



Advancing mutual recognition of accreditation decisions

Report of the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) * for the London Ministerial Conference, 17-18 May 2007

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Executive summary

In the Bergen Communiqué the Ministers “underline the importance of cooperation between nationally recognised agencies with a view to enhancing the mutual recognition of accreditation or quality assurance decisions”. Mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions is needed to enhance the mobility of students and graduates with accredited or quality assured qualifications in the European Higher Education Area. This report gives an overview of the progress made by the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) with regard to mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. It also contains a political request for the London Ministerial Conference.

ECA has been founded in 2003 with the aim of reaching mutual recognition agreements in 2007. The ECA approach of mutual recognition is based on an intensive process of trust-building through information exchange; commonly agreed tools and instruments; external evaluations of members and cooperation projects aimed at mutual recognition. The ENIC/NARICs of ECA member countries have been involved in the project in order to strengthen the link between accreditation decisions and recognition of qualifications.

Results of the ECA project:

- ECA has established a road map towards mutual recognition. The major milestones until today include the Code of Good Practice; Principles for the Selection of Experts; the Joint declaration between ECA members and ENIC/NARICs in 6 countries on the automatic recognition of qualifications; and an agreement of ECA members that each others accreditation tools and instruments are compatible and free of substantial differences.
- The project activities have helped to increase mutual understanding of the various accreditation systems and resulted in mutual trust between the involved accreditation organisations. The combination of formal agreements and principles with practical cooperation projects and mutual observations has been particularly useful.
- The ECA approach towards mutual recognition supplements existing initiatives and instruments (e.g. Lisbon Recognition Convention) to facilitate recognition of foreign qualifications by providing transparent and reliable information on the quality of higher education institutions and programmes.
- The cooperation between accreditation organisations and ENIC/NARICs has been very beneficial for both. Both accreditation organisations and ENIC/NARICs are moving towards a situation in which differences are accepted because there is trust in each others (accreditation and recognition) decisions.
- European and international stakeholders and networks have been involved in the work of ECA towards mutual recognition. Because of the potential benefits to European and global student mobility it is important to intensify this cooperation within and outside of Europe.
- The ECA approach and road map towards mutual recognition have delivered clear results and have brought mutual recognition agreements within reach. This approach could therefore be useful for other accreditation and quality assurance organisations in Bologna countries (and beyond).

ECA members expect to reach mutual recognition agreements within their own competences by the end of 2007. The involvement of Ministers and stakeholders is now needed to implement, advance, and expand mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions.

An encouragement in the London Communiqué along the following lines would be very helpful in this respect:

“We acknowledge the progress made with regard to mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions. We continue to support these efforts and encourage recognition bodies and stakeholders to support such initiatives with a view to implement, advance and expand mutual recognition agreements.”

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the Bergen Communiqué the Ministers “underline the importance of cooperation between nationally recognised agencies with a view to enhancing the mutual recognition of accreditation or quality assurance decisions”. This report gives an overview of the progress made by ECA members and what more can be done to advance mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions.

The emergence of the Bologna process stimulated the establishment of national quality assurance and accreditation systems in Europe. Comparability of the quality of study programmes is a prerequisite for the implementation of the common European Higher Education Area and for the mobility of students and staff. The need for close cooperation of quality assurance agencies and acceptance of national quality assurance systems has been emphasised by the ministers responsible for higher education in Europe since 2001.

It is believed that mutual recognition of accreditation or quality assurance decisions can substantially reduce existing barriers in the recognition of qualifications and thereby enhance academic and professional mobility in Europe. Despite the ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, many recognition decisions in Europe are currently taken on a case by case basis. Doubts on the quality and level of qualifications are important factors on the grounds of which recognition of a foreign qualification can be denied. Mutual recognition agreements between accreditation agencies should lead to the trust needed by national recognition authorities and higher education institutions to “automatically” recognise qualifications from study programmes or institutions that have been accredited by an acknowledged accreditation organisation.

Against this background, 15 national accreditation organisations from 10 European countries work together in the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) with the aim to achieve mutual recognition of accreditation decisions among members by the end of 2007. The objectives and activities of ECA are in line with the Bergen Communiqué of May 2005¹: “We underline the importance of cooperation between nationally recognised agencies with a view to enhancing the mutual recognition of accreditation or quality assurance decisions”. ECA’s aim is also in line with the recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union²: “hereby recommend that member states ... promote cooperation between agencies in order to build up mutual trust and the recognition of quality assurance and accreditation assessments, thus contributing to the recognition of qualifications for the purpose of study or work in another country”.

