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## Higher Education in Europe

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## UNVEILING THE HIDDEN INFORMATION IN CREDENTIALS: A PROPOSAL TO INTRODUCE A "SUPPLEMENT TO HIGHER EDUCATION DIPLOMAS"

*Carin BERG and Ulrich TEICHLER*

As the world shrinks and becomes increasingly integrated with regard to the diffusion of technologies, the flow of educated personnel and the requirements both of higher education institutions and of employers, the twin questions of educational mobility and of mobility with regard to employment, are becoming increasingly important. A major barrier to the granting of equivalences is lack of information about the meaning and the value of academic credentials, diplomas, and degrees despite the creation of information centres in various countries and the formulation of various international equivalence agreements, including the Unesco regional conventions on equivalence and the recognition of diplomas and degrees of higher education. Programmes diversify; they undergo rapid change; there are so many exceptional cases, that general information devices cannot keep up to date. What the authors propose and describe is a supplement to be granted with each diploma, the items within it being sufficiently standardized so as to make the value of each corresponding diploma and credential transparent enough to facilitate the granting of equivalences.

### I. Introduction

A broad consensus exists in Europe that international mobility in higher education and occupational mobility of graduates have played roles of increasing importance in the last two decades and will play even more important roles in the future. Therefore, institutions of higher education are expected, to an increasing extent, to receive foreign students who intend to complete course programmes, which they have already begun somewhere else, to take advanced course programmes abroad, and even to follow complete study programmes in countries other than those in which they acquired the necessary prerequisites. Also, employers are being challenged to an increasing extent to recruit persons who have acquired parts or all of their education in other countries.

At present these students and graduates face substantial barriers to mobility including difficulties in gaining recognition of foreign credentials. So far as these difficulties are of a political nature — such as the case of professions open exclusively to nationals with national diplomas — only changes in the relevant laws and regulations will bring about appropriate solutions. However, many of the problems which students and graduates are facing in connection with recognition are coincidental. They are related to the lack of information about their studies, specifically to the elliptical nature of the information given in diplomas of higher education.

The process of educational expansion as well as new societal needs have brought about a diversification in the higher education systems of many

European countries. Varied patterns of institutions and course programmes have been chosen in different countries to meet those challenges. New interdisciplinary programmes have been established: an increasingly broad range of vocational subjects and degrees has been added to the range of academic subjects; the differentiation of knowledge has led to new specialized course programmes; short course programmes have been established to encourage the previously disadvantaged as well as to meet the need for lifelong education. All these developments have contributed, at least on the surface, to a bewildering diversity of higher education institutions, course programmes, and credentials which are barely understood by experts within the given countries and even less by potential "receivers" of graduates and students, be they from within the countries in question or from abroad.

The existing documents certifying the successful completion of courses have not kept pace with these changes. On the contrary, they continue, only too frequently, to be drawn up in ways which obviously have only the insider in mind. Some documents certifying the award of a degree only mention the institution awarding the degree, the name of the graduate, and the date the degree was awarded. Others may additionally address the broad disciplinary areas upon which the student focussed his studies. Still others, while naming specific fields, do not provide information as to grades. Most credentials barely refer to the duration of studies. In many cases, titles are misunderstood in international contexts as in the cases of "Dottore" or "Dottoressa" in Italy, "Doctorandus" in the Netherlands, and "Doctor" in Czechoslovakia, all of which, being conferred upon the completion of a first degree in the respective countries, are not, as might be believed, advanced, research-oriented academic degrees.

Misunderstandings regarding the academic and professional value of higher education diplomas are more likely to occur nowadays than ever before. At the same time, the correct interpretation of credentials, national or foreign, has become increasingly important both because of the growing formalization of admission to higher education at different levels and because of the decisive role credentials play in careers.

In recent years, therefore, efforts have been intensified at various levels to overcome obstacles to the recognition of diplomas so as to promote international mobility in education and in employment. Various international organizations in the Europe Region address these issues, notably Unesco, the Council of Europe, and the European Community.

