United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Strasbourg/Paris 18 November 2015
DGII/EDU/HE (2016) 05
ED-2015/UNESCO/LRC
Original: English

THE COMMITTEE OF THE CONVENTION ON THE RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS CONCERNING HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE EUROPEAN REGION

Seventh session
29 February 2016, 9:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m.
UNESCO House
Paris

REVISED RECOMMENDATION ON THE RECOGNITION OF JOINT DEGREES

Directorate General II (Directorate of Democratic Citizenship and Participation – Education Policy and Rights Division) of the Council of Europe and the UNESCO Division for Policies and Lifelong Learning Systems

Distribution: LRC Committee

Revised Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees

(Adopted by the Committee of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region on 29 February 2016 at its Seventh meeting in Paris, France)

Preamble

The Committee of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region,

Considering that the aim of the Council of Europe and UNESCO is to achieve greater unity between their members, and that this aim can be pursued notably by undertaking common action in cultural matters and supporting reforms in higher education;

Having regard to the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (CETS No. 165, hereafter "the Lisbon Recognition Convention");

Having regard to the European Cultural Convention (ETS No. 18);

Having regard to the Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education in Bologna on 19 June 1999 (Bologna Declaration), and the establishment of the European Higher Education Area, as well as to the subsequent communiqués of the ministerial conferences within the Bologna Process;

Having regard to the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes adopted by the ministers at the Bologna Ministerial Conference in Yerevan in 2015;

Having regard to the Diploma Supplement which facilitates the recognition of joint degrees, developed jointly by the European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNESCO;

Having regard to the subsidiary texts adopted under the Lisbon Recognition Convention: the Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education, the Revised Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and the Recommendation on the Use of Qualifications Frameworks in the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications;

Having regard to the development of credit systems, in particular the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and its Users' Guide;

Having regard to the practical action in favour of improving the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education carried out by the Council of Europe/UNESCO European Network of National Information Centres (ENIC) on academic recognition and mobility;

Having regard to the European Area of Recognition (EAR) manual which offers practical implementation guidelines on the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention;

Considering that the Council of Europe and UNESCO have always encouraged academic mobility as a means for better understanding various cultures and languages, and without any form of discrimination;

Considering that studying or working in a foreign country is likely to contribute to an individual's personal, cultural and academic enrichment, as well as to improving their career prospects;

Considering that the recognition of qualifications is an essential precondition for both academic and professional mobility;

Considering that qualifications frameworks should be used to facilitate the assessment of foreign qualifications by the competent recognition authorities;

Convinced that the joint development of study programmes between higher education institutions in different higher education systems and the award of joint degrees contribute to academic and professional mobility, and to the further development within and between the regions of the world;

Convinced that the improved recognition of joint degrees will contribute to developing the European dimension of higher education and entail important benefits for individuals, as well as for European society as a whole;

Aware that recognition of qualifications originating in joint arrangements is still encountering difficulties of a legal and practical nature;

Conscious of the need to facilitate the recognition of joint degrees;

Recommends that governments of States Parties to the Lisbon Recognition Convention:

i. take into account, in the establishment of their recognition policies, the principles set out in the appendix hereto, which forms part of this Recommendation;

ii. draw these principles to the attention of the competent bodies concerned, so that they can be considered and taken into account;

iii. review national legislation with a view to removing any legal obstacles to the recognition of joint degrees and/or introducing transparent legal provisions that would facilitate such recognition;

iv. ensure that this Recommendation is distributed as widely as possible among all stakeholders concerned with the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education,

Invites the Secretary General of the Council of Europe and the Director-General of UNESCO, as appropriate, to transmit this Recommendation to the governments of those States which were invited to the diplomatic conference entrusted with the adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, but which have not become parties to that convention.

Appendix to the Revised Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees

General considerations

The present Recommendation is adopted within the framework of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and applies to the parties to this convention. The principles and practices described in this Recommendation can, however, be applied equally well to the recognition of qualifications in countries other than those party to the Lisbon Recognition Convention or to qualifications issued between or among national or subnational education systems (hereinafter referred to as "national").

The purpose of the present Recommendation is to improve the recognition of joint degrees that are considered as belonging to education systems of the States Parties to the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Moreover, the Recommendation may also apply to cases when part of a study programme has been completed in an education system of a country not party to the convention.

While the scope of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, as well as of subsidiary texts adopted under the provisions of Article X.2.5 of the convention, concern the recognition of qualifications in countries other than that in which they have been earned, the provisions of the present Recommendation may be applied equally well, *mutatis mutandis*, to joint degrees issued by two or more institutions belonging to the same national higher education system.

