Bologna Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition 18 February 2013 - Draft Minutes
Second Meeting, 18 February 2013, DG EAC, Place Madou, Brussels

Contents

Participants
Kevin Guillaume (BE-fr), Erwin Malfroy (BE-fl), Andreas Dieckmann (DE), Tilman Dörr (DE), Allan Bruun Pedersen (DK), Cheryl Colbert (LU), Sarah Morassi (NL), Anna Bejmo (SE), Mats Edvardsson (SE), Cecilia George (SE), Stojan Sorčan (SI), Adam Tyson (EC), Margie Waters (EC), Rallu Frunza (EC)
Apologies
Kathleen Ordnung (DE), Hellen Põllo (EE), Afonso Costa (PT)

I. Work Programme (WP)

The Bologna Pathfinder Group met for the second time to report on action agreed in the first meeting and to agree on a future work programme. The minutes of the first meeting were formally adopted, and a roadmap with Bologna milestones to respect was identified. The meeting also reached agreement on a work programme and its key specific actions.

1. Problem definition – the members of the group expressed their wish to have a better problem definition within the group. Given the fact that automatic recognition may have impact on two levels, access and admission, the identification phase will be focussed on different stakeholders.
Key specific actions:
1) **Consult student unions** and identify problems encountered by students in degree mobility (the EC will consult ESU and ESN) – **all members to report back in the 3rd meeting**
2) **Survey the NARICs of the pathfinder group countries** to identify system level recognition problems and map out the procedures used within the group – action coordinated by Allan Bruun Pedersen (DK) with support from the Commission - **report back in the 3rd meeting**

2. Identification of gaps – in order to ensure that the recognition problem is not transferred from one level to another (from access to admission), the members of the group will check how system level recognition interacts with HEIs admission decisions. The Group believes that it is very important that its work takes account of the views of the wider stakeholder community, including, or even especially, of higher education institutions, who are responsible to a very large extent for many of the decisions which affect holders of foreign diplomas.
Key specific actions:
1) After getting the findings from the NARIC survey, **HEIs will be addressed with questions regarding both access and admission**, feeding in relevant findings from the previous exercise – **report back in the 4th meeting**

3. Articulation of Bologna and EU tools – the group is especially keen to see how Bologna and EU tools can be used and articulated more effectively with recognition procedures, in particular quality assurance systems, ~~and mechanisms such as~~ qualifications frameworks, ECTS, DS and grading tables ~~and the Diploma Supplement~~.

Key specific actions:
1) **Complete the table with substantial elements in recognition** to map out the use of various tools and practices within the group – action coordinated by Erwin Malfroy (BE-fl) – **report back in the 3rd meeting**
2) **Explore the possibility of using the Diploma Supplement** as common translation tool within the pathfinder group countries – **discussion and report back to meetings 3&4**, following consultations under the first two points of the WP
3) **Reflect on whether and which peer review of each other's recognition systems within pathfinder context would increase transparency** between systems – **reports throughout future meetings**

4. Extend current forms of regional cooperation to include, where possible, pathfinder countries - the group was interested to learn from the various experiences shared by the members, with the possibility of extending good practices within the group. The risk of creating only islands of recognition was emphasised, therefore strong focus will be placed on finding the bridges which could link the different regional cooperation initiatives in recognition
Key specific actions:
1) Continue developing the **BENELUX cooperation** in recognition matters
2) Pursue the possibility of **informal cooperation** between the Nordic and Baltic countries, with a view to include Germany[1] as well
3) Continue developing the **Western Balkan cooperation** in recognition matters
4) Germany will **reflect on the possibility to develop regional cooperation** in recognition within the German speaking countries, or to join the Baltic - Nordic cooperation
Reports back to meeting no 3

5. Use of ICT tools to simplify recognition – members of the group stressed the potential which ICT tools could bring in matters of recognition.
Key specific actions:
1) Explore the possibility of ~~building on~~making better use of **national IT applications** for admission or recognition purposes, to contribute to the simplification process – **meeting 4**
2) Reflect on the **advantages brought by sharing information and databases** developed by NARICs – **discussion in meeting 3 and 4** based on results of the surveys conducted under the first point of the WP
3) Identify a **NARIC centre which could present their ICT best practices and experience** with use of IT tolls in recognition – **theme for meeting 3**

6. Identify good practices based on results of previous actions – the Pathfinder countries already have some experience of more automatic forms of recognition on a national level (such as the Portuguese practice of giving the holder of a bachelor degree the automatic right to be considered for entry to a master's degree programme); or on a regional basis, either through a formal process (such as the Dutch-Flemish Treaty) or cooperation at 'practitioners'-level via groupings of ENIC-

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[1] The Council of the Baltic Sea States is an overall political forum for regional inter-governmental cooperation. The states are Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Russia, Sweden and a representative from the European Commission.