Various approaches have been chosen in order to facilitate mobility: the conclusion of conventions; the standardization of higher education systems; agreements on equivalences; comparative evaluations; improved information systems on studies, diplomas, and degrees; creation of national information bodies on academic recognition.

Valuable as these activities may be, their effectiveness is limited by the lack of basic information about course programmes, credentials, and the individual study courses of students. The aim of this article is to put forward the view that efforts to provide documents with internationally transparent information relative to the qualifications acquired by individual students and graduates constitute an important step towards the reduction of obstacles to international mobility in education and in employment.

## II. Achievements and Limitations of Various Measures Taken Within the Context of Higher Education to Facilitate Mobility

Obviously, obstacles to mobility in education and employment cannot only be attributed to organizational questions within higher education, nor can the obstacles in question be eliminated by organizational measures alone, important though they be. To promote mobility in higher education, a variety of actions is needed. Although many such actions have already been undertaken or are developing as already mentioned, they are helpful but not sufficient for purposes of recognition.

The concluding of conventions on recognition and mobility is important for several reasons. The conventions attract attention to inherent problems, and they create, for the ratifying parties, a moral obligation to solve the problems in question and to support measures to promote recognition and mobility. By their very nature, however, conventions are frameworks which cannot, given their nature, solve detailed problems. These must be dealt with in other ways.

Methods of standardization can help to reduce those peculiarities of courses, assessment methods, credentials, etc., which happen to emerge as a result of a lack of coordination devices even when genuine diversity is not present. Within any country, emerging diversity will be subject to evaluation after a given period so as to determine whether or not functionally similar course programmes and credentials might not be labelled identically or whether marginal differences might not be abolished in order to justify identical labelling. Such standardization is considered beneficial in terms of reducing uncertainty among prospective students, institutions of education, employers, etc. If international mobility in education and employment gains importance, efforts in favour of standardization will naturally become a focus of attention in international co-operation. Both limitations on the power to standardize internationally and the value placed on diversity in higher education systems — which is one of the attractions of international mobility in higher education — will keep the impact of efforts in favour of international standardization in bounds.

Agreements on equivalences are instrumental in guaranteeing mobility in spite of diversity in higher education systems. Differences in course programmes are accepted, but an "exchange rate" is determined. A student should not run the risk of being refused acceptance in another country as the result of individualized decisions; rather, he should be certain as to the correct assessment of his studies and credentials. Multinational equivalence agreements, however, continue to be relatively vague and to exclude the most difficult equivalence issues. Bilateral equivalence agreements may be more far-reaching, but again, they tend to solve only the most obvious "atypical" cases.

For these reasons, the importance of establishing an improved information system is enhanced. Information systems on studies, diplomas, and degrees existing and operating in the context of international mobility (for example, handbooks and other publications) serve a dual function vis-à-vis international standardization and equivalence agreements. On the one hand, they give information about them and interpret them by means of detailed explanations with regard to which studies correspond to which credentials in terms of framework regulations established in the context of efforts favouring

standardization and equivalence. On the other hand, they attempt to fill in the gap for exceptional cases including those not covered by equivalence agreements. Both the diversity of cases which have to be subsumed to established frameworks as well as the even larger number not covered by such frameworks underscore the importance of information. One should, therefore, not be surprised to observe that most efforts in support of international co-operation for increased international mobility in education and employment focus on these issues.

Information systems which already play an important role in facilitating mobility are certainly going to be improved in the near future. But for reasons to be discussed below, the information systems in question are bound to be incomplete and imperfect given the existing diversity and flexibility of higher education and credentials systems and the rapid innovation occurring in course programmes, all of which are increasing the numbers of "atypical" cases.

The creation of national bodies for information on academic recognition has proved to be most valuable as a means for deepening knowledge of education in other countries. Close contacts among experts in the various centres help establish mutual confidence in the quality of education in the European countries. But even these experts have great difficulty in evaluating given credentials because of the lack of information contained in diplomas and certificates.

We share the view that measures for improving the transmission of information pertinent to the recognition of studies and credentials are crucial for facilitating mobility and therefore deserve special attention. A more detailed discussion of the existing information system might explain why we are favouring a new concept in this domain.