Definitions

The terms defined in the Lisbon Recognition Convention are used in the same sense in the present Recommendation, and reference is made to the definition of these terms in Section I of the convention.

For the purpose of this Recommendation a joint degree is understood as referring to a higher education qualification awarded jointly by at least two higher education institutions, on the basis of a joint programme. A joint degree is issued on a single document.

A joint programme refers to a study programme developed, co-ordinated and provided jointly by at least two higher education institutions and leading to the awarding of a joint degree.

General principles

Holders of joint degrees should have adequate access, upon request, to a fair assessment of their qualifications.

In assessment of joint degrees the competent recognition authorities should follow the same assessment procedure and criteria as stipulated in the provisions of the Revised Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications (adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee in 2010).

The competent recognition authorities should recognise joint degrees unless substantial difference can be shown between the joint degree for which recognition is sought and the comparable qualification within their own national higher education system. Joint degrees

should be treated in the same way as any other qualifications from the higher education systems to which they belong.

Legislation

Governments of States Parties to the Lisbon Recognition Convention should, where appropriate, review their legislation with a view to removing any legal obstacles to the recognition of joint degrees and introduce transparent provisions that would facilitate such recognition.

National authorities should establish legal provisions enabling higher education institutions to offer joint programmes and award joint degrees. Joint degrees should be awarded in accordance with national legal provisions.

Quality assurance and recognition

The competent recognition authorities should consider recognising joint degrees, which are quality assured in a single cross-border process and by a quality assurance agency, provided that the outcomes are officially recognised in the countries to which the providing institutions belong.

In the absence of a single cross-border quality assurance process, the competent recognition authorities may make the recognition of joint degrees conditional on all parts of the study programme leading to the degree and/or the institutions providing the programme being subject to transparent quality assurance mechanisms in line with the rules and legislation of the countries to which the providing institutions belong, as well as to European guiding principles.

Governments of States Parties to the Lisbon Recognition Convention should establish legal provisions concerning quality assurance of joint programmes.

Information

Higher education institutions awarding joint degrees should make available the information related to their joint programmes and joint degrees.

As appropriate, in order to facilitate the recognition of joint degrees, graduates should be provided with a diploma supplement or some other comparable document, and study programmes leading to joint degrees should make use of the ECTS or other credit systems, basing the award of credits on learning outcomes.

A diploma supplement issued with a joint degree should clearly describe all parts of the degree, and it should clearly indicate at which institutions and/or in which study programmes the different parts of the degree have been earned.

EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM TO THE REVISED RECOMMENDATION ON THE RECOGNITION OF JOINT DEGREES

Introduction

The Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education (hereinafter referred to as "the Lisbon Recognition Convention") is the main international legal text concerning the recognition of qualifications in the European region. The convention was adopted on 11 April 1997 and entered into force on 1 February 1999.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention is also one of the key standards for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the main goals of which include improving the mobility of students, staff and graduates, facilitating the recognition of qualifications and increasing the transparency of higher education systems in Europe.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention has a double function. In legal terms, it is a treaty between States, and as such it is valid as a legal standard for the recognition of qualifications belonging to the higher education systems of the parties to the convention as well as the qualifications covered by its subsidiary texts. In a broader sense, the convention also serves as a guide to good practice, and in this sense its provisions may, *mutatis mutandis*, be applied to all higher education qualifications, regardless of their origin. The convention is in fact used as a standard well beyond its strictly legal function.

In Article X.2.5, the convention foresees that the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee may adopt subsidiary texts to the convention. The convention itself, in a legal sense, only covers qualifications belonging to the education systems of parties. But the importance of qualifications not belonging to any national or subnational (hereinafter referred to as "national") education system has increased vastly in importance since the convention was adopted. There has been a need to adopt subsidiary texts concerning qualifications that may or may not be a part of national education systems. The development of joint degrees and joint programmes has increased emphasis on quality assurance of joint programmes and recognition of joint degrees.

Joint degrees

The increased importance of joint degrees is part of the overall development of qualifications often not formally recognised as belonging to any – or any single – national education system.

This problem of typology should, however, not overshadow the considerable potential of joint degrees as an excellent means of stimulating mobility, co-operation between higher education institutions and the internationalisation of higher education.

The purpose of the present recommendation is to help ensure fair recognition for qualifications that have considerable potential, but that are in a legal sense not fully covered by the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

Preamble

The preamble builds on the existing legal framework for the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education, as elaborated by the Council of Europe and UNESCO. It places the recommendation in the context of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the EHEA and points to the main developments that call for improved provisions for the recognition of joint degrees.

