

Introduction

All the Nordic countries have ratified the Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region. With the Nordic Declaration on Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education (Reykjavik Declaration) the Nordic Ministers of Education and Research will ensure e.g. that qualifications in the field of higher education of the Nordic countries shall be given full mutual recognition and that the Nordic countries shall achieve better Nordic agreement in evaluating qualifications obtained in both Nordic and other countries. The national ENIC offices have been asked to identify problems in implementing and applying the Reykjavik Declaration as well as the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

All the Nordic countries are active members in the Bologna Process. In the Bologna Process, a lot of attention has been paid to the recognition of foreign qualifications and more recently, on recognition of prior learning at higher education institutions. Qualifications frameworks and more precisely, the development of learning outcomes, are also linked to recognition issues both on national and European level. The Nordic ENIC offices consider it important to link all work which is being done in the framework of the Reykjavik Declaration to the work which is being done in the context of the Bologna Process. This applies especially to the National Action Plans to Improve the Quality of the Process Associated with the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications.

Even if progress has been achieved, there are still recognition problems and problems in the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. This report describes what has been done to identify problems and improve recognition procedures and methodology in the Nordic ENIC offices during the last two years. Priorities for further work will be identified and plans to further improve recognition will be discussed. Emphasis will be on joint Nordic activities. Details concerning activities in each Nordic country separately can be found on their websites or directly from the offices. All important links, reports, seminar materials and general information on the work of Nordic ENIC offices can be found on www.norric.org.

Reports and annual conferences over the last two years

During the last two years, the following four Nordic reports have been finalised:

- Deviations from the 3+2 degree structure model and recognition issues – working report of the NORRIC project on the two-cycle degree structure (2006)

- Recognition of foreign higher education degrees in the Nordic countries – similarities and differences – working report of the NORRIC project on recognition standards (2006)
- Information on recognition of foreign qualifications in the Nordic ENIC/NARIC offices – report of the NORRIC project on information work (2006)
- Towards a Nordic Recognition Strategy - final report of the overall Education Barriers project (2007)

The 2006 and 2007 annual conferences were held in Iceland (Reykjavik) and Norway (Oscarsborg). The main outcomes of these two seminars are reflected in this report.

1. National Action Plans to Improve Recognition: overview and status for the Nordic countries

All Nordic countries have prepared “national action plans for improving recognition” as part of the stocktaking reporting concerning their progress in the Bologna Process. Below is a summary of the national plans from all Nordic countries. The summaries concentrate on problems identified as well as the measures planned or taken to improve recognition of foreign qualifications in each country. Full texts are available at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/londonbologna>

As can be seen from the national reports below, even if the core work is similar, there are differences in the emphasis of activities in different Nordic offices. This is due to e.g. differences in national legislation and different needs and practice.

Common emphasis for all Nordic countries continues to be the work on information, databases as well as support to higher education institutions in their work on e.g. admission issues. All Nordic countries find it important to ensure the implementation of the principles of the Reykjavik Declaration as well as the Lisbon Recognition Convention at higher education institutions.

Denmark

The Danish National Action Plan goes through legislation, recognition practice, information provision and structures in relation to the field of recognition. This passage will focus on the areas which have received special attention over the last few years and where new initiatives to improve recognition have been planned. In some cases these initiatives have been realised by now whereas others are in the process of realisation.

One of the top priorities of the Danish government in the implementation of a national strategy of Denmark in a global economy has been to enhance the possibility of getting credit transfer at Danish higher education programmes. Decisions on credit transfer are made by the individual institution but the holder of the qualification may complain to the Qualifications Board. The role of the board has been extended to cover Danish students who want to appeal credit transfer decisions from one Danish programme to another. In the process of the amendment, the whole act on assessment of foreign qualifications has been

critically re-examined and it has been found that all the obligations under the Lisbon convention has been fulfilled.