### III. Problems with Regard to General Information Devices for the Comparison of Studies and Credentials

In spite of significant achievements and trends favouring further improvement, we note some shortcomings in the general information devices, such as handbooks, computerized information systems, etc., used for comparing studies and credentials:

1. Such general information devices concerned with studies and credentials in the European countries tend to consider only the current "normal" course programmes and credentials. Lack of information cannot be avoided with regard notably to:

- small subject areas;
- exceptional programmes within disciplines;
- interdisciplinary programmes;
- newly emerged, innovative programmes;
- programmes and credentials that have been phased out or are in the process of being phased out;
- programmes not leading to regular degrees.

Even if handbooks become more sophisticated and detailed in the future, for example through the introduction of computerized information systems, such limitations will nevertheless be unavoidable due to the great flexibility of higher education programmes.

2. Existing handbooks tend to be oriented primarily towards mobility in education, neglecting mobility in employment. There are differences in accessibility to information centres — either *de jure* or *de facto*. More notably, however, information on many employment-related issues — for example, work experience gained prior to or during the course of study, the participation of employment systems in the establishment and accreditation of courses, and the role played by higher education credentials in given countries regarding access to professions, tends to be missing or to be insufficiently provided.

3. Handbooks and computerized information systems on higher education abroad serve the purpose of explaining systems, but they are not necessarily sufficient for describing the competences of individual students or graduates. The qualifications of the latter are best explained by information as to whether or not course and examination regulations rigidly determine the learning and the competences of students and whether or not the students faithfully gear their studies accordingly.

If, however, some flexibility of learning is provided for students or they are permitted to choose atypical ways of learning, their qualifications will not be adequately portrayed by descriptions of the systems themselves. Certainly, efforts can be made to give credit for individually acquired qualifications, but in many cases, insufficient attention to such phenomena can hardly be avoided.

4. Information issues can play very critical roles as potential barriers to mobility in education and in employment not only as a result of problems related to the comparability of different course programmes and credentials but because of the all-too-brief information provided in many credentials. A major function of information centres and of other agencies handling foreign credentials is the decoding of their mysteries. The more cryptic credentials are, the more indispensable the services of such centres become. Even experts may have trouble assessing certain credentials appropriately due to the very small amount of information which they provide. Even within given countries, credentials may provoke misunderstandings, being symbolic rather than informative, and serving the insider rather than a larger range of interested persons and agencies. In international contexts, this situation may create more or less insurmountable barriers to mobility.

5. In some cases, the gaps between the information provided by credentials and the information required by institutions of higher education which are considering students from abroad for admission and employers who are considering employing persons having graduated from foreign institutions can be furnished by means of supplementary statements which degree-granting institutions of higher education can provide upon request. Such a system, however, might pose problems. Administrative insufficiencies, political barriers (in the case of refugees, etc.) and other difficulties can prevent a later supplementation of information.

### IV. Rationales for the Proposal to Introduce a "Diploma Supplement"

Many of the problems described above, which are inherent in the existing information systems, could be alleviated substantially if institutions of higher education issued a "supplement" along with the usual official credentials

— a supplement which would provide basic information on the respective credential.

Such a supplement would:

— indicate the character of the course programme and of the credential in such a way as to facilitate evaluation and comparison with regard to corresponding education in another country;

— explain the qualifications of the person having been awarded the given credential, even if they are not closely in tune with the underlying, typical course programme;

— provide basic information of particular relevance to employing agencies.

The supplement would be of great help to information centres or similar agencies charged with the expert assessment of foreign credentials, particularly in assisting them in doing justice to complicated cases. At the same time, it would facilitate the decoding of credentials, which should in principle be easily understood, by increasing the quantity of information contained in the credentials themselves.

The "Diploma Supplement" should preferably be issued to students, along with the diploma, when they graduate. At this moment, and more so now than later, all the necessary information is easily accessible. Thus, students would be free to use their supplements according to their needs, making legalized copies to attach to job applications or to requests for academic recognition. By such means, problems regarding the release of confidential data could be avoided, as it would be the students themselves who would make their supplements available to other institutions or persons.