Regarding the EHEA, the recommendation recalls references to joint degrees and joint programmes in Bologna Process ministerial communiqués. In the communiqués adopted in 2001 (Prague Communiqué), 2003 (Berlin Communiqué), 2005 (Bergen Communiqué) and 2007 (London Communiqué), the ministers stress the importance of the European dimension of higher education and graduate employability, and call for an increase in the development of joint programmes at first, second and third cycles offered in partnership by institutions from different countries and leading to recognised joint degrees. The ministers also stress the importance of removing legal obstacles to the establishment and recognition of joint degrees, as well as of actively support quality assurance of joint programmes.

Regarding the EHEA, the recommendation also recalls references to joint degrees and joint programmes in other more recent communiqués, including:

The Leuven/Louvain la Neuve Communiqué in 2009:

> "Within each of the three cycles, opportunities for mobility shall be created in the structure of degree programmes. Joint degrees and programmes as well as mobility windows shall become more common practice."

The Bucharest Communiqué in 2012:

> "We encourage higher education institutions to further develop joint programmes and degrees as part of a wider EHEA approach. We will examine national rules and practices relating to joint programmes and degrees as a way to dismantle obstacles to co-operation and mobility embedded in national contexts."

The Yerevan Communiqué in 2015:

> "A common degree structure and credit system, common quality assurance standards and guidelines, co-operation for mobility and joint programmes and degrees are the foundations of the EHEA."

Definitions

This part of the recommendation seeks to define "joint degree" as a generic term. There is no common definition for a joint degree in use today, whether explicitly or implicitly, but a joint degree will often be characterised by the following:

- the programmes are developed jointly by at least two higher education institutions;
- students from each participating institution take part in the study programme at other institutions (but they do not necessary study at all co-operating institutions);

- students' stay at the participating institutions should constitute a substantial part of the programme;
- periods of study and examinations passed at the partner institutions are recognised fully and automatically;
- the partner institutions work out the study programme jointly and co-operate on admission and examinations;
- after completing the study programme, students are awarded a joint degree in the form of a single (joint) document.

The main kinds of joint degrees may be illustrated by a number of examples, which may include very different levels of actual co-operation in study programme development and mobility of staff and students.

The Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees, adopted in 2004, provides different definitions of a joint degree. Current developments and concepts are focused on the principle that a joint degree is a joint qualification awarded jointly by the partners and issued jointly as a single document.

Therefore, the main scope of this recommendation is to focus on the recognition of joint degrees, awarded jointly and issued as a single document. The term "joint degree" is used as the established term for the qualification covered by the present recommendation. The term "document" designates the document attesting the qualification.

This subsidiary text concerns the recognition of joint degrees as the title clearly states. However, joint programmes may also lead to the award of double or multiple degrees. Double or multiple degrees are issued as single documents in a national context in each participating country, and should be recognised according to the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the subsidiary text on the recommendations on criteria and procedures for the assessment of foreign qualifications when the programme is offered in accordance with national legislation in each participating country. However, provisions of the subsidiary text may also apply to the assessment and recognition of double or multiple degrees, in terms of general principles, legislation, quality assurance and information provision.

While qualifications arising from transnational arrangements often differ substantially from national qualifications, in the case of joint degrees each of the components normally belongs to a national system. It is the combination of these elements that leads the competent recognition authorities (and others) consider joint degrees either as belonging to more than one national education system or not fully belonging to any single national system.

General principles

This part of the recommendation outlines the main principles on which it builds. These conform to the main principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (see in particular Articles IV.1, V.1 and VI.1 of the convention).

The point is also made that joint degrees should be recognised in the same way as any other qualification from the education system from which they originate. It often seems more difficult to obtain recognition of a joint degree than of a national qualification. This is in contradiction with the overall policy goal of fostering mobility and institutional and international co-operation.

It should further be kept in mind that while recognition of all parts of the study programmes leading to a joint degree is automatic among the partner institutions, such recognition is not necessarily granted outside this consortium.

In the framework of this recommendation, in the countries where institutions provide a part of the study programme, recognition of a joint degree may be easier than recognition of a foreign qualification, as the study programme leading to the degree has been developed jointly by one or more institutions belonging to the higher education system of the country in which recognition is sought. A recognised institution in the country in which recognition is sought will therefore already have assessed the profile, level, workload, learning outcomes and quality of the foreign components of the joint degree.