In 2005 CIRIUS was given the powers to establish standards and criteria for general admission to higher education programmes in Denmark and one of the major developments within the last years has been an electronic guide to admission which provides institutions with in-depth knowledge of foreign upper secondary qualifications. Now the institutions mostly make their decisions concerning applicants with foreign qualifications by consulting the website and not on the basis of individual written assessments made by CIRIUS.

CIRIUS has carried out a survey on the institutional practice on admission and credit transfer. The overall conclusion is that the institutions live up to their obligations concerning recognition of foreign qualifications. However, two areas concerning credit transfer need to be developed further: information on the appeal possibility and whether the institutions look for full compliance with their own curricula when deciding on credit transfer. In relation to seminars and workshops held by CIRIUS the obligations of the institutions will be emphasised and information concerning appeal possibilities is published on the website and sent to the institutions.

Recognition of undocumented qualifications is a difficult area. If the applicant does not provide CIRIUS with any documentation supporting the information on his or her educational qualification, CIRIUS will write a general assessment of the degree. A system of prior learning is currently being developed within adult education whereas such a system already exists in the area of vocational education.

An act on accreditation will replace the state regulated higher education system in Denmark which will strengthen quality assurance in Denmark. This act might make it easier for Danish higher education institutions to establish transnational education and deliver qualifications outside Denmark.

CIRIUS is the principal provider of authoritative information on recognition of foreign qualifications in Denmark. CIRIUS will make a user survey in order to gain a better basis for adapting the form and content of information to the users' needs.

CIRIUS and the Danish Evaluation Institute are both represented in working groups concerning development and internationalisation – especially in relation to recognition. Most notably a working group on the relationship between a national Danish Qualifications framework and the overarching European qualifications framework is preparing a model for a national Danish qualification framework.

Finland

The compliance between the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) and national legislation were thoroughly reviewed before the LRC entered into force. The Government proposal covers all the articles of the LRC, explaining how and in which parts of the national legislation the articles have been implemented. Finnish

higher education legislation determines that eligibility to higher education in the country of origin gives eligibility also in Finland. The documents are available at www.finlex.fi.

The recognition practice in institutions is monitored in various ways. A national working group, which was appointed to prepare the National Action Plan and the recommendations for the recognition of prior learning at higher education institutions, has organized seminars and sent out questionnaires to higher education institutions concerning their criteria and practice. The national student unions have made their own enquiries. Based on the information received from different sources as well as on the experience of the Finnish ENIC/NARIC, the situation appears to be rather good. Students and higher education institutions have e.g. experienced that personal study plans have proved useful. In future, information can be drawn in electronic form from the new joint application systems for Bachelor programmes conducted in English at Finnish polytechnics. The joint application system was launched in January 2007. More information can be found from www.admissions.fi.

The time required to process applications for recognition or credit transfer has not emerged as a problem in Finland. Student admissions take place in a certain schedule and questions concerning recognition are solved in due course.

The Finnish higher education institutions adopted Diploma Supplement (DS) early. Since 2005 the higher education institutions have been required to issue their students a DS automatically, earlier they were required to issue a DS on request. The ENIC/NARIC will continue to help the higher education institutions to improve the quality of the DS issued. New instructions concerning e.g. joint programmes, quality assurance and description of learning outcomes in the DS will be prepared.

Information provision remains a key task for the Finnish ENIC/NARIC. Information is provided via training, website, publications, seminars and direct answers to questions from stakeholders. A customer survey was conducted in 2006 and the results of this survey will contribute to developing the provision of information.

The main body of the Finnish national action plan is based on the work of the national working group, established in 2006 on the recognition of prior learning at higher education institutions. The work on recognition of prior learning is also supported by the work on qualifications frameworks and more specifically, supporting Finnish higher education institutions to develop learning outcomes.

