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CULTURAL, EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Report

on

**Mutual Recognition of
Higher Education Diplomas
by the BSEC Member Countries**

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Ninth Meeting of the Cultural, Educational and Social Affairs Committee held in Kyiv on 1-2 October 1997 decided to review the implementation of the measures related to the mutual recognition of higher education diplomas by the BSEC member countries. Following a discussion on the progress achieved in the mutual recognition of higher education diplomas by the countries in the Black Sea region at its Tenth Meeting in Tirana on 1-2 April 1998 and taking into account the relevance of this issue for further development of educational and scientific cooperation, the Committee decided to discuss “The Mutual Recognition of Higher Education Diplomas by the BSEC Member Countries” as the main subject on the agenda of its Eleventh Meeting in Sofia on 23-24 September 1998.

2. The issue concerning the mutual recognition of educational qualifications, especially those related to higher education, has been raised on many occasions at the meetings of the Committee as well as during the General Assembly. Mutual recognition of higher education diplomas was one of the measures outlined in Recommendation 10/1995 on “Cooperation among the PABSEC Member Countries for the Improvement of Education” adopted by the Fifth General Assembly in Moscow in June 1995.

3. Furthermore, Recommendation 27/1998 on “Cooperation among the Academic Communities of the BSEC Member Countries and Its Legal Framework”, adopted by the Eleventh General Assembly in Bucharest in June 1998, urged the national parliaments and governments “to promote the conclusion of bilateral and multilateral agreements promoting academic mobility in the Black Sea region through the mutual recognition of qualifications related to higher education; to consider the accession to the relevant Council of Europe and UNESCO conventions; pending the conclusion of such agreements, to promote the exchange of information concerning the recognition of diplomas and degrees”.

4. The Rapporteur expresses acknowledgments to the national delegations of Armenia, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Turkey that have forwarded contributions for this Report and the Recommendation on this subject as well as to the PABSEC International Secretariat for information received from international organisations and other sources.

II. THE INTERNATIONAL AND EUROPEAN ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE RECOGNITION OF EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

A. International Legal Instruments

5. It should be pointed out that the issue of the mutual recognition of education qualifications, periods of study, equivalence of education certificates, or in a broader context, of academic mobility, is the subject of a number of Council of Europe and UNESCO conventions:

- European Convention on the Equivalence of Diplomas leading to Admission to Universities (1953, ETS* No. 15) - signed and ratified by Greece, Romania and Turkey, signed by Moldova and Russia;
 - Protocol to the European Convention on the Equivalence of Diplomas leading to Admission to Universities (1964, ETS No. 49) - signed by Russia, signed and ratified by Romania
- European Convention on the Equivalence of Periods of University Study (1956, ETS No. 21) - signed and ratified by Romania and Turkey, signed by Greece and Russia;
- European Convention on the Academic Recognition of University Qualifications (1959, ETS No. 32) - signed and ratified by Romania, signed by Greece, Russia and Turkey;
- UNESCO International Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab and European States bordering on the Mediterranean (1976);
- UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees concerning Higher Education in the States belonging to the Europe Region (1979) - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Russian Federation, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine are Parties to the Convention;
- European Convention on the General Equivalence of Periods of University Study (1990, ETS No. 138) - signed and ratified by Romania and Russia, signed by Turkey.

6. UNESCO has been collecting information and carrying out studies on the issues of mobility and recognition of qualifications over the last fifty years. "Study abroad", published every two years since 1948, is one of the most comprehensive international guides to scholarships and courses available in post-secondary disciplines.

7. UNESCO action in standard-setting has resulted in the adoption of six regional Conventions on the recognition of diplomas in higher education covering the whole world; two of them are listed above. In a move towards a single universal convention, the General Conference of UNESCO adopted the international Recommendation on the Recognition of Studies and Qualifications in Higher Education in 1993.

8. An important joint initiative of the Council of Europe and UNESCO is the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (ETS No. 165) signed in Lisbon on 11 April 1997. It provides a comprehensive coverage of matters earlier addressed by the above mentioned Council of Europe and UNESCO conventions and aims to promote Europe-wide academic mobility. The Convention will gradually replace the equivalence conventions of the Council of Europe dating from the fifties and that of UNESCO dating from the seventies.

9. The Lisbon Convention has already been signed by thirty-one European countries, including BSEC member countries Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine, Azerbaijan ratified it in March 1998, Armenia is considering

* European Treaties Series

accession in the near future. The Convention has not yet entered into force and its signing and ratification process is still under way.

B. Basic Principles, Concepts And Definitions

10. The above mentioned Conventions provide an international legal framework for activities related to the recognition of qualifications in the field of higher education and define the basic principles and concepts relevant to this work. The most recent and comprehensive coverage of these principles, concepts and definitions is provided in the Council of Europe / UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Convention).

