



PRELIMINARY VERSION, 2004-12-02

Accreditation in the European Higher Education Area

Report of ECA to the Bologna Follow-Up Group

In preparation for the Conference of European Ministers of Education in Bergen, 2005

Executive summary

The European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA) has been founded by twelve accreditation organizations from eight countries to help realizing the European Higher Education Area, by means of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. Mutual recognition of these decisions should lead to a greater mobility of students and staff; should inform the labour market on the values of degrees; and, should contribute to the recognition of higher education credits and degrees.

The European Ministers of Education can contribute to these goals by creating the conditions under which mutual recognition of accreditation decisions can be realized. Therefore, the European Ministers should call upon the Bologna signatory states to recognise accreditation decisions which are based on shared guidelines, practices and standards for accreditation organisations; to implement accreditation decisions in national recognition procedures; and, to apply accreditation to both public and private programmes and institutions of higher education.

ECA calls upon the European accreditation organisations to act independently, according to the Code of Good Practice; to publish accreditation decisions in a standardized format; and, to look for ways to keep the costs and the administrative burdens of accreditation as low as possible.

Table of Contents

Executive summary	1
1. Introduction	3
2. Significance of Accreditation in Europe	3
3. Definition, Specific Features, and Purpose of Accreditation	3
4. Transnational Recognition of Accreditation Decisions	4
4.1 Code of Good Practice	4
4.2 Qualification frameworks and shared quality criteria and descriptors	5
4.3 Publication Format	5
4.4 Selection Criteria for External Experts	5
4.5 Other forms of mutual cooperation between accreditation organisations	6
5. Political requests	6
Literature	7

1. Introduction

The present report was compiled against the background of the meeting of European education ministers in Bergen in 2005. It is designed to introduce the shared views of twelve accreditation organizations in Europe to the Bologna Follow-up Group. Its purpose is to define accreditation and to explain its usefulness and significance with regard to the development and implementation of the European Higher Education Area. Furthermore, it assesses latest developments in the field of accreditation and describes the current state of coordination efforts among individual accreditation organizations. Finally, it contains some political requests for the future utilization of accreditation in Europe.

2. Significance of Accreditation in Europe

The Berlin Declaration of September 19, 2003 reads as follows: "The quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area." Ministers are committed to support the continued development of quality assurance at the institutional, national and European level. They also stress that, consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself, and emphasize that "this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework."

Considering the individual responsibility of the institutions of higher education on the one hand, and the responsibility of the overall national quality assurance systems on the other hand, the Berlin Declaration of September 19, 2003 lists both evaluation and accreditation as important tools for quality assurance. It has been agreed "that by 2005, national quality assurance systems should include the following: (...)

Evaluation of programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results,
A system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures (...)"

Today, these political concepts have been largely implemented: practically all countries in Europe have meanwhile established national quality assurance systems in the domain of higher education, and accreditation procedures today have become an important method for external quality assurance (1).

Since accreditation decisions facilitate international recognition of study programmes and degrees, and since accreditation results have become increasingly important for regulating transborder education and global trade of educational services, it can be expected that accreditation will become even more significant in the future.

3. Definition, Specific Features, and Purpose of Accreditation

The terminology of external quality assurance is anything but unified. Terms like external evaluation, review, audit and accreditation are being used at random. In the international debate on quality assurance, accreditation is increasingly defined as every formalized decision by an appropriately recognized authority as to whether an institution of higher education or a study programme conforms to

certain standards. The European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) defines accreditation as “a formal and independent decision, indicating that an institution of higher education and/or programmes offered meet certain standards.” This definition covers also some quality assessments that are described as “accreditation like procedures” (2).

Accreditation is achieved through a multi-step process (self-documentation/evaluation by unit undergoing accreditation, external assessment by independent experts, accreditation decision). The decision on possible accreditation depends on a quality assessment based on internationally accepted quality standards. The decision finishing the accreditation procedure itself is authoritative in nature, has been organized externally, and comes to a “yes” or “no” judgment whose validity is limited.

Accreditation procedures contribute to the continued quality development of the accredited academic unit: Institutions receive advice about quality improvement throughout the accreditation process, which may extend beyond the “yes/no” decision itself.

The present concept of accreditation in the area of higher education serves to assure and develop quality: it can focus on institutions, constituent parts thereof, and study programmes, in order to

ensure or facilitate recognition of “credits” and university degrees in an academic context, such as, for example, when changing from one institution of higher education to another, in order to promote mobility, inform current and prospective students on the value of certain study programmes (consumer protection), allow employers to check the value of qualifications, give institutions of higher education the opportunity to demonstrate whether public funds have been used appropriately.

4. Transnational Recognition of Accreditation Decisions

In order to facilitate international acceptance of academic institutions, degrees and studies, it will be necessary that future accreditation decisions in one country will also be recognized in another country. This goal is being realized by regional alliances as well as by the “European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education” (ECA), which was founded on a pan-European level in November 2003. Twelve founding members have signed an ad-hoc cooperation agreement which seeks to achieve “mutual recognition of accreditation decisions within member states” no later than 2007. One first step toward this goal is to draft common guidelines (Code of good practice/Annex 1) and criteria for accreditation. Below is a description of the “state of the art” in Europe regarding this issue.

