

NATIONAL ACTION PLANS FOR RECOGNITION

ESTONIA

1. Legislation

1.1. Lisbon Recognition Convention

The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region (the Lisbon Recognition Convention) was ratified by the Estonian parliament, the *Riigikogu*, on 10 February 1998. Ratification instruments are deposited at the Council of Europe.

1.2. Review of national legislation relevant to recognition

The assessment and academic recognition together with the principles, criteria and procedures in assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications are regulated by Government Regulation No. 89 "The assessment and academic recognition of foreign qualifications" (adopted on 06.04.2006). The regulation is the national overarching legal instrument in implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and it includes the nomination of competent assessment and recognition authorities, the role of the Estonian ENIC/NARIC office in assessment of foreign qualifications and information provision, general principles of assessment and academic recognition. The applicants' right to fair assessment and the recognition if no substantial differences can be proven are also included.

Government Regulation No. 89 was developed to cover most of the issues stated in the Lisbon Recognition Convention and its supplementary documents, such as Recommendation on the Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and Periods of Study (2001); Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees (2004), Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education (2001).

The official translation of the Government Regulation into English is in the agenda for 2007.

The national legislation, including the Government Regulation No. 89, relevant to recognition of foreign qualifications is planned to review regularly according to the amendments of recognition issues in the European Higher Education Area, and development of supplementary recommendations under the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

1.3. Bilateral or regional recognition agreements

An agreement among the Governments of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on the academic recognition of access and higher education qualifications in the Baltic Educational Space was signed in February 2000. The agreement follows the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and is the implementation instrument concerning the correspondence of the qualifications in these three countries and specifies the principles of information provision.

The recognition agreement among Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania is the only mutual recognition agreement in Estonia, and there are no plans to develop other mutual agreements in short term action plans.

According to the Government Regulation “The assessment and academic recognition of foreign qualifications” the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention applied to the countries not Parties of the convention.

2. Recognition practice

2.1. Criteria and procedures

According to the Government Regulation “The assessment and academic recognition of foreign qualifications” the competent recognition authorities are higher education institutions and employers depending on the purpose of recognition. The competent assessment authority is the Estonian ENIC/NARIC (Academic Recognition Information Centre), but higher education institutions or employers may also assess the foreign qualifications if they have appropriate experience in assessment of foreign qualifications and if the institution has sufficient information on the education system of the foreign country, the educational institution and the qualification structure concerned.

Most higher education institutions and employers in the public sector require the Estonian ENIC/NARIC assessment and the statement of comparison. This requirement is the initiative of higher education institutions and employers, and is included in the internal regulations of the institutions.

In the Government Regulation the assessment criteria and procedures were developed on the basis of the Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and Periods of Study (2001). The regulation also includes the time required to process recognition applications, counted from such time as all relevant information has been provided by the applicant. The time from the application to the final recognition statement is 30 days. The time limit is the same for all assessment authorities, i.e. the Estonian ENIC/NARIC, higher education institutions and employers.

2.2. Joint degrees

According to Government Regulation No. 89 the recognition of joint degrees follows the general procedures for assessment, and recognition of foreign qualifications. In the assessment and recognition of joint degrees, the degree is recognised if the joint degree is recognised by the competent authorities of all countries participating in the joint degree programme. The regulation states that the assessment and recognition of joint degrees is based on the principles of Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees (adopted on 9 June 2004 by the Committee of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region).

According to the present national legislation Estonian higher education institutions may create joint programmes and award joint diplomas, but because the existing legislation, including the Statute and Form of Diploma and Academic Record (Government regulation, 2002) joint degrees are not officially recognised by the state.

The working group of stakeholders with the mandate for legislative amendments concerning joint degrees and programmes was established by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research at the beginning of 2006. One of the tasks of the working group in 2006 was to analyse the practice of other countries in regulating the activities in connection with joint degrees and programmes. The working group will present the recommendation for amendments of the legislation concerning joint degrees and programmes to the Government by March 2007. The outcome of the work will lead to legislative changes that will make it possible to issue joint diplomas as a single document for Estonian higher education institutions. Issuing of joint diplomas has to follow the national regulations for the designation of degrees.

2.3. Overview of institutional practice

Higher education institutions and other competent recognition authorities have regular contacts with the Estonian ENIC/NARIC concerning the issues related to the Lisbon Recognition Convention and to national legislation on the recognition of foreign qualifications. Every year the Estonian ENIC/NARIC organises training courses on the assessment and recognition of qualifications. The Estonian ENIC/NARIC staff members have individual contacts and meetings with higher education institutions. In 1999 the national ENIC electronic list was established. Through the electronic list the information concerning the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, subsidiary texts and national legal acts is shared.