The national working group on recognition of prior learning in higher education institutions charted the practice at higher education institutions and presented recommendations for common principles and processes of recognition of prior learning. The institutions are encouraged to streamline all their recognition procedures, including recognition of foreign qualifications and recognition of all prior learning, in accordance with the recommendations by the working group. Supporting and monitoring the implementation of those recommendations will be one of the tasks also for the Finnish ENIC/NARIC. It will also provide further

information on the institutional practice and needs in recognition of qualifications as well as recognition of prior learning.

Iceland

The main emphasis will be on securing that the universities comply with international agreements which Iceland is a party to as the Lisbon Recognition Convention. This will be done by securing that universities do not get accreditation unless they have in their regulations provisions regarding academic recognition that must be in compliance with these international agreements. Should it emerge that a given higher education institution does not adhere to the Lisbon Recognition Convention or other relevant agreements it will lead to a reprimand in the accreditation report and the higher education institution in question will be given certain time limit to correct its procedures.

With new act on universities Icelandic higher education institutions have received the possibility to offer and recognise joint degrees or double degrees. All the universities use a credit system comparable to the ECTS system and they all issue Diploma Supplements to their graduates. A National Qualification Framework (NQF) has been published by the Ministry of Education and the universities have described learning outcomes for all their programmes in accordance with the NQF.

Emphasis will also be on improved access to information on recognition. The home page of the ENIC/NARIC office will provide special application forms and/or a checklist with information, and there are plans to publish leaflets on recognition and recognition procedures.

Norway

The Lisbon Recognition Convention is in principle fully implemented in Norway. A survey conducted in October 2006 was conducted partly to prepare for this action plan and partly for the commission on national and international recognition issues in higher education that was nominated by the Ministry of Education and Research in March 2006. All 45 accredited higher education institutions received the questionnaire, of which 33 responded. This survey made it clear that not all aspects of the Convention were fully implemented.

Awareness-raising and information activities in this area are envisaged. The possibility to include recognition procedures in the formal quality assurance system of all higher education institutions will be considered.

The at present only measure available for monitoring the decisions on recognition made by the higher education institutions is the National Database on Recognition (NAG). NAG has been found to be somewhat wanting. NOKUT will appoint a working party whose mandate will be to look at possible ways of improving it, or else to replace it by a new and more functional database.

The criteria for admission to Norwegian higher education based on foreign education are much debated. They will be reviewed in order to find a new, operational approach to defining the criteria and see to it that they are kept up to date.

The commission on national and international recognition issues in higher education defined the lack of centralised information as one of the main obstacles facing immigrants and others in need of an academic recognition. Rectifying this will be a priority for 2008.

The efforts to combat fraud will be further increased in 2008.

Sweden

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education has a permanent responsibility for information on the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) and has carried out an information campaign to ensure the implementation of the Convention at institutional level. The Agency strictly follows the Recommendations on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications not only for countries that have ratified the LRC but also for other regions of the world.

Since the LRC was incorporated in the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance it has become subject for legal supervision at national level. The Agency supervises higher education institutions and ensures their compliance with laws and regulations in force in the area of higher education. In case of deficiencies a report is required on measures taken to improve the situation. Sustained problems can be reported to the Government.

The General Assembly of the Association of Swedish Higher Education (SUHF) has adopted recommendations on recognition of foreign higher education. The recommendations call upon the institutions to show generosity in recognition. The code of good practice attached to the recommendations emphasizes the importance of transparent procedures. The institutions also have internal policy documents on recognition and according to SUHF the principle of generous attitude towards acceptance of foreign qualifications is followed.

The Agency acts as an expert agency in supporting the work of higher education institutions in recognising foreign qualifications. Biannual national conferences on recognition are held in order to provide information and training to persons responsible for recognition of foreign qualifications. The Agency arranges and takes part in information days on foreign education systems for higher education institutions.

On the website of the Agency information on recognition of foreign qualifications is available in electronic form. Information for applicants including criteria and procedures is available in English and six other languages. Examples of evaluations are stored in a public database. The Agency will be issuing more differentiated information to possible target groups.

