

Center for Research and Policy Making

TO STUDY (ABROAD) OR NOT?

THE PROBLEM OF THE
RECOGNITION OF DIPLOMAS ISSUED
BY FOREIGN UNIVERSITIES

Skopje, September 2006



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Introduction

Owing to the rapid expansion and internationalization of knowledge young and ambitious students from all over the world seek better educational conditions and possibilities. Macedonian students follow this global trend studying all over the world from the neighboring Turkey and Bulgaria to the far away Canada and USA. The Macedonian government needs young, educated, creative experts, to help in the process of the EU integration of the country. Simonida Kacarska is one of these bright students. She has been granted scholarships by the government under the condition to return back and work in the public administration to pay back the funding. A graduate from the University of Sussex she has just done that, working for the government at the Secretariat for European Affairs. Yet her situation is absurd since the diploma she gained is not recognized in the country.¹

Simonida is not an isolated case. Take Vesna Garvanlieva for instance. She earned her B.A. and M.A. from the Eindhoven University of professional education and came back to Macedonia. She thought it would be easy to validate her diploma since the Department of Economics at the University of Cyril and Methodius in Skopje cooperates with the Dutch university. But it was not to be that simple. Macedonian universities question the acceptability of qualifications awarded by other, sometimes even partner institutions. Vesna is "still collecting and translating all these extensive documents, sending them to the Netherlands to get them officially approved. This procedure already lasted three months, and who knows when it will end."²

In order to validate a diploma earned abroad Macedonian universities often ask the candidates to rewrite their theses, or take additional exams. If the academic standards at the local department are different than those at the

¹ <http://www.a1.com.mk/vesti/default.asp?VestID=56686>

² CRPM Interview with Vesna Garvanlieva, 27.02.2006.

graduate school one studied abroad, there is a risk that your diploma might be downgraded. Blerim Kollali had his master thesis downgraded to a *specijalizacija*, an in-between qualification equivalent to something more than a B.A but less than an M.A. The reasons were simple; Blerim's graduate school had different academic standards than the local university. The Law Department at the University of Cyril and Methodius is notorious in turning down applicants that have had their master studies for a period less than two years, a local norm. Neither can you have your diploma validated if the thesis is shorter than 100 pages. Knowing this, many do not bother to apply for diploma recognition.

A special problem is the recognition of diplomas of multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary studies. A rarity in Macedonia, multidisciplinary programs are common throughout Europe. Youth from Macedonia graduates at various international universities in Nationalism Studies, Minority and Human Rights Studies, or Studies in Political Tolerance. Since such academic programs do not exist back at home, they have difficulties validating their diploma. Zhidas Daskalovski had his M.A. degree recognized only after a six year period of trying to circumvent the bureaucratic hurdles. No department felt eligible to evaluate the application. Finally a special committee headed by the Minister of Education reviewed and positively evaluated it. Accidentally Zhidas obtained a PhD from a foreign university before his M.A. degree was recognized in Macedonia. Luckily, the process of validating the PhD diploma took only a year.

The possibility that in case when there is no higher educational institution in Macedonia "relevant to evaluate a diploma earned abroad the minister should form a special committee of 3 professors to do so" has been allowed with the 2003 changes of article 168-a of the Law of Higher Education. This should have made easier the recognition of the degrees earned at multidisciplinary programs. Yet in practice there are still problems. Many of the students even do not know about that change in the law, which might be due to its inefficiency in practice. Dijana Despodova a graduate of

multidisciplinary program explained that in Macedonia “there is no place, no mechanism for recognition of these diplomas.” She had her master thesis defended at the Southeast European Studies Department at the Central European University in Budapest, a program that has no equivalent in Macedonia.

In fact, many Macedonian students educated abroad have problems with the recognition of their higher education diplomas once they return to their home country. Based on an independent research and a questionnaire that was circulated among Macedonian students that have graduated abroad, the Center for Research and Policy Making has identified different problems that our students face validating recognizing their diplomas by the Macedonian institutions. Although the sample was small, 60 Macedonian graduates from around the world, their responses have been very instructive. About 70% of these students have not even tried to apply for recognition of their diploma, 20% still waiting for a response by the Ministry of Education. Only 10% of these Macedonians graduates of distinguished universities such as London School of Economics, or Cambridge University have had their diplomas recognized, although many after up to 12 months long procedure.

