effects of its evaluation statements for employment purposes but is considering a study comparable to the research on teacher recognition decisions.

### **Quality Assurance**

At agency level, the Office of the University Chancellor audits each department's budget and activity plan twice a year.

The department has integrated its QA measures with the working procedures for recognition cases (professional de facto and teaching qualifications). A set of recognition criteria and mode of procedures documented in the assessment manual and database manual ensure all cases are dealt with on an equal basis. Regular staff meetings are held with the purpose of discussing difficult cases and issues of principle and staff planning meetings are held annually. The Head monitors activities, working groups and workloads.

The department also include feedback from their stakeholders in their quality assurance measures. In 2004, a user assessment of the department's web site information was performed and in 2005, an assessment of the application form and other written information was conducted.

***Skills training***

Employees are offered the opportunity to take both general and field specific skills training. The agency's personnel unit offers staff development activities such as project management, presentation techniques and stress handling. Participation in further education and language courses is also possible. New employees undergo an induction programme and are assigned a mentor.

International conferences, seminars and training courses as well as study visits are important means of keeping the department up to date on new developments within the recognition field. In the last two and a half years study visits have been made to 13 countries.

## **II Analysis of recognition work in Sweden**

### ***Internal organisation of work, workload and expertise***

The Swedish ENIC/NARIC office is a large office with a long tradition within recognition. Considering the wide range of tasks, qualified staff and strong track record of development and documentation, the office can claim to be the father of recognition among the Nordic recognition offices.

The department performs its tasks very well thanks to a strong focus on the heart of the assessment procedure, country specific information and assessment method. At the same time the department has broadened its responsibilities to include certification of foreign teaching and other qualifications. Further, the department is embarking on the road of information provision to other stakeholders/organisations within recognition. An information project is just one of the new projects to be launched.

The department's credential evaluators are a very experienced group with a very high level of expertise. All credential evaluators are responsible for a number of countries and are loosely linked into regional working groups. At the interviews, the evaluation group got the impression that the credential evaluators perceive their expert role as very central. However, many evaluators also expressed a wish to change the way the work was structured and fully embrace a working group organisation.

At the visit, the purpose of the working groups was expressed as information sharing, formalising of information and the fair or even allocation of cases. However, the working groups seem not to be fully formalised, as the individual credential evaluator themselves decide whether or not to participate in a working group. Credential evaluators either work individually and have responsibility for a certain number of countries and cases, or work in project teams that share cases, countries and knowledge.

In general, the average turn around time for cases is acceptable. However the turn around time can differ greatly between credential evaluators. Evaluators working alone may reach unacceptable turn around times at peak and vacation periods as no back up system seems to be in place. Evaluators working in groups help each other and thereby ensure an acceptable turn around time for all or most cases handled by the group.

The department has chosen to formalise the country specific information and knowledge of evaluators through internal country profiles with specialised information on a country's education system and assessment standards. However, at the time of the visit only a few profiles had been prepared. The evaluation group finds the initiative, which can support information sharing and quality, important. A greater managerial focus on the project might ensure greater progress.

The evaluation group finds the discussion of the internal organisation of work very interesting and important and is surprised the issue was not raised in the self assessment. However in the report, the department expresses concern about the high number of experienced personnel who are due to retire in the next few years. The possible loss of experience and knowledge is seen as a threat to the organisation. The evaluation finds that the internal organisation of work and the risk of losing

knowledge when colleagues leave the department are interlinked and should be considered as two sides of the coin. The solutions to these issues could possibly be influenced by the results of the information project and other projects, which have been initiated recently. The group recommends management and staff initiate a discussion of how work is structured and choose a more uniform system of work that supports the products and services delivered by the department.

The credential evaluators have good opportunities for training and development both in areas directly related to credential evaluation and in more general topics. Many evaluators are used nationally and internationally as experts and speakers in working groups and at conferences etc. The staff group expressed general satisfaction with the development and training opportunities available to them. However, the opportunity to participate in conferences, seminars and network meetings did not seem to be equally distributed among staff. The evaluation group got the impression that senior staff enjoyed better opportunities.

### ***The mandate for recognition at HSV and division of work***

The HSV mandate for recognition work is fairly open compared to the mandate for the other Nordic recognition agencies. In the order, the agency's responsibility for certification of foreign teacher training qualifications, EU directives and the Lisbon Recognition Convention is mentioned. However, the order does not give any directions as to the scope and status of the agency's recognition work and relationship with other stakeholders within recognition. In the annual budget document, the agency's recognition related tasks are somewhat further specified. The level of regulation of recognition activities varies in the Nordic Countries – and given the broad spectrum of recognition activities at HSV – the Swedish recognition area seems to be the least regulated.