NARICs. The pathfinder group has agreed to build on these experiences to try to identify the key features which lead to improved academic recognition, and which may be transferable to other countries, thus enabling an extension of the existing cooperation frameworks to neighbouring countries, but also to learn from each other to see what may be improved in their own countries.
Key specific actions:

> 1) Keeping in mind the agreed roadmap, the group will **focus on finding best practices** which could set up a fast track to recognising each others' qualifications; ultimately, paving the way for a European area of recognition, to realise ~~pave the way towards achieving~~ the long term EHEA goal on automatic recognition, and capture them in the report to be prepared for the 2015 conference – **report back throughout the meetings**

7. Organise future meetings within a country of the pathfinder group to increase synergies and mutual understanding; members of the group who would like to host a meeting were asked to communicate this before the next meeting if possible

II. Context and discussions

1. Follow up on students' consultations

Members of the group reported back on their student consultations, which are still ongoing. So far, students mostly reported problems in credit mobility, admission to study programmes, or access to the labour market. Sometimes students lack awareness of whether access to a study programme is refused because of their foreign degree or because they do not meet specific admission conditions. The Commission also reported that the European Students Union and the Erasmus Student Network will each conduct surveys to help the group identify obstacles to degree mobility. Reports back from the consultations will continue to be shared in future meetings. Other stakeholders will be consulted on relevant issues.

2. Progress update and next steps of regional cooperation initiatives

2.1 Dutch-Flemish practices for near-automatic recognition – steps towards Benelux cooperation

Mr Erwin Malfroy and Ms Sarah Morassi explained that the Dutch-Flemish treaty on automatic recognition (updated NVAO Treaty) was signed this year, and it will enter into force within a few months, after its ratification. In November 2012 a first meeting within the Benelux context took place, to discuss the potential for automatic academic recognition of each other's higher education degrees. Further meetings this year will principally identify any problems which have to be solved in order to have a functional system of ~~automatic~~ fair and fast recognition within the Benelux area.

2.2. Western Balkan Cooperation

Mr Stojan Sorčan presented a proposal for a Western Balkan cooperation initiative on recognition. Balkan region countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia; answers yet to arrive from Kosovo and Albania) are interested to establish a platform for better cooperation and communication on academic recognition and quality assurance, similar to the Nordic and the Dutch – Flemish cooperation, with a view to increasing student mobility within the region. ENIC and NARIC centres within the area already cooperate, through the Regional

network of ENIC-NARIC centres established in 2006 in Mostar. A new initiative was also developed by University of Novi Sad, to establish a Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation in Higher Education (Founding Document, Croatia 2012).

Within the region, a subgroup on automatic recognition will be developed by Balkan region countries to exchange good practices and show others what is possible in terms of automatic recognition. By increasing cooperation between the ministries, recognition and accreditation offices and higher education institutions, there will be an increase in transparency and exchange of experiences which will build the needed trust in each other's HE system.

2.3. Nordic collaboration – Baltic extension

Mr Allan Bruun Pedersen clarified that it is not possible (or at least difficult) to formally extend the Nordic cooperation to the Baltic countries, given that Nordic cooperation is financed through the Nordic Council of Ministers. However, he emphasised that it is possible to have informal cooperation, and invite members of the Baltic recognition offices to join or contribute to concrete projects or to join as experts in the Nordic meetings. He stressed that the Baltic States have their own regional cooperation with annual meetings. Lastly, he stressed the fact that there is an almost automatic recognition process at system level: Nordic and Baltic ENIC-NARIC Offices each recognise academic degrees from the other group of countries as comparable to the same level in their own.

2.4. Discussion

Access vs Admission

Both DK and SE representatives emphasised that many recognition problems may arise at admission level. HEIs sometimes require a certain level of grades for admission purposes, and this could also amount to a reason for not granting access based on a foreign degree. Some members of the group mentioned their tables of grades which are used for understanding the grading system of a country from where a degree has to be recognised. The Italian NARIC developed a database with such grading tables and this could be disseminated to HEIs (http://cimea.it/maclaude.aspx).

Concerns regarding verification of authenticity

Concerns were raised regarding fraud prevention and authenticity check. Many NARIC offices have reference materials for recognition and the process is already more or less automatic. However, documentation still has to be provided for authenticity checks. It was agreed that there should be a simpler process in cases where the bureaucratic steps delay the recognition decision.

Registers of study programmes/degrees

Online registers of degrees are used between signatories of the automatic recognition treaty between the Dutch and the Flemish. They can be found at www.highereducation.be and http://www.ib-groep.nl/zakelijk/ho/croho/raadplegen_croho.asp (in Dutch). Every time NVAO accredits a programme, this is placed in the relevant register of programmes for transparency reasons. In Sweden, a website contains all programmes available for admission in the current year, but not past or future programmes. (https://www.universityadmissions.se/intl/start)

Participants emphasised that each pathfinder country has some sort of register of qualifications, and that these could be used to strengthen trust and transparency within the group. Pre-Bologna degrees may present challenges, as well as other types of short cycle degrees which come from dual systems.