The point is also made that the assessment criteria and procedures stipulated in the Revised Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications (2010) apply also to the assessment of joint degrees. It is important in particular that the holders of a joint degree are regarded as equals with holders of foreign qualifications, and that there are no discriminative differences made or additional administrative obstacles foreseen. Articles IV, V and VI of the Revised Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications are also relevant in the assessment of joint degrees.

Article IV of the revised recommendation applies to the assessment procedure of joint degrees in terms of:

- information to the applicant;
- information on the qualification for which recognition is sought;
- fees;
- translation;
- verification of the authenticity of the document.

Article V of the revised recommendation applies to the assessment criteria of joint degrees in terms of:

- status of the institution(s);
- assessment of individual qualifications.

Article VI of the revised recommendation applies to the outcome of the assessment of a foreign qualification. It should also apply to the outcome of the assessment of a joint degree.

In relation to the subsidiary text Recommendation on the Use of Qualifications Frameworks in the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications, national qualification authorities should guarantee a joint degree wherever referenced in their own national qualifications frameworks. This must correspond to the same level on an overarching qualifications framework, if relevant.

Legislation

It is still often legally difficult in many countries to issue a single document in the name of two or more institutions from different higher education systems.

It is not uncommon for higher education institutions to have rules requiring that at least one half of the credits toward any given degree be taken at the institution in question for the degree to be issued by that institution. If a student seeks a joint degree from more than two institutions practising this rule, the results are predictable. This is an obvious case where rules and regulations prevent a laudable initiative, but legislation may also impede fair recognition in less obvious ways.

In some countries only national standard diplomas can be issued, so some institutions are unable to issue a joint document with a foreign partner institution.

Finally, it should be noted that national legislation does not specifically prevent joint degrees from being established or recognised. In many cases, an absence of legal provision positively recognising the concept of joint degrees may in itself constitute an impediment to the recognition of such qualifications. Any review of national legislation should therefore consider positive provision for the recognition of joint degrees rather than just abolishing any explicit impediments to such recognition.

Quality assurance and recognition

The increased importance of quality assurance and the acceptance of close links between quality assurance and recognition of institutions and study programmes on the one hand and individual qualifications on the other hand is one of the major developments since the adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 1997.

Joint programmes have been challenged by the fact that legislation in the countries of the providing institutions requires that the same programme be subject to quality assurance in all countries. The consequence is that a joint programme of a larger consortium may constantly be in the process of being quality assured in the different countries. In the European region more and more countries have adopted legal provisions allowing cross-border quality assurance of national programmes. This legal development is based on agreed common standards and guidelines on quality assurance. The recognition of joint degrees that are quality assured in one single cross-border process by one single quality assurance agency should be considered provided that the quality assessment is recognised in the respective participating countries.

The recommendation indicates that where a part of the study programme giving rise to a joint degree has not been the subject of quality assurance mechanisms or is not considered as belonging to the education system of one or more parties to the Lisbon Recognition Convention, this may be a valid reason not to recognise the joint degree. In such cases, recognition authorities should, however, consider whether partial recognition may be granted, in keeping with the provisions of the Revised Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications.

Information

Information on education systems/qualifications frameworks (where applicable) as well as on individual institutions, study programmes and qualifications is one of the key challenges faced by those working with the recognition of qualifications.

Information about joint programmes and joint degrees should be as easily available as information on any other study programme or national qualification. It is important and relevant for the competent recognition authorities that information provided by the national authorities and higher education institutions is available for students, the competent recognition authorities and other stakeholders, and that the information is accurate, adequate, relevant and reliable.

Higher education institutions are strongly encouraged to issue a Diploma Supplement or other comparable document to facilitate the assessment of the joint degree concerned. The Diploma Supplement is an important instrument that helps to facilitate the recognition of qualifications. In the case of joint degrees, it is particularly important that a Diploma Supplement clearly describing the different components of the study programme and education systems within which they have been earned be issued with the degree.

For better transparency it is recommended that a Diploma Supplement issued with a joint degree include the following information:

- the programme details include information about the individual study pathway of the graduate, which includes the programme components (with full name, credits and grades), learning outcomes and the institution that offered that part of the joint programme;

- if there are other partners in the joint programme consortium which are not involved in awarding the joint degree, their full name, status and role in the programme is included;

- the Diploma Supplement should contain information about the co-ordinating institution or a contact point for further information about the joint programme;

- if the joint programme has been quality assured, reference to the responsible quality assurance agency should be included;

- the information on the higher education system should at least include the systems from which the graduate has obtained a joint degree.