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ACADEMIC LINKS
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FOR THE
INTERNATIONALISATION
OF THE
HE SECTOR

ALISIOS WORKSHOP REPORTS

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Report of the ALISIOS Workshop 3

*Enhancing recognition of degrees and credits
between Brazil and Europe: implications for
collaboration, mobility and internationalisation*



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The **third Workshop** of the ALISIOS project, entitled “Enhancing recognition of degrees and credits between Brazil and Europe: Implications for collaboration, mobility and internationalisation”, took place in the Pantanal Convention Centre of Cuiabá, Mato Grosso, Brazil, on **25 April 2015**. The event was held during the Conference of the Brazilian Association for International Education (FAUBAI), one of the partners of the ALISIOS project. It was organised by FAUBAI in cooperation with the European University Association (EUA – ALISIOS partner) and the University of Coimbra (ALISIOS coordinator).

The Workshop tackled the topic of recognition, both of degrees and of credit mobility, as this complex theme is essential for ‘flexibilising’ and internationalising the Higher Education sector. As many problems still persist between Brazilian and European universities, the workshop provided a number of important case studies, tools and considerations for how universities and systems can improve recognition procedures and how governments, agencies and other networks can support this endeavour.

It was structured around two main parts: the first addressed degree recognition: frameworks, tools and approaches; the second focused on credit recognition: advancing institutional partnership and incentivising mobility.

PART I - DEGREE RECOGNITION: FRAMEWORKS, TOOLS AND APPROACHES

Renée Zicman, FAUBAI Executive Director and **Joaquim Carvalho**, Vice-Rector for International Relations of the University of Coimbra and ALISIOS project Coordinator, welcomed the participants and presented the aims of the project and of the Workshop.

Then, they passed the floor to **Howard Davies**, Senior Adviser of EUA, who delivered the opening presentation: “Why recognition matters? Implications for rendering higher education more flexible, open and international.” The main topics of the presentation were the following:

- Recognition in Latin America: the TRESAL report;
- Recognition in Europe: its role in three national internationalisation strategies – Netherlands, Portugal, United Kingdom;
- Automatic recognition of academic qualifications;
- Automatic recognition of professional qualifications;
- Trade agreements;
- Widening participation and lifelong learning: the role played by the recognition of prior learning.

The most important concluding remarks stressed that:

- Recognition:
 - is a student’s right and a legal obligation under the Lisbon Recognition Convention;
 - underpins mobility, joint degrees, and institutional collaboration;
 - combats university in-breeding and isolationism, and
 - drives economic growth.

The opening speech was followed by a debate and five other plenary presentations.

The first plenary presentation was delivered by **Allan Bruun Pedersen**, Vice-chair of the LRC Committee and Head of the Danish NARIC (Denmark). He focused on frameworks for enhancing recognition: national and regional qualifications’ frameworks, recognition conventions and their impacts. UNESCO is responsible for several regional conventions on recognition: the European Convention (Lisbon Recognition Convention), the African

Convention, Asia and the Pacific Convention and the Latin American and Caribbean Convention.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention, signed in 1997, is the only legally binding document in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It concerns recognition of access qualifications, periods of study and all higher education qualifications. Once ratified it is valid for all higher education institutions and should be reflected in the national legislation. This Convention's basic principles state that applicants must have access to fair recognition; full recognition must be given unless the recognition authority can prove that there are substantial differences between the foreign qualification and a comparable national qualification. Recognition should be mainly based on level, profile and learning outcomes, not on the duration and credits of a qualification.

There are several subsidiary texts to the Lisbon Recognition Convention with recommendations, which have served as the basis for guides with concrete definitions, examples and practical advice and procedures for recognition, such as the "European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions". Qualifications' frameworks are also very useful tools to facilitate fair recognition. These qualifications' frameworks exist at European (EQF) and national (NQF) levels and provide comparison of levels of study, learning outcomes, workload and quality assurance methodologies. Again, the key to a fair recognition is not the strict credit comparison but the focus on the learning outcomes, which describe what a holder of a qualification, knows, understands and is able to do after completing a degree in a certain country.