An open mandate gives the agency a high degree of freedom and at the same time a huge responsibility for doing the right thing. The responsibility entails that the agency – as the central recognition office in Sweden – ensures a clear division of work between itself and other recognition organisations such as HE institutions, the job market and others.

In the activity plan for 2005, the department states that its prime objective is to evaluate foreign higher education for individual use in Sweden. This is primarily done by issuing assessment statements for labour market purposes, guidance and information provision to HE institutions and certification of foreign teaching qualifications. In both the activity plan and self assessment report the department clearly distinguishes between its different recognition tasks and also identifies specific projects/initiatives and development plans. Three broad categories of users and purposes for the department's recognition work have been identified.

The department has only partly specialised the services it offers to meet the different needs of these three broad user groups, however. Within the area of certification of foreign teaching qualifications, the department has established a separate application and recognition system in accordance with Swedish and EU regulations. The department is also implementing special initiatives to help integrate persons with foreign teaching qualifications into the Swedish job market. Currently the agency is conducting a survey on the effects of certification etc.

In relation to professional de facto and academic recognition the department serves the needs of its users for recognition statements and information/guidance based on a common approach to

recognition of foreign qualifications. Basically the same recognition information is offered whether in statements to applicants or as guidance to HE institutions. In general, very precise information concerning the similarity of foreign qualifications to the Swedish equivalent is given. The assessment includes an evaluation of whether the foreign qualification contains at the minimum, the same number of total credits as a Swedish degree. Furthermore, a subject area can also be included if the number of credit points in a specific subject area are comparable to the number of credit points in the Swedish subject area.

This intricate totalling of credits in the agency's assessment approach was a major surprise to the evaluation group. In the self assessment the agency states that a transition from traditional equivalence to recognition has taken place over the years. From the point of view of the evaluation group, the agency seems to have maintained some level of equivalence assessment concerning the number of credits.

From the interviews the evaluation group got the impression that users – including the highly professional institutional users – did not understand the detailed and somewhat hidden information concerning comparability of credits in assessment statements/information. Nor did users need such detail in the assessment information from the department. Only the representative from the professional organisation welcomed such specific information, which the organisation used as basis for admission of professionals with foreign qualifications.

One reason given by the agency for the high level of detail was to accommodate favourable transfers of credit from foreign qualifications into Swedish equivalents at HE institutions. As a general rule, the institutions ask their applicants to obtain an assessment of their foreign qualification from the department before they apply for university admission. However, the representatives from the institutions did not find that the statements in general could replace their own assessments as a basis for decisions on credit transfers.

The evaluation group suspects that this division of work might contain an element of duplication (the same qualification is assessed twice) and redundancy in the sense that the information is not used or properly understood by the users. The evaluation group recommends the department reconsider the recognition services it offers to different users in order to clearly specialise its services and to focus on the needs of the different users. As a public organisation, the department has a responsibility to ensure a proper division of labour between itself and other recognition organisations. The department should therefore consider the value added its services offer in relation to different users and differentiate its services accordingly. The evaluation group recommends the department consider the following questions:

- Who are our main customers and what are our main products?
- What do our different users need?
- Do we use our limited resources appropriately or what should be the value added of the department?

### *Quality Assurance*

The department has a strong system of QA for its internal work processes. The handling of cases is based on recently developed manuals, which describe the assessment process and the criteria for assessment. Each case is filed in a common database and is checked by two other credential

evaluators before it is finalised. Complicated cases and cases that can set a precedent as well as changes to recognition standards are discussed at fortnightly recognition meetings.

At the visit, the issue of validation of changes in recognition standards were discussed. At present the department uses its recognition meetings for validation, which therefore does not include documentation or external hearing on changes. However, the department pointed to the Nordic projects and co-operation as important reference points for its changes in recognition standards. The lack of proper validation of changes in recognition standards is not specific to the Swedish ENIC/NARIC office and describes the situation in all the Nordic offices. The evaluation group finds the issue of validation important for the quality assurance of recognition work and recommends the department raise this issue in the NORRIC network.

At the time of the visit the department was in the middle of conducting its first study on the effect of teacher certification. The department is considering conducting such studies on a regular basis, if the teacher study proves of value. The evaluation group finds this study very interesting and a source of valuable experience for all the Nordic offices. It is of the utmost importance that in the future, the department is informed by and can respond to questions of the following kind: Are your applicants now employed? Did they obtain credit transfers at university? Do you need to obtain a statement if you are a refugee? Are your users satisfied with your services?