Some do not even try to validate their diplomas. A main problem is the long duration of the procedure. The complicated, long and costly bureaucratic procedures, the need to provide a long list of documents, and various administration difficulties also deter us, they say.³ Students complain also that relying on ‘connections’ is often the key how to get your diploma recognized by public institutions in Macedonia. The fact that many of Macedonia’s youngest and most promising citizens are not optimistic about the outcome even before they apply for recognition of the diploma is alarming.

This situation is a great handicap not just for the students in question, who are hampered when looking for a job in the public sector, but also for the

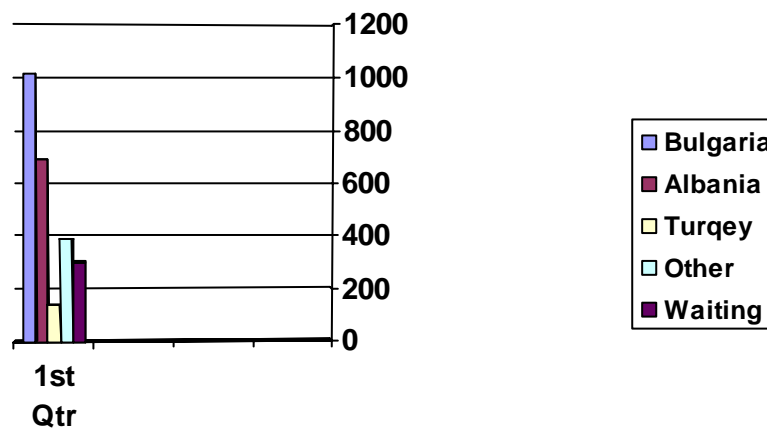
³ See answers to the CRPM questionnaire.

country that does not use their knowledge and skills gained abroad, very often at universities of good standing. Because of the long and exhausting procedure of recognition of diplomas gained abroad, many of these students see their future working in the private sector, NGO-s, or international organizations where their diplomas are positively evaluated. According to the results of our survey, 50% of the surveyed are employed in the NGO sector, 30 % in private sector, the rest being unemployed.

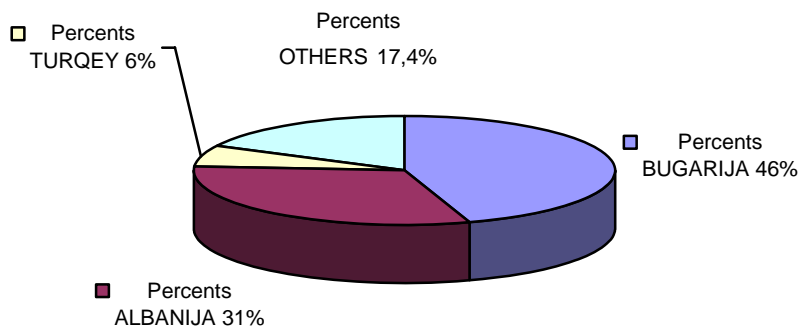
Not only their search for jobs is complicated but also they cannot continue their education at Macedonian universities. Their right to life-long learning is being directly violated. Life-long learning has been promoted in the past three decades, resulting from rapid economic and technological growth of knowledge-based societies. This concept that provides for each individual continual learning process must be available for Macedonian citizens too. The possibility to upgrade one's own professional skills is one of the basic principles of the Bologna Declaration of Higher Education. It is not being given to these students. Neither can they achieve academic and professional mobility on the labor market.

According to the Ministry of Education, the problems with the recognition of diplomas gained abroad occur when the person has studied in countries that do not have bilateral agreements with Macedonia.