11. **The basic principles** include in particular the following:

- **adequate access** for holders of qualifications to an assessment of these qualifications in another country.
- **no discrimination** on any ground such as the applicant's gender, race, colour, disability, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, or on the grounds of any other circumstance not related to the merits of the qualifications for which recognition is sought;
- the procedures and criteria used in the assessment and recognition of qualifications should be **transparent, coherent and reliable**;
- decisions on recognition should be made within a **reasonable time limit**. If recognition is withheld, the reasons for refusal should be stated and information should be given concerning possible measures the applicant may take in order to obtain recognition at a later stage;
- the principle of **institutional autonomy** should be respected. Therefore, in the cases when the competence to make decisions in recognition matters lies with individual higher education institutions or other entities, the state party to a recognition convention only undertakes to transmit the text of this convention to these institutions or entities and take all possible measures to encourage the favourable consideration and application of its provisions.

12. Some of the basic definitions as laid down in the Lisbon Convention are as follows:

- **Higher education** - All types of courses of study, or sets of courses of study, training or training for research at the post secondary level which are recognised by the relevant authorities of a Party as belonging to its higher education system.
- **Higher education institution** - An establishment providing higher education and recognised by the competent authority of a Party as belonging to its system of higher education.
- **Higher education qualification** - Any degree, diploma or other certificate issued by a competent authority attesting the successful completion of a higher education programme.
- **Qualification giving access to higher education** - Any diploma or other certificate issued by a competent authority attesting the successful completion of an

educational programme and giving the holder of the qualification the right to be considered for admission to higher education

- **Recognition** - A formal acknowledgement by a competent authority of the value of a foreign educational qualification with a view to access to educational and/or employment activities.
- **Competent recognition authority** - A body officially charged with making binding decisions on the recognition of foreign qualifications

C. Mechanisms For Review And Implementation

13. One of the essential elements of the implementation mechanism for the UNESCO and Council of Europe conventions is the European Network of National Information Centres on Academic Recognition and Mobility (**the ENIC Network**), established by the Decision of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and the UNESCO Regional Committee for Europe in June 1994. The ENIC network is co-ordinated by the Council of Europe and UNESCO's Centre for Higher Education (CEPES) in Bucharest. As all the BSEC countries are also UNESCO members, they already have the National Information Centres.

14. The ENIC Network represents the main instrument for the practical implementation of recognition procedures and problem solving. It has contributed, through joint working groups, such as the "NEED Working Party" dealing with Central and Eastern European qualifications, "Europe-USA" tackling mutual recognition problems between European countries and the USA, as well as the Working Group on Russian Education dealing with Russian educational qualifications, to solving concrete recognition problems.

15. ENIC has worked closely with the NARIC network composed of the National Information Centres on Academic Recognition and Mobility of the EU member states. The European Community has adopted numerous measures and regulations promoting the mutual recognition of diplomas by its member countries. For example, a system of automatic recognition of qualification has been created for several professions, such as doctors and pharmacists. This system is backed up by a certain level of coordination of training in these disciplines.

16. In addition, the application of UNESCO conventions is monitored through a number of mechanisms:

- the Joint Plan of Action adopted by the International Congress on Academic Mobility and Recognition of Studies (Paris, 1992);
- Regional Committees (including the Regional Committee for Europe*); in particular, the UNESCO's Centre for Higher Education (CEPES) in Bucharest acts as Secretariat to the Regional Committee for the Application of UNESCO Convention (1979) on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Europe Region
- National Information Centres on Academic Recognition and Mobility already established in 145 countries.

* The UNESCO Europe Region includes all European countries, as well as Turkey, Israel, Canada and USA.

17. Some of the BSEC countries participate in the SOCRATES-ERASMUS programme of cooperation in the field of higher education implemented by the European Community. This programme, open to the EU member states, has been recently extended to some Central and Eastern European countries, including Bulgaria and Romania. It aims to promote the mobility of students at all levels up to the doctoral level, including the recognition of diplomas and degrees, as well as periods of study through the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

18. The UNESCO held a World Conference on Higher Education entitled "Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century" in Paris on 5-9 October 1998. The aim of the Conference was to lay down fundamental principles for the in-depth reform of higher education systems throughout the world with a view to strengthening their contribution to development and to the building of peace. One of the main themes of the Conference was international co-operation. At the same time, an assessment of the implementation of regional conventions was made on the basis of the results of the coordination meeting of the Regional Conventions on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees held in Paris in April 1998.