In order to serve its intended purpose, the supplement should provide information on a certain range of items including details about the person being granted the diploma, the institution(s) providing the course programme and awarding the diploma(s), the diploma document itself, entrance requirements, studies undertaken, grades earned, and finally, the academic and professional rights acquired by the award of the diploma.

However, a too lengthy or a too complicated formula should be avoided; otherwise, the supplement is unlikely to be generally adopted throughout all European institutions of higher education. Providing the information in question should require only a little extra effort on the part of the institutions concerned as it is to be furnished along with the diploma at a time when it is easily available. That it is not so provided in such a manner today is the result of tradition or of the fact that the need for it has not been perceived.

The supplement should avoid requiring an overly complicated categorization of information for unduly difficult assessments could lead to heterogeneous ways of supplying information as well as to a lack of co-operation in its provision. In some cases, however, like that regarding types of degrees, the classification of information will be unavoidable. If more than one diploma were provided upon completion of an identical course programme (for example, a national diploma and a certificate issued by a given institution of higher education) only one supplement would, of course, be needed.

The supplement should be accompanied by an explanatory note addressed to the recipients of the information thus helping to improve the valid provisions of information as well as the establishment and the understanding of a common terminology.

## V. The Categories Suggested for Incorporation in the "Diploma Supplement"

### A. Personal Data

Basic information about the person to whom the diploma has been awarded should be provided in a first section of the supplement. The statement of family name, given name(s), and date of birth are usually sufficient for identifying the person as well as for matching the supplement, including the certification at its end, with the corresponding diploma.

### B. Institutional Data

In identifying the institutional basis of a higher education diploma, it may not be sufficient to state the name of the institution in which the student was enrolled. An additional category stating the diploma-granting authority is required if the authority in question is not the institution that provided the course programme. Sometimes even a diploma can be awarded jointly by two institutions.

A student might transfer from one institution of higher education to another during his period of enrollment in a given course programme. Today student mobility is encouraged and receives support. Increasing numbers of students have thus studied at several institutions. However, only the institution which testifies the completion of the course programme ought to be mentioned in the supplement, for this institution is the one usually considered to have been the most influential both in shaping the students' qualification and in determining the institutional prestige of a given credential.

### C. Diploma Data

In describing the diploma, one must begin by taking into account the fact that in some cases the completion of a course programme or of a final examination is given a different name than that of the title conferred upon completion. In Italy, for example, undergraduate studies lead to the degree of Laurea, whereby the title *Dottore* or *Dottoressa* is conferred. In some cases, abbreviated titles are common, such as "drs." for the Dutch "doctorandus" and "dr." for "doctor".

Second, one would need some statement as to the type of course programme the graduate has followed. Although this information should be given in terms of the national system of higher education, some kind of typology would be useful in order to understand its character. For example, we find in each country an understanding as to what a first regular university degree means even if the English "bachelor", the Scottish "master", the Danish "candidatus", and the "Diplom" conferred in the Federal Republic of Germany are not considered equivalent. Phrases like "University/Non-University/First degree/Advanced degree/Special programme/Further studies" might be useful in standardizing the description.

Third, we suggest that the date of final completion of the course programme/final examination be stated because, in some cases, a time span of a

year or even more elapses between formal completion and the award of the diploma.

Finally, as suggested above, other formal diplomas which were awarded jointly upon completion of the studies leading to the diploma to which the "Supplement" is primarily addressed should be stated. These diplomas would include university certificates, degrees conferred by other degree-granting institutions, and national diplomas conferred in addition to legally recognized degrees.

#### D. Entrance Requirements

Entrance requirements are among the most important indicators of the level and the quality of course programmes in higher education. It is very difficult, however, to find a yardstick considered appropriate for measuring these requirements in all the countries of the Europe Region. Some countries give particular importance to the type of prior institution or course programme. Others stress additional selection criteria and methods such as grades and admission test points. However, the range of kinds of prior schooling providing eligibility for given course programmes is so broad that it is hardly possible anymore to establish any "typical" access routes. We nevertheless believe that two indicators are particularly suitable for appropriately describing the educational prerequisites of higher education course programmes at universities in the Europe Region:

— Years of prior schooling: Total number of years of prior schooling required for admission to the course programme to which the diploma refers.