The purpose of this report is to provide insight into the methodology of the mutual recognition project of ECA and to present the results that have been achieved so far. The report concludes with some political requests to advance mutual recognition of accreditation decisions, addressed to the Ministers responsible for higher education in Europe. The work of ECA can serve as an example for mutual recognition of all types of quality assurance decisions.

The full report will be published on the website of ECA³ by the end of March 2007.

¹ The European Higher Education Area - achieving the goals: communiqué of the conference of European ministers responsible for higher education, Bergen, 19-20 May 2005

² European Parliament and Council: Recommendation of 15 February 2006 on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education

³ <http://www.eaconsortium.net/>

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF MUTUAL RECOGNITION AGREEMENTS

Mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions is needed to enhance the mobility of students and graduates with accredited or quality assured qualifications in the European Higher Education Area.

The ENIC/NARICs with whom ECA cooperates have made it clear that ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention does not solve all the recognition problems. A case by case approach is still followed. Doubts on the quality and level of qualifications can lead to “substantial differences” on which grounds recognition may be denied. As a consequence further studies or work in another country may be impossible. Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions can take these doubts away. In such a mutual recognition agreement accreditation organisations from different countries acknowledge the foreign accreditation decisions as if they were taken by themselves. Such agreements will not be signed before there is sufficient trust that there are no substantial differences with regard to standards for quality and the level of the qualification, and with regard to accreditation procedures and results overall. This mutual trust between those organisations that are responsible for assessing the quality and level can give recognition bodies, higher education institutions and employers the trust needed to accept the foreign qualification.

Moreover, mutual recognition of accreditation decisions would prevent that joint programmes and joint degrees need to be accredited in each of the participating countries. The experiences with joint programmes have made it clear that this can be a significant problem for the institutions concerned.⁴ If an accreditation decision in one country would also be recognised in another country then that would make it much easier for institutions and students to participate in these cross-border programmes which by definition increase mobility.

Acceptance of qualifications and cross-border academic and professional mobility can be advanced if accreditation decisions and mutual recognition agreements are visible and easily accessible for recognition bodies, higher education institutions, students, employers and graduates. Therefore, ECA members have committed themselves to set up an on-line Information Tool for Accreditation Decisions that will provide this information.

In sum, the members of ECA believe that mutual recognition of accreditation decisions facilitates the recognition of qualifications. And better recognition of qualifications makes it easier for students and graduates to move across borders within the future European Higher Education Area. Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions will supplement the other measures taken within the Bologna process to increase mobility.

3. THE ECA APPROACH OF MUTUAL RECOGNITION

ECA has been founded in 2003 with the aim of reaching mutual recognition agreements in 2007. The ECA approach of mutual recognition is based on an intensive process of trust-building through information exchange; commonly agreed tools and instruments; external evaluations of members and cooperation projects aimed at mutual recognition.

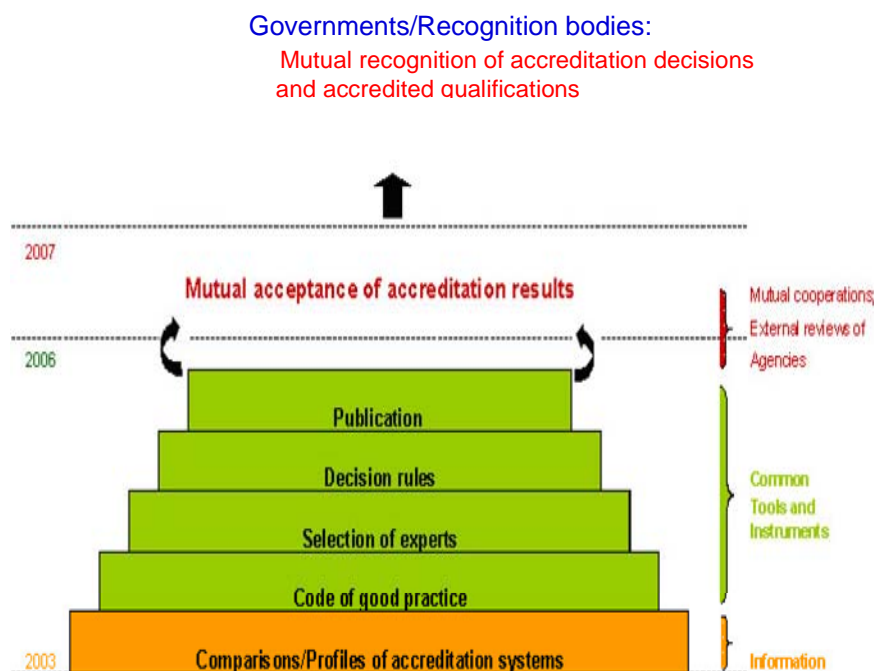
ECA is a bottom up initiative of national accreditation organisations which are committed to contributing to the aims of Bologna. After a first meeting in The Hague in June 2003, the Consortium was formally established as an autonomous project organisation in Córdoba in November 2003. Over time the number of participating accreditation organisations increased and encompasses today 15 members from different parts of Europe (Austria, Flanders, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, Switzerland). The objective of the Consortium is to build up – step by step – mutual trust between accreditation organisations. This confidence shall enable the participating