The text of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and other international and national legal instruments are available on the Estonian ENIC/NARIC website.

A survey about the assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications by the universities was conducted by the Estonian ENIC/NARIC in November 2006. The next survey is planned for 2008. The Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for inspecting higher education institutions and for assessing whether the institutions' activities comply with the national legislation. If the higher education institution is shown consistently not to apply the relevant national act or regulation, a prescription will be prepared by the Department of Inspection at the Ministry of Education and Research.

The Estonian ENIC/NARIC office is not authorised to inspect higher education institutions and other competent recognition authorities, but if the activities do not consider the Convention and/or relevant national legal acts the office may inform the Ministry of Education and Research of the violations.

The holder of a foreign qualification has the right to appeal if the recognition of the qualification by the competent recognition authority does not correspond to the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the related national legal instruments.

2.4. Transparency tools for recognition

ECTS

Estonia plans to undertake extensive changes for implementing the ECTS system. Based on legislative amendments from 19 November 2006 to University Act the transfer to ECTS credit point system will be completed by 2009/2010 academic year. The rearrangement of study programmes using the learning outcomes approach is the responsibility of higher education

institutions and takes place from 2006 to 2009. The reform of study programmes is supported and guided at the national level.

For designing the necessary legislative changes a national working group was established by the Ministry of Education and Research. The results are due in March 2007.

Diploma Supplement

By a regulation of the Government of the Republic of Estonia the Statute and Form of Diploma and Academic Record (Diploma Supplement) adopted in March 2003 it is the obligation of all higher education institutions to issue a Diploma Supplement in English from 1 January 2004. With regards to the regulation pertaining to both the Estonian and English document the format of the Diploma Supplement (*akadeemiline õiend* in Estonian) elaborated by the European Commission, Council of Europe and UNESCO/CEPES has been complied with.

The Diploma Supplement in English and *akadeemiline õiend* (the Diploma Supplement in Estonian) are automatically issued to each graduate of professional higher education, master's-level and doctoral-level programmes. The graduates who are awarded a bachelor's degree will receive the Diploma Supplement (*akadeemiline õiend*) in Estonian automatically, and the Diploma Supplement in English upon request only.

The Diploma Supplement is issued free of charge.

2.5. Borderless/transnational education

According to Government Regulation No.89 in the assessment and recognition of the qualifications awarded through the borderless/transnational education, the same principles and criteria are used as in the assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications. The Regulation states that in addition to the general principles and criteria the guidelines of the Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education (2001) are taken into account.

3. Information provision

3.1. Provision of information on recognition

The Estonian ENIC/NARIC is responsible for providing information on foreign education systems and qualifications; the recognition and comparison of qualifications; international and national legal acts concerning the regulation on recognition of qualifications. The office provides information to foreign countries about the Estonian education system and qualifications in order to simplify the assessment and recognition of Estonian qualifications abroad.

The Government Regulation "The assessment and academic recognition of foreign qualifications" (2006) is the main instrument in the regulation of recognition criteria and procedures. The text of the regulation is published on the official website of the national legal acts, as well as on the website of the Estonian ENIC/NARIC.

The new website of the Estonian ENIC/NARIC was created during August-November 2006 and will be uploaded in December 2006. The website includes information on the Estonian education system, lists of recognised higher education institutions in Estonia, criteria and

procedures of the assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications, texts of international and national legal acts related to academic and professional recognition, the activities within the Bologna process, and other relevant information on academic and professional recognition. The management of the website is authorised by the Estonian ENIC/NARIC and its content will be updated regularly.

The information fact sheets are prepared by the Estonian ENIC/NARIC and will be available both electronically and in paper format in December 2006. These fact sheets are prepared taking into account the recommendation of the document “Information Fact Sheets for ENIC/NARIC Centres” prepared by the Working Party on Information Strategy to the ENIC and NARIC Networks (2004).

New legal documents or amendments to national legal acts related to recognition are publicised through the national ENIC electronic list. If necessary, national information seminars on new legal instruments or amendments are organised.