4.1 Code of Good Practice

Members of the ECA network have already agreed on a joint “Code of good practice”. This “Code of good practice” guarantees comparability of accreditation procedures throughout Europe and defines internal quality assurance measures of accreditation organizations. The Code contains a series of normative standards with correlating questions and points of reference. Relying on concrete evidence, the latter will illustrate to what extent pre-defined standards should be implemented by the various accreditation organizations. All members of the ECA network must

fulfil these requirements and will have to review their procedures regularly against this code. External evaluation of the accreditation organisations is necessary and will guarantee that they fulfil the requirements of the “Code of good practice”.

4.2 Qualification frameworks and shared quality criteria and descriptors

Transnational recognition of accreditation decisions should be based upon Europe-wide consensus with regard to generic quality criteria for awarding degrees. ECA agrees that common descriptors such as the “Dublin descriptors” as worked out by the “Joint Quality Initiative” provide a basis for distinguishing between the various Bologna degrees (3). They must be calibrated with efforts to draw up national and European “qualification frameworks”.

Apart from output-oriented quality criteria for completed studies as described above, European accreditation organisations have also agreed on a series of input and process oriented quality criteria for higher education institutions and their study programmes. These are being examined through the various accreditation processes (e.g. objectives of study programmes, design of curricula, student workload, quality of teaching staff, didactic principles, mission statement of institutions, internal quality mechanisms, infrastructure, etc.).

Although the development of shared quality criteria and descriptors is an important element in the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions, such a standardization process must respect national cultures and should not hinder diversity in higher education.

4.3 Publication Format

ECA members are currently working on a standardized format for the publication of accreditation results. It serves to enhance the transparency of the quality of study programmes or institutions.

International transparency of accreditation decisions also helps build better understanding of international quality standards in higher education as well as of the comparability of university degrees. Furthermore, it allows implementation of one of the Bologna objectives – i.e. easily readable diplomas which would facilitate mobility of students.

4.4 Selection Criteria for External Experts

The selection of external experts is of key importance for any quality-oriented accreditation procedure. The transnational recognition of accreditation decisions is closely linked to the implementation of accepted selection criteria and procedures involving external experts. The ECA members agreed on the following principles:

Any decision regarding the composition of the expert team is to be based on the rules and regulations of the accreditation organisation or on pertinent legislation; the selection process must be fully transparent.

Study programmes or institutions undergoing accreditation are given the opportunity to object to the selection of experts.

The accreditation decisions are not made by the group of experts themselves, but by the accreditation organisation.

Experts must be independent and in a position to make unbiased judgments.

Depending on the objectives of the accreditation procedure, expert teams should bring together the relevant expertise.

4.5 Other forms of mutual cooperation between accreditation organisations

A survey of the legal frameworks in all ECA member countries and its implications for mutual recognition of accreditation decisions has been carried out. Based on these results all ECA members are establishing now a “road map” that outlines the steps necessary to achieve ECA goals.

In order to deepen trust among the accreditation organisations, many ECA members started “practice oriented cooperation projects” such as mutual participation in each others accreditation procedures; exchange of external experts; shared review of accreditation proposals; and, institutionalised platforms of information exchange.

Finally a working group of ECA is analyzing, discussing and looking for the different approaches in accreditation (e.g. programme versus institutional accreditation), discusses new developments in higher education/quality assurance and looks for possible innovations in accreditation.

5. Political requests

Aiming at:

- Facilitating Europe-wide recognition of “credits”, and university degrees
- Promoting mobility of students and teaching staff
- Informing the labour market on the value of degrees
- Rendering account of the effective handling of public contributions on the part of the institutions of higher education
- Protecting consumers against false information and low-quality of university degrees.

The ECA members call upon the European Ministers of Education to decide on the following in the Meeting of Bergen 2005:

1. Governments of Bologna signatory states should recognize the accreditation decisions in all member states if there exists an underlying agreement on common guidelines, practices and standards between the accreditation organisations.
2. In accordance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and its subsidiary texts (4), accreditation decisions should be implemented in the national recognition procedures of degrees and qualifications in the domain of higher education.
3. Accreditation should be an essential part of the recognition of private higher education institutions and of their programmes. It should be equally essential for mainly privately financed programmes of public higher education institutions.
4. Accreditation organisations should extend their activities both to public as well as to private post-secondary educational institutions/programmes. They should be flexible to adapt their procedures to new developments in academic teaching (e.g. accreditation of study programmes offered in the area of distance learning/E-learning).

The ECA members call upon the European accreditation organisations to respect the following issues:

1. Accreditation organisations must be independent from government, from higher education institutions as well as from business, industry and professional associations.
2. In respect to the variety of European higher education systems and traditions, accreditation processes and policies in the European Higher Education Area should be governed by a “Code of good practice” which should be binding for all accreditation organisations in Europe. The Code shall establish basic guidelines for accreditation procedures and list quality assurance measures for accreditation organisations.
3. Accreditation decisions should be published in a standardized format within Europe. This publication should provide all stakeholders with the relevant information about the quality of the unit/programme undergoing accreditation.
4. Costs and bureaucratic burden of accreditation procedures should correspond with the possibilities and means of higher education institutions.

Literature

1. Schwarz St, Westerheijden DF. Accreditation and Evaluation in the European Higher Education Area. In: Higher education dynamics (series editor Maassen P,); Kluwer ed. Enschede/Oslo, 2004
2. Quality assurance in the Nordic Higher Education-accreditation like practices. ENQA occasional paper 2, 2001
3. “Dublin descriptors”, www.jointquality.org
4. Lisbon Convention, Article VIII.1, and UNESCO/Council of Europe: recommendations on the recognition of joint degrees, June 2004