⁴ The methodological report of the ENQA TEEP II project has highlighted the problem of multiple accreditation of Erasmus Mundus joint master programmes.

agencies to accept the accreditation results and decisions of other ECA members as equivalent to their own. As a final step, the involvement of recognition bodies and governments is necessary to let mutual recognition agreements become fully effective.

Mutual trust among accreditation organisations is an indispensable element and the basis for mutual recognition agreements. ECA members decided that the envisioned trust-building should be based on information exchange; commonly agreed tools and instruments; and cooperation projects and external reviews of members (see Figure 1). The experiences within ECA clearly demonstrate that all three mentioned action fields are indispensable elements in the trust building process.

Figure 1. The ECA approach of mutual recognition



ECA defines accreditation as a “formal and independent decision, indicating that an institution in higher education and/or programmes offered meet certain standards”. This definition also covers quality assessments or audits that may be described as “accreditation like”. The main point is that there is a formal and independent decision that can be recognised by other agencies.

ECA members adhere to the principles of “subsidiarity” and “national sovereignty” in quality assurance. Although ECA members act according to a common “code of good practice”, they respect diversity in accreditation. National specificities in accreditation procedures are tolerated and accepted as long as they do not fundamentally influence the final accreditation decisions.

4. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

ECA has established a road map towards mutual recognition. The major milestones until today include the Code of Good Practice; Principles for the Selection of Experts; the Joint declaration between ECA members and ENIC/NARICs in 6 countries on the automatic recognition of qualifications; and an agreement of ECA members that each others accreditation tools and instruments are compatible and free of substantial differences.

Following the approach of mutual recognition the ECA members established a road map with concrete activities, milestones and deadlines, aiming to reach their goals until the end of 2007. The road map including the year of (expected) completion is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The ECA road map towards mutual recognition

	Activities/Tools	Completion
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Surveys of accreditation systems ▪ Accreditation profiles ▪ Mutual cooperations/observations 	2004 2005 2006
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Code of good practice ▪ Principles: selection of experts ▪ Equivalent accreditation frameworks ▪ Common publication format 	2004 2005 2006 2006
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Agreement: no substantial differences ▪ Accreditation of joint programmes ▪ External evaluation of ECA members ▪ Bilateral projects within ECA 	2006 2006 2007 2007
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Joint declaration ECA – ENIC/NARICs ▪ London 2007: progress report ▪ Information Tool for Accreditation Decisions ▪ Formal agreements on mutual recognition 	2005 2007 2007 2007

Mutual understanding of accreditation organisations

ECA members started with surveys and information exchanges that were necessary to understand the different operations and national contexts of the accreditation organisations within ECA. A first survey in 2003 on the organisations and the standards and criteria used in the accreditation frameworks showed that there were many more similarities than differences. A second survey in 2004 showed that both the legal consequences of accreditation decisions and the necessary involvement of governments and stakeholders in coming to mutual recognition vary nationally. These findings made it clear that accreditation organisations should focus on the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions as far that is within their competences. Governments and stakeholders should be involved formally as soon as mutual recognition agreements are within reach.

ECA members continued with providing information on each other systems according to a common format in so called accreditation profiles. These accreditation profiles were published on the ECA members website in 2005.

The accreditation organisations also started with bilateral or multilateral cooperation projects and mutual observations. It was encouraged that these cooperations and observations were reported to other ECA members. There were 13 observation reports available to members at the beginning of 2007.