— Name of school-leaving certificate or diploma marking the end of preceding education: If no particular name is used, the type of institution or course programme should be stated. In the case of graduate courses, the undergraduate diploma should be stated. If various certificates or diplomas are accepted as entrance requirements, the one which is the most indicative of the entrance requirements for the course programme under consideration (in contrast to other course programmes in higher education) should be stated.

Both indicators should refer to typical entrance requirements, not to the specific qualifications of the given individual, for it is the typical level of prior education, not the de facto educational career of given individuals, that has the greatest impact on the value of a diploma.

#### E. Study Organization

Among various characteristics of course programmes, the overall formal course length is an important indicator. We suggest that the period of study officially required in order to complete a course programme be stated but not the period the student has actually spent studying. The former contributes to a description of the requirements of the programmes while the latter describes individual differences of study behaviour within a given framework. (One has to admit, however, that the borderline is fluid; in many cases a "de facto course length" has emerged, which, although not formally binding, has become more-or-less mandatory.) The overall formal course length includes possible practical periods, if they are counted as terms, semesters, etc., as well as examination periods.

The type of study (whether full-time, part-time, or distance study) should be stated in the supplement, because part-time and distance courses often require extended periods of study in order to acquire the same competences as those acquired by means of full-time study over a normal time span.

#### F. Contents of Studies

A short statement of the field of study is complicated by the fact that the corresponding information included in diplomas in the Europe Region may refer to major groups of fields of studies (for example, the BSc), to individual disciplines (for example, engineering), to generally established subdisciplines (for example, mechanical engineering) and to even smaller areas.

Also, practices vary with regard to the consideration of one or two fields as majors, to provisions for choosing areas of emphasis or of specialization, or for covering the major in a broad way, as well as with regard to the consideration of certain fields as minors or as integral parts of a broad discipline (for example, sociology courses taken within the framework of an economics course programme can be viewed as minors or as forming an integral part of economics like the role of mathematics in engineering courses).

We suggest the introduction of the category, "major field(s) of study/areas of emphasis". No more than one field should be stated in this category unless the diploma stresses that equal weight is being given to two or three fields (for example, teacher training in two subjects).

The information provided in this section ought to give details about the knowledge and the achievements of the graduate. If possible, a list of all individual courses and the respective grades should be provided, particularly in the case of certain countries in which, traditionally, only courses or subjects of examinations have been recorded.

In this connection, the weight placed on respective areas/subjects/courses should also be stated. In addition, the customary way of calculation should be presented, including a statement of the proportion which is given to various parts of examination subjects in the calculation of overall grades, the number of credits required for graduation, weekly hours, etc. Of course, an explanation of the system applied must be included.

As the title of a thesis is generally one of the most important indicators of the area in which a graduate has acquired in-depth knowledge, it should be stated, or if "no thesis [was] required" and the student was conferred a diploma without any thesis, that fact too should be stated. The workload should be indicated but not with reference to the period from the beginning of the course programme to the submission of the thesis, but rather in terms of the calculated time allotted for writing the thesis.

#### G. Practical Period

Information on practical periods has significance in this framework, as the number of course programmes requiring practical work as a more or less integrated part of overall study programmes has increased substantially in recent years. As the supplement should not only ease academic but also professional mobility, practical periods obviously play an important role in the latter context.

The actual duration of practical period(s), which are required or encouraged prior to the granting of the diploma and which are not part of prior educational stages or take place following graduation, should be stated.

It would be helpful to disassociate periods of practical work which fit in with the overall length of course programmes and other practical periods which are not included in overall formal course length. The length of the latter, if they are mandatory, should be stated if their completion requires a prolonged overall period between admission and completion of the course programme even if they are not counted as parts of the overall formal course length.