III. BILATERAL ARRANGEMENTS BETWEEN THE BSEC MEMBER COUNTRIES

19. The issue of the mutual recognition of higher education qualification is gaining prominence as more students come to study from one BSEC country to another. For example, the number of students from BSEC countries studying in Romania is 13,200 persons, out of which 4200 students from Moldova and 8000 students from Greece. Naturally, each of them would seek diploma recognition after completing studies and returning home in order to obtain employment or continue studies at post-graduate level.

20. Article 2 of the *Black Sea Convention on Cooperation in the Fields of Culture, Education, Science and Information (1993)* states that the Parties undertake to encourage, promote and develop "cooperation and exchanges of information on the opportunities of recognising diplomas, degrees, scientific and academic status among the Parties". Although some progress has been achieved at bilateral level as mentioned below, unfortunately no consistent efforts have been undertaken by the Parties in order to move forward in diploma recognition matters at the regional level.

21. To date, the only bilateral agreement on the mutual recognition of higher education qualifications has been signed by Romania and Moldova (20 June 1998). Romania is currently engaged in negotiating bilateral agreements, in varying stages of progress, with the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Turkey, Greece and Bulgaria.

22. The issue of the recognition of higher education qualifications is to some degree reflected in various bilateral agreements on cooperation in the field of education and science concluded between many BSEC member countries, as well as between their ministries of education. For example, Armenia has signed a number of such agreements in 1994-1997 with the Russian Federation, Georgia, Ukraine and Romania.

23. Greece has signed educational agreements with Azerbaijan, Albania, Armenia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine which include provisions on the exchange of information concerning the recognition of diplomas. At the same time,

Greece has not signed any agreement on the recognition of higher education diplomas, not even with EU countries.

24. Some BSEC countries have concluded diploma recognition agreements with third countries: for example, Bulgaria concluded agreements (which need to be updated following changes in Bulgarian legislation) with twenty-eight developing countries.

25. Cooperation agreements have been signed by universities, for example between the Kyiv Shevchenko University and the Yerevan State University. The conclusion of agreements between universities may make an important contribution to enhancing the mobility of students, lecturers and researchers in the region and creating a favourable atmosphere for the mutual recognition of higher education qualifications.

26. The Black Sea Universities Network was set up in 1997 by the First Conference of University Rectors from the Black Sea countries held in Mangalia, Romania in September 1997 at the initiative of the Black Sea University and the Ovidius University of Constantza. The Network is now linking 63 universities and inviting more to join; it is estimated that it can be eventually joined by 80-100 universities from the Black Sea region. Encouraging the mobility of professors, researchers and students in the region is one of the goals of the BSUN, it was one of the main subjects of discussion during the Second Rectors' Conference in Constantza in July 1998.

27. The BSEC member countries have established national-level recognition bodies: for example, the Inter-Scientific Centre for Recognition of Foreign Diplomas - in Greece, the National Centre for the Recognition and Equivalence of Diplomas - in Romania, and the Committee for the Legalisation of Graduation Certificates at the Ministry of Education and Science - in Bulgaria. These recognition bodies are assisted by national ENIC centres which are often affiliated with ministries of education. At the same time, recognition procedures have been elaborated taking into account internationally recognised principles and approaches.

28. A major problem encountered by national authorities in the recognition and equivalence procedures derives from the differences which exist among officially recognised lists of educational fields and specialisations. These lists differ from one country to another both with regard to the field from which the student has graduated and from the inclusion in the same specialisation of two distinctive fields as far as another country is concerned, as well as from differences in the content of curricula.

29. In order to solve this problem, information exchange should be stepped up among the BSEC countries in the spirit of requirements set forth in Section VIII "Information on the assessment of higher education institutions and programmes" of the Lisbon Convention which states that each Party shall develop, maintain and provide an overview of different types of higher education institutions belonging to its education system, a list of recognised institutions, both public and private, belonging to its higher education system, as well as a description of higher education programmes.

IV. PROPOSALS OF THE NATIONAL DELEGATIONS

30. **Armenia**

1. **The advisability of the mutual recognition of diplomas**

- The mutual recognition of higher education diplomas strengthens academic cooperation and promotes the dissemination of knowledge; consequently, higher education acquires an international, humane character while the acquaintance with the world achievements in the field of education will assist in upgrading the skills of students, researchers, lecturers and experts.
- Obviously, there is a great variety of constitutional, legal and regulatory standards, organisational types of educational establishments and their professional activities. In this respect, information exchange and the analysis of the training and attestation of specialists among interested countries and organisations would help to develop and improve higher education.
- An agreement on the mutual recognition of higher education diplomas would reduce difficulties and obstacles to those who having received a diploma in one country wish to continue their studies or pursue professional activities in another country.
- The recognition of diplomas would promote mutual understanding and rapprochement among different nations