Mutual recognition of accreditation procedures

A first major milestone for ECA was the signing of the ECA Code of Good Practice in December 2004. The Code guarantees comparability of accreditation procedures and defines the internal quality assurance measures of accreditation organisations. The Code contains 17 standards with correlating questions and points of reference. The Code was agreed on before the European standards and guidelines. The ENQA Board has formally stated that the Code corresponds with the European standards for external quality assurance agencies. The standards of the Code should be implemented by members by the end of 2006. This was monitored each 6 months at the ECA Workshop. In December 2006 ECA members reported that they had implemented the standards of the Code which will be externally evaluated in 2007.

A second milestone was the agreement on ECA Principles for the Selection of Experts in June 2005. The Principles state the fair procedures that should be used for selecting independent experts in panels. The Principles also apply to the appropriate mix of expertise in institutional and programme accreditation panels.

In 2006 it was confirmed through several surveys that the standards, criteria and decision-making rules were to a great extent equivalent in both institutional and programme accreditation frameworks.

In addition, the design for an Information Tool for Accreditation Decisions led to agreement on the format according to which accreditation decisions will be published in this on-line Information Tool.

Mutual recognition of assessment results

The milestones and cooperation activities mentioned above led ECA members to take an intermediate step towards the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. In December 2006, ECA members agreed to regard each others accreditation tools and instruments as compatible and free of substantial differences (cf. Annex). This agreement is one of the fundamentals to reach mutual recognition agreements between accreditation organisations by the end of 2007.

In December 2006, ECA members also confirmed that the accreditation of joint programmes operating in different countries should be included in mutual recognition agreements. Principles were drafted to increase mutual trust and transparency when accrediting joint programmes. These Principles should be adopted at the ECA Workshop in June 2007.

The external evaluations of members with regard to compliance to the ECA Code of Good Practice are scheduled for 2007. The information in the external review reports will be used to assess whether ECA members comply to the standards in the Code. If needed to reach a judgement additional information will be asked from members.

ECA has obtained funding from the European Commission Socrates programme⁵ to conduct comparisons and observations in a structured manner involving all ECA members in bilateral projects. The resulting comparative analyses and observation reports will be published in 2007. It is expected that these practical and comparative experiences will enhance the trust needed to come to mutual recognition.

Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions

The accreditation organisations came to the conclusion that the involvement of the recognition bodies was necessary to strengthen the link between mutual recognition of accreditation decisions and mutual recognition of qualifications. Since 2005 the ENIC/NARICs from ECA countries are invited to the ECA meetings. Most of these ENIC/NARICs attend the ECA meetings during which they have developed their own road map to come to mutual acceptance. This has resulted in parallel processes of mutual recognition of accreditation organisations and ENIC/NARICs. Another major milestone was therefore the signing of a Joint declaration between ECA members and ENIC/NARICs in December 2005. By the beginning of 2007 six countries (Austria, Flanders, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Switzerland) were signatures to this agreement which will lead to an almost "automatic" recognition of qualifications based on mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.

To make accreditation decisions transparent for stakeholders it was decided to build an on-line information tool in English with useful information on the decisions, accreditation and recognition systems, and the qualifications accredited by ECA members. This information tool will be developed with funding by the European Commission (TEAM project) in 2007.

By the end of 2007 mutual recognition agreements should be signed by the accreditation organisations. The engagement of governments, recognition bodies and other stakeholders is needed to let the mutual recognition agreements have its full effect on the recognition of qualifications and mobility (cf. top layer of Figure 1). Moreover, there seems to be an interest from other European countries to join mutual recognition agreements. Therefore, a large dissemination conference is scheduled for the end of 2007. The current report for the London Ministerial Meeting should also serve this cause.

5. INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

European and international stakeholders and networks have been involved in the work of ECA towards mutual recognition. Because of the potential benefits to European and global student mobility it is important to intensify this cooperation within and outside of Europe.

ECA has established close relationships with other quality assurance networks and associations. ECA members are also members of ENQA. They fully acknowledge the political and strategic leadership role of the association for European quality assurance in higher education. ECA has applied for affiliate membership status in ENQA. A cooperation agreement has also been signed with the Network

⁵ The project Transparent European Accreditation decisions and Mutual recognition agreements (TEAM).

of Central and Eastern European Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEEN). The aim of this formal agreement is to create mutual understanding and to work towards the acceptance of the accreditation procedures of the respective member agencies. Observers and experts from ESIB, EUA, EURASHE, ENIC/NARICs, CEEN, the UK, Sweden, the European Commission and the BFUG have been invited to ECA Workshops. Discussions with the various European partners will have to reveal whether the ECA initiative in the domain of accreditation is also transferable to other quality assurance decisions in Europe.

