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Cross national recognition of diplomas : the path to transparency and harmonisation?

*Cécile Deer, SKOPE
University of Oxford*

Summary

This paper provides a brief overview of the current effects of evaluative processes on European higher education systems. Structural change and growth in accountability are being driven internally by the need for political and economic justification but also externally by ever-greater academic mobility and increasing European and international comparisons. The Bologna Process and creation of a European higher education space are seen as reflecting the need to create trans-national equivalences between qualifications which will satisfy the diversity of stakeholders involved. It is suggested that there is scope for institutions to consider how they may benefit from the development of forms of European accreditation.

The rise of national evaluation processes

Evaluation of the core higher education (HE) activities of teaching and research rose to prominence in national HE agendas in Europe during the 1980s (Craft 1992). This coincided with sharp rises in student numbers, diminishing unit costs of teaching and decreasing budgets for public research in real terms. In their 'hard' form, as has been the case in the UK, evaluation processes have been introduced by central government

together with reforms of budget allocation and performance criteria measurements - to force external accountability on largely autonomous higher education institutions (Research Assessment Exercise, Teaching Quality Assessment, performance indicators, peer reviews...). In their 'softer' form, as has been the case in France, they have been used together with other political and administrative reforms to give more autonomy to higher education institutions so as to make them more 'self-aware' as self-standing, semi-autonomous organisations (self-evaluation, mission statements, budget allocation...)(OECD 2001).

In this area, the parallel rise in the influence of international comparisons of higher education systems and institutions and, in particular, the work and publications of the UNESCO¹ and OECD² (not to mention the controversial world ranking of institutions published by the University of Shanghai) should not be overlooked, since they have contributed to the structuring of national and European debates on higher education, its economic and social role and the measurement of its performance.

¹ Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications

² OECD (1998 - 2007) Education at a Glance. Paris: OECD. OECD (2007) Higher Education and regions: globally competitive, locally engaged. Paris : OECD

Cross-national mobilities in the European context

In parallel to these evolutions, various initiatives have been set up within the European Union in order to encourage and support the mobility of academic staff (Tempus 1990) and students (Erasmus 1987, Socrates 1995). Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, three Tempus programmes have helped fund joint projects in the areas of curriculum development and innovation, teacher training, university management and structural reforms in higher education with special emphasis on the mobility of academic and administrative staff from higher education institutions from the EU and partner countries.

The European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, better known as the Erasmus project, which became part of the Socrates project in 1995, was introduced by the European Commission to increase student mobility in the European Community, and was later developed to include the European Economic Area and countries which were candidates for accession. The increased mobility of students and staff has highlighted the wide-ranging differences that have existed and still exist among the various European national systems of higher education and even among institutions themselves (e.g. open or selective access, organisation of the academic year, criteria for level of study, number of contact hours, modes of teaching and methods of assessment, employment contracts and status of academic staff and researchers).

Despite calls from the academic community for the recognition of excellence through diversity, political decision-makers have been quick to point out that these differences have impeded the mobility of students and staff, in particular as they have complicated the mutual recognition and subsequent validation of periods of study and academic work abroad. It was easy to conclude that greater harmonisation of practice should be encouraged to lower these barriers to academic mobility in the European Union.

Harmonisation for mobility and comparability

A major European initiative in this area, although not one originating from the European Commission, has been the Bologna Process, the latest summit of which

took place in London in June 2007. The length of time spent studying has been a main criterium for 'HE diploma comparability' with an emphasis placed on 3-year (Bachelor), 5-year (Master) and 8-year (Doctorate) periods for the organisation of higher education studies. The entire French higher education landscape has very recently been reorganised by State fiat according to this framework.

The German, Italian and Dutch systems of higher education have all undergone reforms in line with agreed guidelines ratified during the successive summits of signatory countries that have punctuated the Bologna process since its inception in 1999. The British higher education sector and its Europe Unit, a sector-wide body, is keeping a close watch on what is happening in this area and in Continental Europe in order to assess the threats and opportunities for British higher education and influence the process³.

