

The recognition, evaluation and accreditation of European Postgraduate Programmes.

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Introduction

The validation of awards and courses within higher education has traditionally, and to a great extent, continues to be a national issue, with each country using its own protocol for determining standards and academic levels, and validating courses according to its nationally recognised and agreed system. Institutions in some countries, however, are able to validate courses which are delivered in an institution in another country. This practice has led to some useful collaborative arrangements in developing European postgraduate programmes for the social professions, particularly in countries where education for social professionals takes place outside of the university system, for example, in The Netherlands. (Lawrence 1999)

Largely as a result of such collaboration, facilitated by the Erasmus programme, there is now a proliferation of courses for social professionals, which have 'European' in their title or as a major component of the course content. What, then, makes a programme 'European'? Whilst there is no agreed definition, various developments in curricula for the social professions took place which have been grouped into three main types:

- X 'Europeanising' existing courses by including some additional comparative material;
- X creation of new, self contained 'European' modules to add to an existing programme;
- X creation of whole courses with a 'European' focus, mainly at post-qualifying or postgraduate level.

(Lorenz 1998:140)

The MA in Comparative European Social Studies (MACCESS), is a one year full-time Masters Degree, delivered in Maastricht and validated by the University of North London. The students (between twenty and thirty each year) and lecturers (approximately sixty-five each year) are drawn largely (but not exclusively) from a network of thirty-two institutions from nineteen countries, which grew from an Erasmus project. The programme is currently in its sixth year. (Lawrence & Reverda 1998).

In the MACESS programme, the following components can be identified as being European dimensions:

- X MACESS has official recognition from the Council of Europe
- X the lecturers are drawn from wider Europe
- X the students are drawn from wider Europe
- X students study in 2 or 3 countries (taught in Maastricht, research in 3rd country, research in home country)
- X the programme is delivered in one European state and validated by another European state
- X the course demands European content in each module and in the dissertation
- X the course content in each module is based on comparative and/or European material

Recognition: the pragmatic way

The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), is a method of giving credit for time spent studying based largely upon counting study hours- it is still being developed at undergraduate level through the Socrates programme on an institutional basis. More work needs to be carried out at postgraduate level to make it a useful measure or tool, although it should be acknowledged, that in its current form, the main focus of ECTS is to interpret study abroad into the home institute's own (national) curriculum. It does little to help in the recognition of complete programmes.

As a Master of Arts Degree, MACESS is recognised within the UK, with appropriate standing in an international context. For some MACESS graduates this has been sufficient, when presenting the award in applying for employment, or for other academic courses. Some students, though, have encountered difficulties in gaining recognition for their qualification. This has highlighted the tension between national systems of recognition and such supranational programmes, which has created difficulties for some MACESS graduates. (Lawrence, S. and Reverda, N. 1998) A pragmatic approach has therefore been taken with regard to the status of the award, and, drawing on the experience of delivering MACESS over a five-year period, the recognition can be characterised as having been operated at three levels:

- X on an *individual* basis- this is where a graduate has to present prescribed information to a national agency, which then decides upon the equivalence of the award. MACESS has been recognised on such an individual level in eg, Denmark, The Netherlands.
- X on an *institutional* level - where an institution recognises the award in respect of entrance

to another programme. MACCESS has been recognised in this way particularly because of ECTS, where the system is operational within the fifteen countries of the European Union. X on a *national* basis, where the award will be recognised by any institution or employer within that particular state. MACCESS has such recognition in the UK and Germany, and is currently being assessed for national recognition in Norway, Finland and Switzerland.

Recognition: new trends and developments

However, the lack of a European process and procedure for the recognition of higher education qualifications, has become an increasingly serious problem. In the past five years, MACCESS has attracted 122 students from 16 different countries, as follows:

21 students each from Germany and the Netherlands;
 16 from Norway;
 14 from Hungary;
 13 from Belgium;
 9 from Denmark;
 7 each from Finland and the United Kingdom;
 4 from Spain;
 2 each from Greece, Italy and Portugal;
 1 student each from Bulgaria, Ireland, Sweden and Uganda.

It is obvious, however, that the pragmatic approach described above, cannot be repeatedly applied.

Fortunately, some developments are emerging in Europe, which create new possibilities with regard to the recognition of degrees and the introduction of quality control systems. Within the EU, governments have become increasingly aware of the fact, that in order to strengthen the intellectual, cultural, social, technological and scientific dimensions of Europe, institutions of higher education must play a dominant role in issues of recognition. Because of this, the various systems of higher education must become more compatible and more comparable (Bologna, 1999).

The first initiative in this area came from the governments of Italy, Germany, France and the United Kingdom. They agreed on a 'Joint declaration on harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system', the so-called Sorbonne Declaration. The main aim of this

declaration is to create an open European area for higher learning, to take away barriers and to enhance mobility and closer co-operation.

In order to achieve this the following objectives were defined:

- the introduction of a system with two main cycles: undergraduate and graduate
- the use of credits (ECTS) and the semester structure
- the encouragement of students to spend at least one semester in another country
- the stimulation of teaching and research staff to work in another European country

Furthermore, the four governments committed themselves to validate mutually acquired knowledge, to recognise respective degrees, and 'to encourage a common frame of reference, aimed at improving external recognition and facilitating student mobility as well as employability' (Paris, 1998).

On the basis of this Sorbonne declaration, a conference on the European Space for Higher Education was organised in Bologna in June 1999. Thirty-one ministers and Secretaries of State for higher education attended this conference, representing twenty-nine European countries. The conference produced what is now called the 'Bologna Declaration' | (Bologna, 1999).

The text of this declaration is even more specific in its intentions.

'While affirming our support to the general principles laid down in the Sorbonne Declaration, we engage in co-ordinating our policies to reach in the short term, and in any case within the first decade of the third millennium, the following objectives, which we consider to be of primary relevance in order to establish the European area of higher education and to promote the European system of higher education world-wide:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees.
- Adoption of a system of two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate. Access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years...The second cycle should lead to the master and/or doctorate degree as in many European countries.
- Establishment of a system of credits...as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility...
- Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles...for students...for teachers, researchers and

administrative staff...without prejudicing their statutory rights.

- Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies.
- Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regards to curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research' (Bologna, 1999).

These statements seem very promising. For the first time, functionaries at the highest political and academic levels have committed themselves to the creation of a more open, transparent, compatible and comparable system of higher education in Europe, and to take away barriers and thresholds for student and staff mobility, and to mutually recognise degrees and awards. For both social professional education in general and for European Master Degree Programmes (e.g. MACCESS) in particular, it can solve problems (in some cases severe ones) of mutual co-operation and recognition of degrees, and the acceleration of commonly developed projects can become an even greater possibility for the near future.

Finally, if the ideas described above are introduced in the near future, social professional education will have to prepare itself for this. What will be the difference between undergraduate and graduate education, and are we able to define the respective objectives? Furthermore, how can we develop and establish a transparent European system of quality control both for undergraduate and graduate programmes, and what roles can independent European associations like the EASSW and FESET play in this? These questions go beyond the mere exchange of information among educational institutions, and invite us to accelerate in-depth co-operation between educational institutions within Europe at the very beginning of the new millennium. The real debate has to begin now.

References

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