#### H. Grading Scheme

Grading schemes also display a "bewildering diversity". Grades, for example, can be given to overall course programmes, to major components of course programmes, and to individual study units. Therefore, overall grades can refer to final examinations, to a mix of final examinations and prior course examinations, or only to grades acquired within the context of individual study units. Grades can aim at covering achievement during the overall study period or only that realized during later stages of the study period. We suggest that information relative to what is normally recorded at the concerned institution of higher education should be recorded.

Grades can only be understood if basic information about the grading system is also provided. Such information could include, when applicable:

- the grading scale (for example, 1 = "very good", 4 = "pass", 5 = "fail");
- the distribution of grades (for example, if a degree "with distinction" refers to a certain percentage of students or if a grading scale of 100 points refers to the rankings of the respective pool of students);
- the respective weight given to final examinations and to various fields/ areas of emphasis, etc. within the framework of the overall grade given.

#### I. Rights Acquired (Academic and Professional Rights)

Diplomas not only certify completion of a study programme but may also determine options for further studies as well as for professional activity. The example can be cited of one country in which a diploma awarded at the end of a non-university level higher education programme only entitles its holder to enroll in an undergraduate programme in the corresponding field. A degree awarded by a university, for example in architecture, might give access to the corresponding profession in one country, whereas in another country a graduate might have to pass a professional licensing examination in order to acquire the same professional rights.

Information on professional rights should refer to typical career possibilities. For example, information relative to a diploma in architecture should refer to the career of a professional architect, not to that of a teacher in a vocational school. Since such a choice is not obvious in all cases, the supplement should state the profession to which the information provided refers.

The concept of academic rights should refer as much to admission to undergraduate studies (if the person concerned was awarded a non-university diploma) as to eligibility for admission to a doctoral course programme, etc.

A diploma supplement should receive the same kind of certification as a regular diploma (signature, name, and capacity of signatory, institution, date, etc.). As it is aimed at informing a broader range of people than merely insiders, the information about the capacity of the signatory and about the institution should be stated in such a clear way that identification is possible with the aid of reference books.

#### VI. Conclusions

As we see it, the introduction of a diploma supplement of the kind which we have described would be of substantial help in overcoming difficulties regarding recognition and would hence be an aid to the international mobility of students, graduates, and professionals.

We have referred to the diversity of higher education in Europe. Although it exists, it must not be exaggerated. The European universities share a common past from which they have all developed. The goal of university education is the same throughout Europe: to achieve a blend of advanced knowledge and methodology leading to the ability to undertake independent research. Even if new higher education programmes are frequently geared more to professional life than to further graduate studies, the keywords remain the same: advanced knowledge, methodology, and independent work.

Thus the importance of differences should not be exaggerated but be seen as different paths leading to the same goal. As such, they are both an attraction and a stimulant for students and teachers.

Consciousness of underlying similarities rather than of differences should be the generator of trust and confidence without which the recognition of foreign credentials is not possible. If such a spirit of confidence prevails, improved information by means of a diploma supplement will be a powerful device for ensuring recognition and will thus promote international educational and professional mobility.

#### DIPLOMA SUPPLEMENT

- |                              |                               |                                      |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Family name               | 2. Given name(s)              | 3. Date of birth<br>(day/month/year) |
| 4. Educational establishment | 5. Degree awarded by          |                                      |
| 6. Name of diploma           | 7. Title conferred            |                                      |
| 8. Type of programme         | 9. Overall grade              |                                      |
| 10. Length of programme      | 11. Type of study             |                                      |
| 12. Field of study           | 13. Practical period          |                                      |
| 14. Academic rights          | 15. Professional rights       |                                      |
| 16. Date of admission        | 17. Date of final examination | 18. Complementary diploma            |

## PROGRAMME CONSISTED OF THE FOLLOWING COURSES/SUBJECTS/EXAMINATIONS

19. a) Name of subjects/courses/examinations      b) Workload Units/Credits/Weekly hours      c) Grade

(to be continued on second page if necessary)

## 20. Exemptions/Prior credits

21. a) Title of thesis      b) Workload      c) Grade

## 22. Certification

- a) Date      b) Signature      c) Capacity      d) Stamp

## COMPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

A. Type of establishment

B. Entrance requirements

C. Programme requirements

D. Workload

E. System of examination

F. Grading scheme