Recognized foreign diplomas by country of graduation (Data for the period 03.06.2002-14.12.2005)



Proportion Of Recognized Foreign Diplomas



Although no bilateral agreements exist with Kosovo, Romania and Holland diplomas gained there are increasingly being recognized.⁴ Yet these are exceptional cases and countries. As the table above shows the number of

⁴ CRPM Interview with Dijana Girasova, Information Center- Ministry of Education. 24.02.2006.

approved requests for recognitions of diplomas obtained abroad, received in countries that have not assigned bilateral agreements, is very low.⁵ At the moment, about 300 requests for diploma recognition are under consideration.⁶

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

1

The Legal Aspects of the Issue

The Law on Higher Education deals with the recognition of diplomas earned abroad. The Information Center is a body within the Ministry of Education, which is to assist holders of foreign diplomas, obtain recognition of their qualifications in Macedonia. This Center only facilitates the recognition procedure. It forwards the application to an appropriate review committee of a local university which makes an assessment of the gained qualification and determines its compatibility with the Macedonian educational system. The procedure is complicated. Many documents are required. The review committee, reserves the right to even demand additional documents. In order to process a request the applicant must submit the following documents to the Information Center:

Document	Costs for the Applicant
An original diploma written in the original language and an apostille ⁷ of the certain country;	Up to 100 Euros
Certified photocopies (3 samples) of the original diploma	600 denar-10 euro
Photocopy of the additional documents required by the minister of education;	Up to 10 Euros
Official translation of the certified diploma into Macedonian	300 denar-5 euro
Official translation of the certified photocopy of the BA/MA/PhD/ diploma into Macedonian	600 denar-10 euro
Authenticated photocopy of degrees earned in Macedonia before studying abroad	300 denar-5 euro
Application to the Minister of Education requiring the equivalence of the study document	250 denar-4 euro

⁷ Apostil or apostille is a French word which means a certification. It is commonly used in English to refer to the legalization of a document for international use under the terms of the 1961 Hague Convention Abolishing the Requirement of Legalization for Foreign Public Documents. Documents which have been notarized by a notary public, and certain other documents, and then certified with a conformant apostille are accepted for legal use in all the nations that have signed the Convention.

Applicant's personal statement	Up to 5 Euros
Photocopy of ID card/passport	Less than 1 Euro
Authenticated translation of the curricula of the academic studies to be recognized, as well as an authenticated translation of the Doctoral/Magisterial thesis	up to 25000 denar- 600 Euro
Personal statement signed by the applicant	Up to 5 Euros
A university transcript;	Up to 30 Euros
A payment of unspecified "administrative expenses"	4500 denar- 75 Euro
A fee paid for issuing a certificate recognizing the diploma	Up to 25000 denar- 420 Euro ⁸
TOTAL COSTS	Up to 1280 Euros

It costs a bit of time and money to provide so many documents. All of them need to be certified and authentically translated.⁹ Unlike Bulgaria or Croatia, Macedonian students also need to have an authentic translation of their thesis. Knowing that M.A. and PhD. theses sometimes are lengthy documents, the expenses only for dissertation translation would be enormous. In fact, the recognition of the diploma in Macedonia is one of the most expensive compared to other countries from the region. The total costs could be as high as 1280 Euros! All that money for a stamped piece of paper signed by the Minister proclaiming Simonida a Master of Arts in European politics, within the Macedonian state. For a comparison in Croatia the same procedure costs only 65 euros¹⁰.

Once you submit the documents to the Ministry of Education the recognition procedure starts with an evaluation of the documentation of the applicant by the Information Center. A review committee is established at departments that are equivalent or similar to the one where the candidate obtained her degree. The deadline for the committee to make a formal evaluation is 3 months since the ministry delivers the documentation of the applicant to the committee.¹¹ The review committee has the right to ask for an "additional opinion" by the Information Center regarding all the aspects

⁸ The administrative costs paid to the Ministry of Education for a BA diploma recognition are about 15 000 Macedonian denar (or about 250 Euro); for a MA diploma recognition the costs are 20 000 denar (340 Euro) and for a PHD diploma recognition the costs are 25 000 den (420 Euro), See <http://www.fzf.ukim.edu.mk/pdf/studentski/4-1-1-4.pdf>.

⁹ The cost for certifying a page of any document at a notary is 200 Macedonian denar (3.5 euro) while a translation per page costs about 300 denar (5 euro).