Several other practical and transparency tools for recognition were mentioned and are available in the presentation on the ALISIOS website. The Latin American and Caribbean Recognition Convention is not being implemented in several countries. Argentina, for instance, never joined the Convention, while Brazil and Chile signed but later denounced it, reducing the number of participating countries to 11.

The second speaker, **Leandro Tessler**, International Education Specialist and Former Head of the International Office of University of Campinas (Brazil), talked about degree recognition obstacles in the Europe-Brazil context. He started by pointing out the differences between the higher education systems and degree programmes in Europe and Brazil, stressing the fact that in Brazil higher education is perceived by society as professional training and more than 40 higher education level degrees require professional certification/ accreditation. Curricula are very much based on contact hours, very specialised content and professionalization. He also highlighted that some universities have few research activity and that 60% of the Brazilian HE research production is concentrated in only 6 universities.

These characteristics often lead to difficulties in the recognition process, which in fact is based on equivalence rather than on recognition. On top of that only public universities can recognise degrees and the content of the courses of foreign degree has to match at least in 75% the content of the Brazilian degree. Even more problematic is the fact that some universities do not offer degrees in certain fields, especially interdisciplinary ones, making the recognition process impossible.

Another obstacle is related to the myriad of HE qualifications that exist in the Brazilian HE system, which have no correspondence with the European ones, especially the ones aligned with the Bologna Model (for instance at master level). Degree structures and terminology can be a real problem for the holder of a Brazilian or foreign degree. According to Tessler there is a strong need for Brazil to rethink its curriculum structures. They have to be more flexible and interdisciplinary. Some work is being done on that direction. The Brazilian Academy of Science published a White Paper on curricular changes and ca. 15 federal universities are trying to

reform their undergraduate degree programmes to be more flexible and compatible with the European Bologna Model. Last but not least, state bureaucracy should be simplified.

Next on the agenda, **Giovanna Filippini**, Head of the International Relations Office, University of Bologna (Italy), presented a university perspective on degree recognition – strategies, successes and challenges. She began by sharing the main goals of the University of Bologna in terms of its HE internationalisation strategy, which is very much focused on the internationalization of degree profiles and learning methods, outcomes and environments, the increase of the international student body, the widening of the percentage of graduates with relevant study or work abroad and the internationalisation of research and PhDs.

In order to support these aims, the University of Bologna has put in place a central support office, an international desk, to provide information on degree recognition to foreign students, to coordinate the activity of the 15 registry offices (one per School/Faculty) for international student admission and credential evaluation (for instance, it offers advice on uncommon qualifications). The international desk centralises and shares key documentation that supports the recognition procedures at the University, for instance, the Lisbon Recognition Convention, best practices and recommendations of the EHEA and ENIC-NARIC networks (the EAR HEI' s manual that Allan Bruun Pedersen referred to in his presentation), national legislation, such as laws and decrees of the Italian Ministry of Education) and institutional documents that are produced internally.

Filippini gave then several examples of the requirements and challenges that the University of Bologna has to comply with and to face when dealing with the recognition of Brazilian higher education degrees during the applications for admissions to the University of Bologna degree programmes at undergraduate and post-graduate levels. She highlighted that some processes require close cooperation between the administrative personnel and the academics in charge of evaluation of the qualifications.

Filippini concluded by setting forth some challenges for future developments in Italy:

- Need of more user-friendly applications (Italian national legislation still asking for specific documents - Declaration of Value);
- Inter-institutional agreements to facilitate vertical mobility;
- Increasing n° of international applications vs. need of expertise on credential evaluation at different levels (degree programme boards, staff);
- Lack of procedures for specific applicants (i.e. refugees);
- Need of exchange and best practices with national/foreign universities and ENIC/NARIC networks, to improve practices and information sources available online;
- Need to find mechanisms to share administrative and academic competences.

Manuel Assunção, Vice-president of the Portuguese Rectors' Conference (CRUP)/Rector of the University of Aveiro (Portugal) and **Nicolas Maillard**, ANDIFES Council for International Relations (Brazil) delivered the last two presentations of the morning session, under the topic "Bi-lateral approaches: Advancing recognition through university association agreements: example of the CRUP-ANDIFES approach and current negotiations".

