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**European co-operation in the light of GATS  
Quality assurance and recognition: The importance of the Lisbon Convention**

The Bologna Process is the most important and wide-ranging reform of higher education in Europe since the immediate aftermath of 1968. The ultimate aim of the Process is to establish a European Higher Education Area by 2010 in which staff and students can move with ease and have fair recognition of their qualifications. This overall goal is reflected in the Bologna Declaration, signed by 29 European ministers of education in 1999, which asked for:

- a system of easily readable and comparable degrees;
- a system of accumulation and transfer of credits;
- co-operation in quality assurance.

The Bologna Process is moving higher education in Europe towards a more transparent and mutually recognised system with diversified national systems within a common frame. An important instrument in this process is the Lisbon Recognition Convention developed jointly by the Council of Europe and UNESCO.

Significant characteristics of the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Convention are co-operation and trust between national educational systems and between higher education institutions in Europe.

In parallel to the Bologna Process, global trade in educational services is developing through the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) under the World Trade Organisation (WTO). *Can the Bologna Process based on co-operation and GATS based on competition co-exist in the sector of higher education?*

Little is yet known about the consequences of GATS for quality, access, and equity of higher education. There is in the university sector a fear that GATS may influence the national authority to regulate higher education systems, and have unforeseen consequences on public subsidies for higher education. Both the European University Association (EUA) and the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) have taken a critical stand on trade in educational services. Also American university organisations are critical to GATS.

Many governments may want to remove barriers against trade in educational services, however, only a few national proposals reached WTO before this year's June 30 deadline. Proposals from Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the United States all underline the need for governments to retain their sovereign right to determine their own domestic educational policy, a right which is also confirmed in the provisions of WTO. As most countries permit private education to coexist with public education, the proposals envision private education and training to continue to supplement, not displace, public education systems.

Only one of these proposals, the one from Japan, focuses on the quality concept, stating that it has become extremely important for each country to improve the quality of education and

research, responding to the rapidly changing needs of the society. Any measures in the education services sector should be considered with primary interest in maintaining and improving quality. The Japanese proposal points out that due consideration needs to be taken to

- maintenance and improvement of the quality of education activities in each country,
- protection of consumers/learners against services of low quality,
- measures to ensure international equivalence of degrees and diplomas.

On this background it is important to be aware that an international code for quality assurance and mutual recognition, for national information centres and international information networks already exists: the Lisbon Convention, which now has been ratified by 28 countries and signed by 15 more. Since it was agreed in 1997, supplementary standard-setting instruments have been attached to the Convention, among them the UNESCO / Council of Europe Code of Good Practice in Transnational Education. Similar UNESCO conventions exist in other regions.

Among the main points of the Lisbon Convention are the following:

- Each country shall recognise qualifications as similar to the corresponding qualifications in its own system unless it can be shown that there are substantial differences.
- All countries shall provide information on the institutions and programmes that belong to their higher education systems and appoint a national information centre.
- All countries shall encourage the use of the Diploma Supplement.

As already mentioned, the Parties to the Lisbon Convention have also agreed on the need for a code of good practice in the provision of higher education study programmes and other educational services by means of transnational arrangements. Building on the Lisbon Convention, the UNESCO / Council of Europe Code of Good Practice in Transnational Education reminds us that

- academic quality and standards of transnational education programmes should be at least comparable to those of the awarding institution as well as to those of the receiving country.
- awarding institutions as well as the providing institutions are accountable and fully responsible for quality assurance and control,

I would also like to mention that the Council of Europe Committee for Higher Education and Research (CD-ESR) at its meeting 3-4 October 2002 decided to encourage the ENIC Network together with the NARIC Network and ENQA to submit a subsidiary text on the synergies between quality assurance and recognition to the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee.

To be accepted in the higher education sector, it is essential that GATS respects the existing mechanisms in international higher education, in particular the Lisbon Convention and subsidiary texts. Among the 41 signatories to the Lisbon Convention we find the four leading exporters of educational services: The United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, and they are now in the process of ratifying the Convention.

Committing to and abiding by the Lisbon Convention – with the full implication of national recognition or accreditation systems, national information centres and the Code of Good Practice in Transnational Education - may be seen as a basis also for trade in educational services relating to higher education.

Under the Lisbon Convention, a national quality assessment system is an option, not a formal requirement. However, *importers* of higher education may require the effective operation of a national quality assessment system in *exporting* countries as a prerequisite for trade in educational services. Then, according to the Convention, information on the methods and results of this assessment, and on the standards of quality specific to each type of higher education institution, will be available. This may take care of quality in a trade in higher education by using the national assessment systems in the *exporting* countries.

It has been argued that national quality assurance systems in importing countries could be used as barriers against import of higher education. Ratifying the Lisbon Convention, a country will be bound to recognise qualifications from other parties to the Convention as similar to the corresponding qualifications in its own system. This certainly is *not* to build barriers against higher education from other countries. Of course, all countries should have a quality assurance system and authorities in importing countries should put their foot down if there are significant and negative differences in quality.

Thus, the Lisbon Convention, based on co-operation and trust between national systems, may help to secure quality and at the same time hinder the building of barriers against trade in higher education

My home country, Norway, has already inscribed "no limitations" on market access under GATS. However, the Norwegian government assumes that the Lisbon Recognition Convention and similar conventions for other regions should be the basis for the recognition of qualifications from educational services. Due respect should be paid to national quality assurance systems and transparency in education as resulting from the Bologna Process. Recognition of qualifications from transnational education services should comply with the UNESCO/Council of Europe Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee. I sincerely hope that other countries will follow the example of Norway.

Not all countries have reached the same stage of development. In many countries, higher education institutions are poorly equipped and may lack highly qualified specialists in many fields. Import of high quality educational services may then be a partial solution. Co-operation and trade in higher education between countries at the same stage of development may also be relevant, even if the quality should not be fit for the most developed countries. The Lisbon Convention and the Code of Good Practice take care of this as it relates the national systems of individual countries without setting absolute standards.