Among other things, the Bologna Process aims to increase the mobility of students among its signatory countries by creating a 'European space of higher education' (Deer 2006). There are several aspects to this harmonising process but an increasingly important one has been to foster trust and transparency via the comparability of diplomas, that is to say their cross-national 'portability' and even comparability of periods of study. Two main initiatives have represented concrete steps in this direction: the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and, more recently, the Diploma Supplement (2005). As part of Erasmus (1989), the European Credit Transfer System assigned credits to course components according to student workloads per learning outcomes and acquired competences.

As a credit accumulation system, it fits into the objectives of the Bologna Process for the European Higher Education Area. The Diploma Supplement introduced in 2005 is a document issued to students by higher education institutions (HEIs) on the successful completion of a higher education qualification that:

'describes the qualification they have received in a standard format that is designed to be easily understood and straightforward to compare. The reader (credential evaluator, admissions officer, academic, employer, citizen, etc.) should be able to make informed and accurate judgements about the

³ <http://www.europeunit.ac.uk/home/index.cfm>, accessed Oct. 2007

qualification. The Supplement contains information on the nature, level, context, content and status of the studies that were undertaken and successfully completed by the student. In addition, it places the qualification in the context of the structure of the higher education system within which it was issued' (UK HE Europe Unit 2006).

The comparability debate : what kind of transparency?

But the more comparable HE diplomas and periods of study have become 'on paper', the more this has raised the issue of genuine comparability of what is being taught and learnt in the various HE systems of the signatory countries during similar periods of study at similar HE levels. This brings back 'evaluation' as a harmonising principle of quality assurance but based on a qualitative rather than quantitative dimension. In this context, actual teaching processes and learning outcomes would need to be looked into in more detail, which is a potentially more 'intrusive' form of evaluation and also a more expensive one. A report recently published by the Higher Education Policy Unit, which underlines the varying intensity of higher education studies in different countries, illustrates how difficult, expensive and contentious such an in-depth approach would be (Sastry and Bekhradnia 2007).

The purpose and priorities of any 'evaluation' processes in and for higher education whether at national or at European level also need to be considered. A number of aims can be and have been identified, principally :

- to inform the political authorities: use of public money (financial accountability), equal opportunity and equity (social accountability);
- to inform the students (nationally and internationally) and their parents: Quality Assurance (benchmarking), performance indicators;
- to inform the higher education sector and institutions (about themselves) and about other institutions: internal self-evaluation, best practice, harmonisation, credit transfer and accumulation.

If we accept that some sort of harmonisation and mutual recognition is a desirable goal in order to foster academic mobility in Europe, any 'hard' form of

qualitative evaluation at European level, even if it were feasible, would not be the most efficient way to achieve greater transparency for the European higher education stakeholders, whether economically, politically or academically. A more acceptable alternative to this could be the development of European models of accreditation in various study areas, either via mutual recognition of accreditations⁴ or along the line of the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) for management and business administration. There has been a small-scale attempt at developing such a European accreditation in engineering for industry. The modalities of implementation have been the object of a pilot project funded by the European Union (involving the QAA). The next stage is to try to refine and develop the idea by involving a larger number of voluntary partners.

The advantage of developing European accreditations, certifications or even labels is that higher education institutions or departments are free to apply and join if and when they are ready to do so. They can assess the pros and the cons of joining a network and adhering to conditions which should provide both benchmarks and guidelines for good practice, trust and mutual recognition. Such accreditations could be delivered by independent agencies working either in competition with each other, if a market model were to be preferred, or in partnership with the European authorities if a political model were to be favoured. Such European labels attached to higher education institutions or to certain programmes within them could become increasingly worthwhile in the context of global higher education competition as they can give greater visibility to individual European institutions and also provide alternatives to other non-European accreditation arrangements.

⁴ European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA)

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