Brazilian degrees are recognised in Portugal, but Portuguese degrees are hardly recognised in Brazil, especially in the field of architecture and engineering. The analyses of the recognition requests may take two years and recognition may be partial, forcing the holder of the degree to follow course units of a similar degree programme at a Brazilian university.

Faced with this scenario, the Conference of Portuguese Rectors (CRUP) and the Conference of Brazilian Federal Universities (ANDIFES) decided to sign a Memorandum of Understanding in



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2012 between the two conferences with the objective of facilitating and speeding up the recognition of the Portuguese academic degrees in the fields of architecture and engineering in Brazil. This Memorandum foresees the celebration of bilateral agreements between Brazilian and Portuguese universities with the same or similar degree programmes in order to ensure the full and prompt recognition of the degrees, when requested. The idea is that the universities involved exchange information about their degrees' structure and contents and decide to grant equivalence of the relevant degrees in a formal bilateral agreement.

Unfortunately, the implementation of such bilateral agreements over the last three years has been severely hampered by lack of interest and scepticism on the part of the Brazilian universities, and by a general culture of recognition based on nostrification, homologisation and protectionism. So far, there is only one bilateral agreement signed between the University of Madeira (Portugal) and the Federal University of Alagoas (Brazil) and another one still being discussed between the University of Porto (Portugal) and the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil).

PART II – CREDIT RECOGNITION: ADVANCING INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIP AND INCENTIVIZING MOBILITY

Part II included a first session with three plenary presentations chaired by **Renée Zicman** and a second session with four short case studies chaired by **Howard Davies**.

The first session began with a presentation about the “ECTS and its global application” delivered by **Pablo Beneitone**, University of Deusto (Spain). Beneitone began by explaining why it is relevant for HEIs to apply credit systems to their study programmes. This approach can facilitate enormously the recognition of studies, as it makes study programmes more transparent, it improves the comparability of study programmes, it makes it easier to construct well-balanced programmes, it facilitates student mobility and improves the recognition of periods of study taken elsewhere successfully, among other reasons. Student knowledge and skills in a credit system are expressed and measured in terms of credits, which are calculated on the basis of the estimated time students spend on classes and on performing independent study to achieve the expected learning outcomes.

In a credit system you are able to know with a high degree of accuracy the workload of a student in a certain course unit or entire degree programme. The example of the ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) was given to better explain how a student workload based system works, how it was improved within the Tuning project within Europe and how it influenced the development of the CLAR (Latin American Reference Credit) in Latin America.

Participants were very interested in the development of the CLAR has it brought to discussion the identification of a set of issues that Latin American HEIs and Brazilian HEIs, in particular, have been struggling with, such as curricular reform, student workload, including activities outside the classroom, and barriers to student mobility even within countries. Basing study programmes in credits and learning outcomes presents some difficulties or challenges but it also gives HEIs unique opportunities. Beneitone listed some examples:

Opportunities:

- Learning outcomes allow for better comparison and recognition of periods of successful learning
- Time required to achieve expected learning outcomes can be expressed in credits
- Learning outcomes allow for different approaches to reach the same results

Difficulties:

- Formulating learning outcomes requires expertise and experience
- Learning outcomes should express reality
- Learning outcomes should always be measurable

Beneitone showed that a credit system is a fundamental element of transparency, quality, and trust and it can be shown that a learner centred approach that includes workload based credits, linked to learning outcomes and level descriptions can be generalised and shared in a wide variety of academic contexts in the world.

Next on the agenda, **Aderson Nascimento**, Deputy Head of the International Office of Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte and **Douglas Peron**, Civil Engineering Student, Federal University of Mato Grosso (Brazil) talked about credit recognition and mobility in Brazil: reflections from Science without Borders.

Nascimento began by stressing the relevance of the Science without Borders programme in the consolidation, expansion and internationalisation of science and technology and competitiveness in Brazil via international mobility of students and researchers. Then, he pointed out the need of Brazilian HEIs to work harder to create the necessary conditions to respond to the SwB challenges, such as the improvement of the students' proficiency in foreign languages, the establishment or improvement of procedures to deal with outgoing mobility, student abroad support and procedures to receive the students back to their home institutions, particularly in what concerns the valorisation of the experience of the students and the recognition of the studies they carried out abroad. Nascimento highlighted once again the importance of the learning agreement and the participation of the course directors before, during and after the mobility period so that students' work abroad is not squandered. Moreover, Brazilian degree programmes need to be more flexible in order to accommodate interdisciplinarity and diversity, new knowledge and teaching/learning methods, or if we want, added value.