¹⁰ <http://public.mzos.hr/default.asp?gl=200503290000008&jezik=2&sid=>

¹¹ http://www.pravo.org.mk/download/Zakoni/Sub/visokoto_obrazovanie_ID25072003.pdf (25.07.2003)pg.10

that are important for the objectivity of the decision and the deadline for the Information Center to submit the requested information is 30 days¹².

The decision regarding the application is signed by the president and the members of the review committee. Still the ultimate decision is brought by the Minister himself. He/she evaluates if the recognition procedure was carried out in compliance with the law. In practice this procedure is very inefficient and long. Very rarely the decisions for recognitions are made in the time limit set by the law. According to information provided by students responding to our questionnaire, the duration of the recognition procedure *lasts about 12 months*. The Law does not regulate whether the applicant has the right to submit petition in case if the procedure is longer then the legally provided time-limit. If the legal time-limit is broken, the Ministry is obliged to entitle another university to carry out the procedure

Partly the long administrative procedure is due to the fact that the Information Center needs time to check the validity of the applicant's documents. The Center checks the credibility of the university that has granted the diploma. „Until we do not receive confirmation by a given university, we cannot forward the case to the review committee, which aim is to compare the study programs and then to return the documents to the Ministry, where the final decision regarding the recognition is brought up by the minister itself.”¹³ In practice, the checking whether the university granting a diploma is real and legally functioning is done *through email*. Going through the process of validating her M.A. diploma Marija Risteska has noticed the paradox that the officially translated documents and the seals of approval from her university were not sufficient. A query sent electronically to the secretary of the Department of European Public Administration and Public Policy at the Catholic University in Leuven in Belgium about the legality of this institution had to be answered positively instead.

¹² http://www.pravo.org.mk/download/Zakoni/Sub/visokoto_obrazovanie_ID25072003.pdf
(25.07.2003) pg.12

¹³ <http://217.16.70.245/?pBroj=2025&stID=63907&pR=3>

The law on high education does not regulate precisely the position and the responsibilities of the Information center within the system of diploma recognition. The mandate of the Information center is to provide all the necessary documents for the awarding committee to be able, to prepare the opinion regarding the applicant request. There is no time limit that obligates the Center to provide the evaluation of authenticity of the documentation. This is one of the reasons for the exhausting and long duration of the bureaucratic procedure for recognition of diplomas earned abroad. As a consequence often validation of foreign diplomas lasts approximately 12 months. Such a long procedure set by the Macedonian law and implemented by the authorities does not comply with the Lisbon recognition convention, ratified by Macedonia in February, 2002. The convention firmly stands for a transparent and easy procedure in a reasonable time limit.

Article III.5

“Decisions on recognition shall be made within a *reasonable time limit* specified beforehand by the competent recognition authority and calculated from the time all necessary information in the case has been provided. If recognition is withheld, the reasons for the refusal to grant recognition shall be stated, and information shall be given concerning possible measures the applicant may take in order to obtain recognition at a later stage. If recognition is withheld, or if no decision is taken, the applicant shall be able to make an appeal within a reasonable time limit.”¹⁴

Neither does Macedonia comply with the Bologna-Bergen obligations aimed to establish the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010, which state that „the targets include strengthening the role of university level policy making and institutional management, improving access for all ethnic groups, quality assurance and implementation of structural reforms including the degree system and *credit transfer*.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Lisbon Convention

¹⁵ www.bologna-bergen2005.no/EN/national_impl/00_Nat-rep-05/National_Reports-

Two other international treaties are relevant to our problem, conventions on the equivalence of a period of university study:

- European Convention on the Equivalence of Period of University Study¹⁶- brought in Paris 15.XII.1956 as one of the states that have ratified this convention is Macedonia on 30/3/1994¹⁷.
- European Convention on the General Equivalence of Period of University Study¹⁸- brought in Rome 6.XI.1990. Macedonia¹⁹ hasn't signed this convention.