The fact that HE programmes are dynamic, and that some registers are based on accreditation systems and some on admission, is a challenge to be met when exploring this avenue towards strengthening existing forms of cooperation between the members of the group (and beyond).

3. Mutual learning - perspectives on recognition

3.1. Presentation on the use of the engineering quality label

Ms. Caty Duyckaerts, Director of the Executive Unit of AEQES (Agency for the Evaluation of the Quality of Higher Education of Belgium French ~~speaking~~ community) presented the cooperation activities developed between AEQES and the French Accreditation Commission of Engineering Titles (CTI). Graduates of engineering programmes accredited and evaluated within this context (four universities participate in the joint project of the two agencies: University of Mons, Catholic University of Louvain, Free University of Brussels, and University of Liège) will have their degrees automatically recognized in France in the same way as French degrees once the titles are published in the Official Journal in France.

3.2. Recognition experiences by HEIs

Mr. Mats Edvardsson from Gothenburg University presented recognition work from the HEIs perspective. He emphasised that the work of universities in recognition revolves around recognition for access to further study at advanced level. He stressed that this does not include the concept of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), since RPL assumes that actors in the labour market and other stakeholders are also involved. He underlined the fact that a difference in the assessment activities between ENIC/NARIC and HEIs is that universities sometimes have to take into account the specific eligibility requirements for a particular programme or field of study. Lastly, he suggested some steps for the future work of the group, indicating that a simplified recommendation on procedures for recognition containing basic criteria and a simplified approach towards recognition would be welcomed by HEIs, and that the Diploma Supplement should be reviewed, so that the document could be the basis for a simplified recognition process which would treat a degree as a degree.

Mr Edvardsson suggested that looking at the number of applications based on foreign degrees, at the success rate and at the number of appeals could help clarify what information is needed and what problems have to be solved in recognition. He explained that SE has a continuously updated database of foreign HE systems and that if one university declares a foreign degree valid, then no formal recognition application has to be conducted where that same degree is presented at another Swedish university. A coordinated admission system facilitates a one stop shop principle.

4. Identification of key features to facilitate automatic recognition - way ahead

Following inputs previously sent by the members of the group, several aspects were discussed and taken into consideration to be included in the group's future work.

Recognition of foreign degrees should be included in QA procedures

An important issue identified was that in order to ensure fair recognition of foreign degrees, recognition procedures should be included in external and internal QA procedures, in accordance with national principles, as recommended by the Bucharest Communiqué. Admission should be

based on clear policies rather than on individual practice, to reduce obstacles for holders of foreign degrees.

Awareness raising and better LRC implementation by narrowing down the substantial difference exception

Another point raised was the need for better information and awareness raising for those who deal with recognition within HEIs. Reaching out to the admissions officers (in accordance with national practice) can trigger a positive attitude towards recognition of foreign diplomas. Given the autonomy and independence of universities, there is inconsistent application of the LRC principles. Narrowing down the exception allowed by the LRC based on "substantial difference" would also be welcome. Exploring admission procedures regarding foreign degrees could also help the group identify ways to change the culture of admissions officers, based on good understanding of the issues faced by HEIs on the ground. Checking what proportion of foreign degrees is accepted and why others aren't accepted and for what reasons could constitute a first step working on the problem definition.

Diploma Supplement as universal translation tool

The group emphasised the possibility of simplifying the bureaucratic steps of the recognition process by using a common translation tool with regard to the level, learning outcomes and content of foreign degrees. The DS could be a solution to prevent long administrative procedures required by translation and certification activities; this requires identifying what information is needed and whether the DS would need to be adapted.

Use of ICT tools for simplification of recognition procedures

Some members of the group already use various databases or IT applications for making the recognition process faster. Sharing these within the group could lead to better communication, transparency and trust between the actors involved. The Group wished to explore how best to take advantage of technology when working on simplification.

Streamlined recognition process – more centralised admission decisions?

The discussion reflected the issue that not only openness but also quality and competitiveness have to be taken into account when assessing foreign degrees for admission purposes. However, this quality check is sometime rendered difficult by the diversity of HE systems from where candidates apply. The variety of grading schemes, programmes, and specialisations can often be misused for non-recognition. More centralised guidelines in recognition and admission of foreign degrees could help solve this. This is one issue that could be explored when deepening analysis with HEIs on what could help make recognition work better. The group could consider sharing/compiling guidelines from the pathfinder countries.

Integrated use of QFs

The role of QFs in recognition was raised; this theme thus may be returned to at a later date.

5. Any other business

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The third meeting of the group will take place in Luxembourg. The date is yet to be decided. Members of the group are also invited to advise if they want to consult or invite to the meeting a certain stakeholder who could contribute to the work of the group.

The Pathfinder Group will report on their experiences and suggestions to the BFUG in the autumn of 2014, so that the BFUG could consider how to present the outcome of the group's work to the Ministers. In the meantime, the Group will also keep the Structural Working Group informed of its progress.