Peron was a SwB grantee in Spain. Although he managed to elaborate a grid of course equivalences before his departure, once he arrived in Spain he noticed that there was incompatibility in some course schedules and he had to change some subjects. Furthermore, at his home university he had annual courses and in Spain there were semester courses. This was the case of the Topography course, during which he had access to high-tech training, which he valued enormously, but that course was not recognised upon his return to his home university. In fact, once he arrived he had to repeat the course during one year with less up-to-date technology. Only one course taken abroad was credited in his study programme at home, mainly due to the difference in the length of the courses. Peron was of course very pleased with the experience at the personal level but regrets that his new knowledge and skills were not taken into account at academic level. Several participants agreed that measures have to be taken to avoid this kind of situations in which both students and universities are losing and squandering opportunities for growth and improvement.

The second session of the afternoon, comprising four short case studies about credit recognition within the scope of mobility programmes, began with the presentation of **José Celso Freire Junior**, Associate Provost for International Affairs at UNESP/President of FAUBAI (Brazil). Junior started by stating that there is an absolute need for a paradigm shift within the universities so that student mobility can work. The institutional practice and the legal framework within which academics and international relations' officers work have to change to respond to the needs and challenges of quality mobility programmes. He gave the example of UNESP that has developed new legal resolutions concerning undergraduate student and



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double degree mobility that ensures credit recognition and transfer since 2010. The first step is to trust on the competence of the institutions to which students are sent and to acknowledge that different countries will always have different curricula, otherwise, why would students want to move if it were to do the same courses they could do at home. If all curricula were the same, what is the added value of mobility? How did UNESP succeed in changing the institutional environment into a fairer one to mobile students? Backed up by the President of the university and the new compulsory legislation, UNESP worked to gain the active participation of degree programmes' directors and academic tutors, to base all mobility processes in institutional learning agreements, to train administrative staff working in the processes, to develop IT systems to support the processes and to analyse data to improve and solve identified problems.

Celso Freire Junior finished with some recommendations:

- Transform degree programme directors in real key partners in the mobility processes;
- Make sure you involve academic tutors as they have the power to reduce the time of the recognition/ equivalence processes after the mobility;
- Keep in mind that different countries have different curricula and that can be positive and enriching rather than negative and incompatible;
- Make sure you change or improve your institutional legislation so that your mobility programmes are successful. In Brazil that aspect is a *sine qua non* condition.

The second speaker was **Vladimir di Lorio**, Federal University of Viçosa, Minas Gerais/ Vice-President of ANDIFES Council for International Relations (Brazil). Di Lorio made a brief presentation of the Federal University of Viçosa (UFV) and showed some facts and figures about the SwB programme in general and about SwB at UFV in particular. There were a considerable number of students and researchers of UFV that benefited from a SwB grant in 23 different countries from all continents; UFV received eight visiting researchers under the programme. UFV has formal procedures regarding the organisation and management of the mobility and has been trying to apply them as much as possible under SwB.

Grant receiving students have to start a formal process at the Office of the Registrar with a letter of acceptance of the host institution, updated transcript of records, specific form for student mobility and learning agreement. The student process is analysed by the coordinating committee of the undergraduate programme of the mobile student, a committee of the department of the mobile student and a general committee in charge of undergraduate mobility processes. If there are changes in the learning agreement after the student's arrival at the host university, the student must send to the committees a request for changes. When the student returns to UFV, his/ her mobility process is analysed again by the same committees. If all courses taken successfully were previously approved by the committees, the corresponding credits are automatically recognised. When courses were not previously approved, a new analysis is needed but recognition is not automatic or guaranteed. Furthermore, students have other option for the recognition of the courses that were not previously approved; they can apply and submit to a local exam in the subject(s) of those courses.