### ***Profile and information***

The departmental profile in relation to higher education institutions is very high. The department supports the recognition work done by the institutions with statements and guidance and department seminars are used for staff training and knowledge development. The departmental profile is probably enhanced by the department's position within the National Agency for Higher Education.

Amongst institutional users on the job market and integration scene the profile is generally good. The department has participated in many information projects and staff seminars with the aim of enhancing the profile of the department, which was widely appreciated at the interviews. However, there seems to be a greater need for continuous information as a result of e.g. staff turnover and employment/integration. In order to sustain this profile among employment and integration staff the department should maintain a high level of information provision.

The departmental profile is supported by its provision of website-based and printed materials, which provides institutional and end users with information on recognition and previous assessments. The department has long provided a website-based database with assessment information on specific foreign qualifications. The department has signalled a change in its information strategy with the launch of a new information initiative with several subprojects. As the initiatives were not in place at the time of the self-assessment and the site visit they are not included in the evaluation report.

Within the agency, the department operates independently alongside other departments. From the interviews it was apparent that the department has a relatively isolated position in the agency with limited co-operation and communication with other departments. The evaluation group got the impression that work performed at the department does not have the same cachet as work in other departments. Further, salary levels in the department are relatively lower than the other departments bearing in mind the length of service and general expertise. The evaluation group recommends the

director reviews the position of the department in the agency.

The department's relatively isolated position in the agency and the high quality of its work gives it a large measure of control with regard to the work it does and the development of recognition work in Sweden. Given the important role recognition plays in the Bologna Process and in relation to the integration of people with foreign qualifications on the job market/higher education institutions, the evaluation group would expect the director and Ministry of Education to take a more active involvement in the recognition agenda. This is not to say that the department does not have a good working relation with the Ministry. In fact the Ministry uses the department staff in working groups and as experts on recognition and internationalisation issues. However, recognition does not seem to be an item on the agenda at the Agency nor in the Ministry.

### ***The Lisbon Recognition Convention***

The expertise to make decisions concerning academic recognition lies with the higher education institutions. From the interviews with staff and institutions, the evaluation group got the impression that it can be fairly difficult for persons with foreign qualifications to get credits transferred to Swedish degrees. However, to date the department has no hard evidence concerning the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention at higher education institutions.

Through its statements and recognition information, the department expects (or hopes) to accommodate fair recognition decisions (credit transfer) at institutions. Further, the department is planning to increase the recognition information provided to higher education institutions and to develop a website-based tool for academic recognition etc. The evaluation group supports these initiatives. However, it is recommended that the department gathers information on the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and that possibly uneven implementation be raised with the Ministry of Education.

### **III Summary: Strengths, weaknesses and recommendations**

Recognition work is handled professional by highly qualified staff at the Department for Evaluation of Foreign Higher Education. With its long experience and good services, the department is an important and highly esteemed actor on the recognition scene in Sweden. The department delivers high quality work based on internal quality assurance mechanisms, structured work processes and recognition specific knowledge.

As mentioned before the department is working very well and has been doing so for many years without major changes in its recognition work. The department is serving its three major customers: higher education institutions, the labour market and integration with labour intensive and fairly standardized products. However, the scene of higher education in Sweden and Europe is changing and recognition is gaining increasing importance. From the point of view of the evaluation group the department is at a cross road concerning its future roll within recognition. Given the experience and expertise of the department, the evaluation group recommends the department to reconsider the services it offers to its customers and to clearly distinguish the value added of the department's work to recognition in Sweden.

Quality assurance of internal work processes is high on agenda and the department is doing a good job, which could partly be explained by the Agency's general responsibility for QA of higher education in Sweden. At the time of the site-visit, the department was in the middle of conducting a study on the effect of its general recognition work. The evaluation group finds this study very interesting and finds such studies in general an important part of a coherent QA system. Given the department's position in the agency, the evaluation group recommends the department to consider ways of validating changing in recognition standards and to raise the question in the NORRIC-network.

The department's recognition work is not organized in a uniform way. The credential evaluators either organize themselves in working groups sharing tasks, information and knowledge or they work individually. These two modes of organization seem to support two different ways of organizational learning and knowledge sharing. The group recommends management and staff to initiate a discussion of the organization of work and to choose a more uniform system of work that supports the products and services delivered by the department.

The visibility of the departments work is high both in relation to users at the labour market/the integration scene and in higher education. The visibility is supported by provision of written and web-based information on recognition. A new information initiative might further enhance the visibility of the department. The department's position within the agency seems not to be as strong as the other departments. Neither does the agency seem to have clear vision for the role of recognition in relation to higher education, the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Recognition Convention.