3.2. Information package for applicants

The Estonian ENIC/NARIC has published standardised information on the procedures and criteria for the assessment of foreign qualifications concerning higher education. The document “General procedures and criteria for the evaluation of foreign higher education qualifications and qualifications giving access to higher education” is a simplified version of Government Regulation No 89 and is automatically given to all persons applying for assessment directly in the Estonian ENIC/NARIC office. The document includes the following information:

- 1) who may apply
- 2) purpose of assessment
- 3) required documents
- 4) assessment procedure
- 5) object of the assessment
- 6) fees
- 7) time for processing
- 8) outcome of the assessment
- 9) status of assessment
- 10) appealing the assessment
- 11) final clauses
- 12) contact data

If the holder of a foreign qualification is an Estonian citizen, the applicant receives the full text of Government Regulation No 89. After the text of the regulation is officially translated into English in 2007, the non-Estonian native applicants will receive the text of the regulation as well.

The Estonian ENIC/NARIC has published information on Estonian higher education system. The information is available on the website of the office. A paper copy of the information on the higher education system is given to the applicant upon request only.

The criteria and procedures of assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications are regulated at national level. The higher education institutions as competent recognition authorities have to follow the standard criteria and procedures, but there is no national level

regulation on standardised information packages. The general principles of recognition of foreign qualifications are available in the admission regulations of the higher education institutions (internal instrument) and in the university catalogues.

According to the results of a survey the higher education institutions give all applicants an acknowledgement of the receipt of their application. Together with the acknowledgement some of the higher education institutions inform the applicant of the system of assessment and recognition by mail, e-mail or orally.

Most higher education institutions require the assessment of all foreign qualifications by the Estonian ENIC/NARIC. Higher education institutions inform the applicant in written form that the foreign qualification is assessed by the Estonian ENIC/NARIC and there is a reference to the national level standard criteria and procedure on the Estonian ENIC/NARIC website.

4. Structures

4.1. National information centre

The Estonian ENIC/NARIC was established as a structural unit of the Archimedes Foundation in 1997 by the Government of the Republic of Estonia. The office is functioning in accordance with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and its subsidiary instruments. The main tasks and activities of the Estonian ENIC/NARIC are specified in the bilateral agreement between the Ministry of Education and Research and the Archimedes Foundation, signed on 20 November 2002. The main tasks and activities, resources and expertise of the Estonian ENIC/NARIC correspond to the guidelines expressed in the Joint ENIC/NARIC Charter of Activities and Services.

The main tasks of the office are: assessing foreign access and higher education qualifications; determining the correspondence of qualifications and providing information on education systems and recognition issues. Information about regulated professions, competent recognition authorities and application procedures is also provided by the Estonian ENIC/NARIC which is the contact point for professional recognition.

The Estonian ENIC/NARIC evaluates foreign access and higher education qualifications and periods of study for the purpose of further study and the labour market (non-regulated professions). The Estonian ENIC/NARIC statement is a recommendation, an advisory instrument to the competent recognition authorities. There are no plans to change the status of the Estonian ENIC/NARIC evaluation statements.

The Estonian ENIC/NARIC has 3.75 full time equivalent staff positions. The Estonian ENIC/NARIC shares the services of the general secretariat, the accounting department and the IT manager with the other departments and offices of the Archimedes Foundation.

All staff members of the Estonian ENIC/NARIC hold at least master's level qualifications. The staff members upgrade their qualifications by participating in national and international training courses and seminars.

The staff members are often invited to international and national seminars, conferences and training courses as speakers or trainers. Every year since 2004, the Estonian ENIC/NARIC in

cooperation with partners from other countries or under the auspices of an international organisation, has organised at least one international training course on recognition issues, Bologna process or assessment of foreign qualifications. It is planned that every year there are 1 to 3 national level training courses to the higher education institutions and other competent recognition authorities.

The staff members are often invited to participate in the working parties established by the Ministry of Education and Research. The Estonian ENIC/NARIC is a member of the European Union Network NARIC and the Council of Europe/UNESCO Network ENIC.

4.2. Cooperation recognition/quality assurance bodies

Both, the Estonian ENIC/NARIC and the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre (EHEAC) are structural units of the Archimedes Foundation. The main field of cooperation between these two bodies is information exchange. All outcomes of quality assessment are available to the Estonian ENIC/NARIC.

The heads of these two institutions meet regularly to discuss issues of mutual interest, quality assessment and assurance.

The Estonian ENIC/NARIC publications on the Estonian higher education system and degree structure are available to foreign experts in the higher education accreditation process. During the accreditation of higher education programmes the qualifications levels of the academic staff are also assessed. The Estonian ENIC/NARIC is an advisory body for the EHEAC on foreign qualifications.

The relevant information about quality assessment and activities of foreign quality assurance bodies is received through the partner ENIC or ENIC/NARC offices abroad. There are no direct contacts between the Estonian ENIC/NARIC and European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).