2. **The tasks of the member countries:**

- Following the adoption of an agreement on the recognition of higher education diplomas, each country should instruct its educational authorities and accreditation and licensing bodies concerning organisational measures and mechanisms for diploma recognition.
- Educational authorities should set up national commissions on diploma assessment and recognition, composed of representatives of both public and private educational institutions, as well as associations and voluntary organisations
- One of the options of the mechanism for diploma recognition could be developed through creating a system of international or regional accreditation of higher educational establishments of the member countries and the recognition of diplomas issues within this system according to the cycle "specialisation - educational criterion - curriculum".
- Each country should take steps for a fair and expeditious assessment, in conformity with its constitutional, legal and regulatory provisions, of the educational qualifications of refugees and forcibly displaced persons, if they cannot provide documentary evidence of their education.
- The relevance of this issue and the need for its thorough scientific study make it necessary to convene academic workshops and conferences.

31. **Bulgaria**

- In the process of preparing the agreements and programmes of co-operation in the field of education, science and culture, clauses are included envisaging the updating of the agreements on mutual recognition of the equivalence of graduation certificates and documents of academic degrees which have already been signed and the exchange of draft equivalence agreements with countries with which there are no previous agreements.
- The expanding, more active and varied co-operation among the universities in the world highlights the importance and necessity of reaching agreements recognising the terms of study and the higher education degrees between different countries.

- The application of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Convention) and European Convention on the General Equivalence of Periods of University Study.
- The gradual introduction in higher educational establishments of compatible modules of education and an European system of the transfer of credits which will facilitate the mobility of students in obtaining education in other countries and in having documents issued to them recognised. The application of the European system for the transfer of credits in the Bulgarian higher educational institutions is an element of their participation in the European Union's SOCRATES-ERASMUS educational co-operation programme.

32. **Greece**

- Educational agreements signed by Greece include provisions on the exchange of information on the recognition of diplomas. The Greek Inter-Scientific Centre for Recognition of Foreign Diplomas evaluates every foreign diploma on ad hoc basis.

33. **Romania**

- To urge the intensification of the efforts of national authorities of the BSEC member countries to sign bilateral agreements with other BSEC member countries, in parallel with as well as the support of a regional convention on the recognition of higher educational qualifications in the BSEC member countries.
- To ask for the drawing up of a common database containing the list of accredited higher education institutions of all the BSEC member states and information regarding their structure, in order to facilitate reaching mutual recognition of higher education diplomas.
- To ask for the drawing up of a database containing the list of educational fields and specialisations, as well as the recognition procedures in all the BSEC member countries, in order to facilitate reaching mutual recognition of higher education diplomas.

34. **Turkey**

- Procedures concerning the determination of equivalency of degrees awarded by higher education institutions abroad are carried out in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Law on Higher Education and the Regulations Concerning Equivalency of Degrees Awarded by Higher Education Institutions Abroad.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

35. Both the BSEC and the PABSEC have on many occasions stressed the need to facilitate the free movement of businessmen within the Black Sea region. Academic mobility and the free movement of students, lecturers and researchers are also very important for the BSEC countries in order to contribute to forging stronger educational and scientific ties, promoting peace, mutual understanding and tolerance among the nations in the area.

36. Promoting academic mobility, the mutual recognition of higher education qualifications by the BSEC member countries will open their education systems to each other and to the outside world, allowing young people to obtain education abroad and enriching them with international experience. This will undoubtedly contribute to enhancing the human potential of the Black Sea region and raising its competitiveness in tomorrow's global labour market.

37. The diversity of education systems in the countries of the Black Sea region reflects their cultural, social, political, religious and economic diversity, an asset which should be fully respected. The BSEC countries should endeavour to enable their citizens to benefit from this rich diversity by facilitating access by the students of one country to the educational resources of other countries.

38. Stepping up information exchange among the BSEC countries on their higher education systems, institutions, programmes and diploma recognition procedures would constitute a first step on the road towards the mutual recognition of higher education qualifications. Working groups or workshops could be organised for in-depth study of the issue of diploma recognition in the region.

39. Bilateral arrangements in the recognition of academic qualifications should be encouraged, following the conclusion of the first agreement on the mutual recognition of higher education qualifications between Romania and Moldova. Furthermore, cooperation among universities as well as within the framework of the Black Sea Universities' Network could make a significant contribution to promoting academic mobility and mutual recognition of higher education qualifications in the region.

40. The BSEC member countries could benefit from joining the existing international and European arrangements on diploma recognition coordinated by UNESCO and the Council of Europe, first of all, the 1997 Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region.

41. In addition to international conventions, the BSEC countries may consider the possibility of a multilateral agreement or other arrangements on the mutual recognition of qualifications related to higher education, taking into account the specific interests and positions of the member countries.