The two conventions give quite general directions. The main purpose of these conventions is to set up the general frame of this specific area of the tertiary education. Some of the main points made in the Convention from 1956 year, that Macedonia has ratified, are that the states that have ratified this convention would provide recognition of a period of study spent at a university of another member country of the Council of Europe *as equivalent* to a similar period spent at a home university (Article2); than determination of the conditions under which an examination passed or a course taken by the student during a period of study at a university of another member country of the Council of Europe may be considered *as equivalent* to a similar examination passed or a course taken by a student at his home university (Article3). Yet the European Convention on the Equivalence of Periods of University Study, applies to the field of modern languages. The European Convention on the General Equivalence of Period of University Study in 1990 came about from the need larger number of students in all disciplines to spend periods of study abroad and the examinations that they would have passed and the courses that they would have taken during these periods of studying to be recognized by their institution of origin. Unfortunately, Macedonia is not among the countries that have signed and ratified this convention.

¹⁶ <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/Treaties/Html/021.htm>

¹⁷ <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/ChercheSig.asp?NT=021&CM=&DF=&CL=ENG>

¹⁸ <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/Treaties/Html/138.htm>

¹⁹ <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/ChercheSig.asp?NT=138&CM=&DF=&CL=ENG>

Only those that have studied in countries with which Macedonia has bilateral agreements are lucky because their recognition of diplomas is mandatory. Macedonia has this kind of agreements with only three countries, Albania, Bulgaria and Turkey. This legal predicament is not fortunate. Many students bring forged diplomas from Albania and Bulgaria and the authorities have to be about the validity of such diplomas. According to the Information Center, the Ministry of Education has the intention to initiative bilateral agreements with all the countries successors of former Yugoslavia²⁰.

²⁰ CRPM Interview with Dijana Girasova, Information Center-Ministry of Education, 24.02.2006.

2

Nostrification or Recognition?

There are subtle differences in the system of “nostrification” or the acceptance of foreign university degrees as equal with domestic ones and the granting of recognition of diplomas. Nostrification is a procedure where it is evaluated if a foreign diploma is equal with the same diploma gained in that country. If one obtains a master’s degree in the Netherlands the exams passed and the methods of preparing the thesis are compared with the same program in Macedonia, If the exams do not correlate, the student needs to take the missing ones, if the thesis is written in a number of pages that is lower than the standard prescribed at home, then he/she needs to rewrite the dissertation. The main issue is the compatibility of higher educational systems in the two countries. But when recognition of foreign diplomas is applied, the home country equalizes the legal status of the foreign diploma with the diplomas earned domestically. If a student earns an M.A. degree abroad then, the domestic institutions need only to check if this has been done at a certified educational institution. If so, the student is concurred the same degree earned abroad, there is no need for taking extra exams, or rewriting the thesis.

Although the Macedonian Law of Higher Education is explicitly to deal with recognition of foreign diplomas²¹, in practice the previous system of nostrification still has a great influence. When a diploma is evaluated for recognition the criteria for its recognition is the compatibility of the higher educational system in the foreign country to the Macedonian one. That is

²¹ See article 34 of the changes of the Law of Higher Education 2003, effectively adding a new article, 165, in the Law of Higher Education,

due to the complexity of the legal conditions needed to be reviewed in order a diploma to be recognized. Articles 175 and 176 of the Law explain that when recognizing a foreign diploma a number of issues have to be considered such as what kind of an educational system exist in the foreign county; the general comparability of the system; whether the higher educational institution is accredited in the foreign country; the condition of enrolment at the higher educational institution; the academic program (curricula) of the higher educational institution; the curriculum of the studied subjects; the duration of every studied subject; the system of assessment of the knowledge; the development of the accreditation system and the system of evaluation in the foreign country and so on.

Based on the conditions stipulated in the Macedonian Law the recognition of the diplomas earned abroad is much more alike the system of nostrification, then the system of recognition of diplomas. Unfortunately the compatibility of the educational systems is still an important criterion in the Macedonian case of recognition of abroad diplomas.

A Comparative Study

In Croatia, the law lists only five criteria for the recognition of diplomas earned abroad, in Macedonia there are fifteen.²² Until the Law of Recognition of Foreign Educational Qualifications was adopted in 2003 and began implementing in 2004 Croatia used a system of nostrification of foreign diplomas. The main responsibility for the recognition of foreign diplomas was with the departments of the University of Zagreb. Since 2004 Croatia uses a system of recognition of foreign diplomas, equalizing the legal value of the diploma earned abroad with the diplomas gained in Croatia. Croatia has a special law²³ that regulates the issue of nostrification of foreign diplomas. Based on that law, the Agency for Science and Higher Education is responsible for the recognition of these diplomas.