The ENIC/NARIC office is developing a special website giving comprehensive information on criteria and procedures for recognition, results of evaluations as well as descriptions of foreign education systems. It will also be possible to send questions concerning recognition issues and the answers will be available on the website. The site will be in operation by the end of this year. The primary target group is admission and recognition officers at higher education institutions.

The award of joint degrees is not possible at present there are no legal obstacles to establish joint programmes or to award and recognise double or multiple degrees. The Government has encouraged the establishment of joint programmes.

The Diploma Supplement was introduced in 2003 and is automatically issued to all students in English and free of charge. The Diploma Supplement is also issued for doctoral studies (starting 1 July 2007). From 1 July 2007 the credit system is compatible with ECTS.

The Agency will be given the task to compile and publish a National Qualifications Framework for higher education on the basis of legal documents existing before the implementation of the new higher education structure 1 July 2007.

The Agency is in the process of compiling a web-based Swedish-English dictionary for higher education and research terminology. A database for the translation of full degree names has been established and is now available on the web.

2. Challenges in recognition

In addition to what will be done according to the national action plans to improve recognition, the Nordic offices have agreed to put a common Nordic emphasis on two specific issues: 1) fraud and fraudulent documents and 2) substantial differences.

Fraud and fraudulent documents

Fraud and fraudulent documents have become an important issue in recognition work. Nordic offices consider this as an emphasis also in their co-operation. Information on relevant legislation, office procedures as well as statistics will be shared between the Nordic offices. Extranet and networking will be used for exchanging e.g. country-specific information.

Awareness-raising on the fraud and sharing information among all stakeholders is also considered very important. It is the task of the ENIC/NARIC offices to address policy makers, higher education institutions, students as well as general public. For the benefit of higher education institutions and students, it is also important to take measures in order to prevent documents from Nordic higher education institutions becoming subject to a fraud.

Substantial differences

One of the most important ideas behind Nordic co-operation is to streamline the recognition policies and procedures in the Nordic countries. Therefore, it is important for the Nordic offices to discuss together the concept of “substantial difference”, which is central to the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

Substantial differences are also discussed on a European level. According to the ENIC/NARIC working group report “Substantial differences: toward a common understanding” the difference in question should be substantial in relation to the function of the qualification and the purpose for which the recognition is sought. The function and purpose have a clear link with the elements of a qualification: level, workload, quality, profile and learning outcomes. The report emphasizes that one goal of the work of the recognition networks is to promote flexible attitudes.

In a Nordic context, this means more thorough discussions on qualifications from different countries. This discussion is also related to the work on qualifications frameworks. The Nordic reports “Deviations from the 3+2 degree structure model and recognition issues” and “Recognition of foreign higher education degrees in the Nordic countries – similarities and differences” already discuss the substantial differences, but further work needs to be done. The natural way of organizing the work is that the experts on specific geographical areas from different Nordic offices group to discuss the qualifications and how they recognise them. The extranet will be used for that purpose, too.

It is also important to inform the higher education institutions of the concept “substantial difference”. On the other hand, it is useful to know about the practice and problems faced by higher education institutions. All offices will continue close co-operation with higher education institutions and when relevant and possible, also collect information on the recognition work at higher education institutions using appropriate national channels and tools.

3. Nordic co-operation continues

The Nordic co-operation has been intense since 2003. As this report shows, there are also good and visible results. We have learned a lot from each other, and we acknowledge that there are also differences between us. All Nordic offices are committed to continuing the co-operation. The changes in the recognition field on global, European and national level keep bringing new elements to the work and as such emphasize the need for co-operation.

The reports prepared as Nordic co-operation have shown e.g. the need to share and change information on a very practical level, such as details of changes in education systems and information on those education systems of which there is not much information available. During the coming two years the experts of certain geographical areas (e.g. Former Soviet Union, Latin America, China and Africa) will group and share information on the education systems, degrees as well as compare recognition practices. This will help to streamline the procedures as well as recognition decisions in Nordic offices.