Mutual recognition initiatives are encouraged internationally by the recommendation of UNESCO/OECD⁶: “In this context it is recommended that QA and accreditation bodies ... reach mutual recognition agreements with other bodies on the basis of trust in and understanding of each other’s professional practice ..”. In Latin America and in the Asian-Pacific region such projects have been launched. ECA has recently started to hold meetings with the corresponding quality assurance and accreditation networks in other parts of the world (CRAQ in the USA, RIACES in Latin America, APQN in the Asian-Pacific region). It is important to strengthen the links with these regions in order to exchange experiences and ideas. In the future intercontinental links in the domain of mutual recognition could facilitate global mobility of students and staff.

6. LESSONS LEARNED

The ECA approach and road map towards mutual recognition have delivered clear results and have brought mutual recognition agreements within reach. This approach could therefore be useful for other accreditation and quality assurance organisations in Bologna countries (and beyond).

ECA experiences:

- Mutual understanding and trust between accreditation organisations have significantly increased. The combination of formal agreements and principles with practical cooperation projects and mutual observations has been particularly useful.
- The ECA approach towards mutual recognition supplements existing initiatives and instruments (e.g. Lisbon Recognition Convention) to facilitate recognition of foreign qualifications by providing transparent and reliable information on the quality of higher education institutions and programmes.
- The cooperation between accreditation organisations and ENIC/NARICs has been very beneficial for both. Both accreditation organisations and ENIC/NARICs are moving towards a situation in which differences are accepted because there is trust in each others (accreditation and recognition) decisions.
- The involvement of Ministers and stakeholders is needed to implement, advance, and expand mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.

7. REQUEST TO MINISTERS

Based upon all the initiatives and results mentioned above it is hoped that ECA members can enter into mutual recognition agreements by the end of 2007. Governments, recognition authorities, higher education institutions, students, employers and other stakeholders should be encouraged to take part in the work on mutual recognition.

Especially the involvement of governments and recognition bodies is needed to formalise and implement mutual recognition agreements of accreditation and quality assurance decisions. If recognition bodies take the mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions into account then this will highly facilitate recognition of qualifications and joint programmes. It is believed that mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions will make a substantial contribution to the successful implementation of the Bologna process.

⁶ UNESCO/OECD “Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education”, 2005.

An encouragement along the following lines in the London Communiqué would be very helpful:

“We acknowledge the progress made with regard to mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions. We continue to support these efforts and encourage recognition bodies and stakeholders to support such initiatives with a view to implement, advance and expand mutual recognition agreements.”

ANNEX: AGREEMENT TOWARDS MUTUAL RECOGNITION OF ACCREDITATION RESULTS AND DECISIONS***Preamble***

The ECA partners have over the past three years consistently built up a level of trust between the accreditation agencies. At first the trust has been based on a thorough knowledge of the structure and organisation of the different accreditation systems. After that the accreditation frameworks have been compared, the decision-making structures analysed and recommendations have been made on the composition of the panels.

The trust has been brought to expression in a code of good practice, which has been signed by all ECA members. This code will be the basis for the external evaluation of ECA members.

Mutual recognition of accreditation results cannot be based solely on the analysis of how accreditation systems and organisations work in theory. Therefore all kinds of co-operation mechanisms have been developed in order to experience the practical performance of the systems. This has resulted in bilateral accreditation procedures, comparisons between ECA members and numerous observation reports on the performance of the accreditation organisations.

Agreement

Based on the Agreement of Cooperation of the members of the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA);

taking into account the ECA Code of Good Practice and the Principles for the Selection of Experts; acknowledging the accreditation profiles and co-operation activities of the members of ECA;

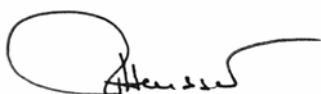
with the aim to achieve the confirmation of the ECA members that they recognise the results of each others accreditation procedures within their competences;

with the purpose to facilitate mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.

ECA members agree to regard each others accreditation tools and instruments as compatible and free of substantial differences;

ECA members agree to continue their co-operation projects, i.e. joint accreditation procedures, observation reports on accreditation procedures, and comparisons of procedures and standards of ECA members;

ECA members are convinced that these co-operation projects will enhance mutual trust and thereby help to achieve the principle goal of ECA, namely mutual recognition of accreditation results and decisions by the end of 2007.



On behalf of ECA, Rolf Heusser, Chairman
Text approved by ECA members at the ECA Paris Workshop on 7 December 2006