Similarly to the current law in Macedonia, the decision by the Agency is made after an evaluation of the documentation of the applicant and the recommendation of the Information Center (the National ENIC/NARIC office) is made. A professional committee evaluates the documentation. It has a time limit of 60 days to deliver the evaluation to the Information Center. A failure to meet the deadline equals to a positive evaluation being made. In the next step, the Croatian Information Center has a time limit of 8 day to give its recommendation for the eventual outcome of the process to the

²² In Croatia the criteria refer only to the following: the gained learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and understanding) and competences; the main features of the academic program; the accreditation of the foreign university and the evaluation of the academic program; the activity, the professional field in which the applicant gains the right to work on the bases of the recognition. The fifth criterion speaks of two additional requirements needed for recognition of PHD diplomas.

²³ See the Croatian Law *Zakon o priznavanju inozemnih obrazovnih kvalifikacija*, Hrvatski sabor na sjednici 25. rujna 2003., Broj: 01-081-03-3248/2, Zagreb, 1. listopada 2003

Agency for Science and Higher Education. Once the Agency receives the documentation it has 8 days to make a decision.

According to the Croatian law the main criteria making the evaluation should be the knowledge and skills gained at the foreign institution. Compatibility of the curriculums between Croatia and the country where the diploma is issued is not a condition in the evaluation process. The whole procedure, which is relatively cheap, costing 400 Croatia kuna (or 65 Euro) is simple and quick, the process usually lasts no more than 3 months. It is also effective. Since 1st July 2004 till 12th June 2006 the Agency received 2182 applications for recognition of foreign diplomas, 1750 (87%) of which were validated and 27 (1.2%) applications were rejected. Most of the rejected applicants studied at universities that have not been accredited.

Recommendations

- Revision of the conditions of recognition. The most important challenge is the establishment of the system of recognition of diplomas in the real sense of the word that would firmly break up the practice of nostrification that generally is exercised in practice. Although the law speaks of a system of recognition of diplomas a procedure for nostrification is still undertaken. Many legal obstacles exist. For example, compatibility of the academic programs is mentioned as an important criterion for the recognition. The number of conditions for recognition should be reduced. All of the conditions that are implying compatibility of the educational systems should be abolished. The law should stipulate that the main criterion for the recognition of a diploma is the gained knowledge and skills.
- In order to prevent the long procedure of the recognition of diplomas which in most cases exceeds the time limit stipulated in the Law CRPM recommends the Croatian solution and experience to be followed. The Law should have an article that would stipulate that in case of breaking the legal time limit for the assessment and the evaluation of the diploma by the authorized committee, a positive evaluation of the diploma would be granted automatically. CRPM believes that this would contribute for more awareness of the need the tasks to be accomplished in the time limit given by the law and in that sense contribute for greater efficiency of the implementation of the law and fairness to the interests of the concerned individuals.
- The time limit regarding the delivery of the evaluation of the documentation by the Information center to the committee should be defined by the law. A detailed information, ought to be given by the Informative center to the evaluation committee. The committee ought to get more data than if the university where the diploma has been issued is accredited or not .

- Bilateral agreements to be signed with the countries from where the most applications for recognition of diplomas are received (the agreement with Romania to be restored).
- The documents needed for the recognition to be downsized and reduced to those essential for the process of recognition and the costs for the administrative procedure to be reduced. The limiting of the number of the documents needed to apply for recognition of a diploma earned abroad could be easily implemented if legal revisions of “the condition of the recognition” are undertaken. CRPM urges the authorities to reduce the enormous high costs of the procedure as even countries with higher living standards (for example Croatia) than Macedonia have cheaper administrative procedure.²⁴

²⁴ According to the State Statistical Office in Croatia an average net salary in Croatia is 4686 kuni (585 euro), while in Macedonia the average net salary in Macedonia is 13544 denari (220 euro).