UFV created special codes for registering foreign courses and credits that are not similar to the ones offered at UFV. All these procedures are not always easy to implement under SwB because in several cases, students do not know beforehand at which host institution they will be placed, which means that sometimes learning agreements are not prepared before the mobility or are not prepared at all and letters of acceptance can arrive very late. Other problems have to do with language training, diverse rules according to the different calls per country of destination, no previous contact of the Brazilian universities with the foreign host universities, transcripts of records in several foreign languages (not always in English). In general, Di Lorio

also thinks that there is a lack of preparation of the coordinating committees dealing with SwB at Brazilian universities and that may lead to the individual mobility of students without any follow-up.

The last two speakers, **Martina Schulze**, Director of the DAAD Brazil Office (Germany) and **Gerry O'Sullivan**, Head of International Education, Irish National Agency: Erasmus+ (Ireland) talked about the experience of Germany and Ireland as recipient countries of SwB grantees, the opportunities and challenges for both these countries and Brazil. Schulze showed data from surveys conducted among undergraduate SwB grantees in Germany, regarding the use of learning agreements and the recognition of their credits in Brazil, during the winter term of 2014 and the winter term of 2012/2013 and the summer term of 2013. Although poor, the data collected confirmed the existing problems related to the lack of learning agreements and fair recognition of credits earned during the mobility.

CONCLUSIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

Joaquim Carvalho, Vice-Rector for International Relations of the University of Coimbra and ALISIOS project Coordinator closed the session and presented the conclusions of the day:

What have we learned?

- Mobility is a trigger for capacity development in internationalisation. First at a procedural and administrative level and then as a trigger for a more conceptual evolution that is based on the value of diversity and the importance of learner centred approaches focused on learning outcomes and not on teacher centred content. This is a conceptual cultural dimension, that is expressed in different ways: content vs. profile learning, focus on learning outcomes, valorisation of diversity – perspectives which are central for good recognition practices.
- Recognition is a right of the student. Brazilian students and teachers' testimonials and statistical data showed that this right is being jeopardised in the majority of the cases.
- Exchange of experience between EU and Brazil is important in this context. It is true that Europe has several tools and good practices in the area of mobility management, credit and degree recognition, but these cannot simply be transposed into the Brazilian context. Changes and adaptations have to be made, starting with the institutional frameworks, whenever they are neither serving the students' rights nor the institutions' interest. This path was also complex and long in Europe. It requires a lot of capacity building and it is not yet completed in several countries, but it is worth doing for the students and institutions' sake. SwB 2.0 should take in what was learned in that regard.
- Data on the extent in which recognition is accomplished in large-scale mobility programmes, such as Science without Borders, is important but we don't have much. Could we have more from the Brazilian side?

Which tools, structures and good practices can universities take away from this workshop?

- Learning agreements;
- Bilateral agreements;
- Credit systems based on student workload;
- Flexible and interdisciplinary curricula;



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- Transform your degree programme directors in real key partners in the mobility processes;
- Make sure you involve academic tutors as they have the power to reduce the time of the recognition/ equivalence processes after the mobility;
- Keep in mind that different countries have different curricula and that can be positive and enriching rather than negative and incompatible;
- Make sure you change or improve your institutional legislation so that your mobility programmes are successful. In Brazil that aspect is a *sine qua non* condition.
- Assume that recognition matters and that it requires not only regulations and procedures but also an institutional culture and mindset that is outward looking, which focuses on the students' interest and functions as a drive against nostrification.

What can agencies and organisations take away? What can governments take away? What is specifically relevant to SwB going forward?

- Governments/ agencies responsible for international higher education should:
 - Be more proactive in the inducement of capacity building in the area of the internationalisation of the HEIs;
 - Enact national legislation that allows HEIs to reform and adapt their systems in favour of the internationalisation of their students and staff in a fair and effective way;
 - Collaborate with the HEIs in the implementation of international education programmes to ensure that partners know each other, build trust and establish bilateral agreements that regulate and monitor the activities;
 - Establish follow-up and improvement procedures to ensure the success of the programmes under way.

The presentations of the Workshop are available in the ALISIOS website at <http://alisios-project.eu/outputs/ws3>