

UK National Report on the Implementation of the Bologna Process

Introduction

The UK welcomes the Bologna Declaration which aims to encourage and facilitate closer collaboration between higher education institutions across Europe and to increase levels of mobility for staff and students. We believe that the role of Bologna should be to provide a framework which allows support for European universities and colleges to play to their individual strengths in order to meet the challenges of the Europe of Knowledge. Government, higher education institutions and other stakeholders are working together to monitor Bologna developments very carefully and are continually assessing how structures, systems and arrangements in place within the UK fit with the wider agenda set by the Bologna Declaration.

Facilitating communication and engaging stakeholders

The UK Government (via DfES)¹ has the overall policy lead on Bologna issues on behalf of the UK. DfES officials work closely with Government officials within the devolved administrations on matters related to the Bologna process and also with sector bodies and other stakeholders across the UK. A high level Policy Forum has been established to enable government and stakeholders across the UK to share information between on Bologna and other European issues in a coordinated way.

To raise awareness and enhance general understanding of the Bologna process's principles and objectives, a number of meetings and seminars have been held for sector bodies and other stakeholders across the UK. For example, the recent Universities UK Policy conference 'From Bologna to Berlin' held in London focused on raising awareness of the Bologna process and its objectives with a wide range of stakeholders across the UK. The event was addressed by a broad range of speakers, including Charles Clarke, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills in England, and representatives from the European Commission and the European University Association.

Within other parts of the UK, stakeholders are meeting to discuss and debate Bologna issues on a regular basis. European stakeholders and Bologna experts have been invited to participate in these events at appropriate points. For example, the Secretary-General of the European University Association attended a recent

¹ Within the UK, responsibility for higher education policy rests with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in England and with the various education departments within the devolved administrations for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. While many of the high level objectives are similar, individual policies, priorities and practices vary across the UK. These differences have been highlighted as appropriate in this report and further detail is given in the national strategy documents referenced here.

seminar in Edinburgh organised by the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education](#) (QAA) Scotland to engage in discussion around issues related to the Bologna process. The President of Universities UK also spoke about the Bologna process at their annual conference last year. The UK Socrates-Erasmus Council is holding a workshop in September 2003 which will include sessions on the ECTS, the Diploma Supplement and feedback from the Berlin Ministerial conference.

Broadly speaking, current developments in UK policy and practice fit well with Bologna objectives and proposals. Government and stakeholders across the UK are keen to widen the focus of debate and to use appropriate UK policy developments to inform the process. We are currently considering hosting a Bologna seminar, possibly during the early part of 2004. The UK's response to the nine specific action lines identified as objectives in the Bologna process are set out below.

Easily readable and comparable degrees, and the Diploma Supplement

The UK believes that the Bologna process will bring a greater degree of clarity and transparency which will ease the mutual recognition of qualifications across Europe. It also allows for diversity, which is essential to a healthy higher education system. The Bologna process will greatly assist the work of the UK National Academic Recognition Information Centre, contracted to the UK Government to provide a national service to assess the comparability of awards from other countries with those of the UK. This will be a useful development.

We are pleased to confirm that the Lisbon Convention on the *Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region* was ratified by the UK Government on 23 May 2003 and came into force on 1 July 2003.

The UK is adopting national frameworks for higher education qualifications. [The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland](#) has qualification descriptors designed to meet the "easily readable and comparable" criterion in the Bologna Declaration. This was launched at QAA's conference "Bachelors, Masters and Bologna" in November 2000. There is a separate [framework for Scottish higher education qualifications](#), reflecting the distinctive nature of the higher education system in Scotland, with its traditional four-year Honours degree. As part of the [Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework](#) it also includes level descriptors and references to credit.

Both frameworks provide reference points for those seeking information on the range of higher education qualifications available in the UK and how these relate to each other, and enable interested parties to assess equivalences in a clear and consistent way.

Lord Dearing's inquiry into higher education across the UK (1997) recommended that all higher education institutions should introduce an [HE progress file](#) which should comprise of a transcript and personal development plan (PDP) element. We plan to use the transcript part of the HE progress file, which is used to record student achievement, to perform the same functions as the Diploma Supplement. The

documents provide almost identical fields of data and information, although in slightly different formats.

The Progress File Implementation Group (PFIG), which is made up of representatives from higher education sector bodies such as [Universities UK](#) (UUK), the [Standing Conference of Principals](#) (SCOP), the [Learning and Teaching Support Network](#) (LTSN) and QAA is working to support the development of institutions' approaches to personal development planning for their students.

The transcripts follow a common format devised by higher education institutions collectively through UUK and SCOP. The guidelines issued by PFIG encourage higher education institutions to have transcripts in place by 2002/03. The Centre for HE Research and Information (CHERI) of the Open University was recently commissioned to undertake a survey of progress being made on the use of transcripts and PDP. CHERI's survey found that most institutions had already introduced transcripts; where this was not the case they would be in place by Summer 2003. The majority of institutions already produce transcripts for undergraduate students but transcripts for postgraduate students are at different stages of development. CHERI's report will be distributed to higher education institutions.

Some UK higher education institutions have already implemented the Diploma Supplement itself. Universities UK has encouraged use of the Diploma Supplement or compatibility of progress files with it.

In summary therefore, UK institutions are aware of and working towards Bologna recommendations in this area. Although good progress has been made, there is still some work to be done, particularly in relation to the development of transcripts for postgraduate students.

In recognition of wider lifelong learning and Bologna objectives, the development of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) is taking account of the need to harmonise records of achievement (progress files) and degree transcripts with other forms of learning. While ultimately the products of this development work will not be identical to Diploma Supplements, they will share a great number of common data categories and are intended to exceed the Bologna Declaration's expectations in that area.

Two cycle system - undergraduate and postgraduate degrees

The two-cycle undergraduate/graduate system is a traditional and integral part of the UK higher education system. The UK has not therefore had any need to alter current structural arrangements as these are broadly in line with Bologna recommendations. There are however currently some concerns in the UK about how awards such as integrated four and five-year first courses in the UK which lead directly to a Masters level award fit into the structures proposed by Bologna will be accommodated by the Bologna objective. The UK looks to the Berlin Ministerial meeting to endorse the outcomes of the Helsinki seminar in March 2003.

In England and Wales, foundation degrees, two-year vocational awards aimed at helping education providers supply the labour market with the highly trained individuals needed to address the shortage of intermediate level skills, have been introduced. By making higher education more affordable, accessible and appealing to a greater range of students, these will widen participation in higher education and stimulate lifelong learning. These new foundation degrees are proving highly popular with young people – the number enrolling on them in autumn 2003 is over twice what it was in 2002. Foundation degrees are not available in Scotland. Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, other long-standing higher education qualifications, are well respected by employers and higher education institutions both as stand alone vocational qualifications and as articulation awards.

Foundation degrees are not Bologna first-cycle Bachelor degrees. However, students can convert from a foundation degree into a Bachelor degree through a maximum extra four terms of study at English and Welsh Universities. Given the nature of this qualification, it would not be possible to move directly from a Foundation Degree to post-graduate study. Progress to the second degree cycle will continue to be dependent on the successful completion of the first degree cycle.

While doctoral programmes are not formally part of the Bologna process, we welcome and have encouraged, through the UK research councils, the development of broad and flexible doctoral programmes.

Credit Systems

Credit accumulation and transfer systems have existed for a significant period of time in the UK. For example, the Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer system (SCOTCAT) has been operating there since the early 1990s. It is likely, with the development of the new qualification frameworks that even more institutions will be participating in credit accumulation and transfer systems. However, some institutions have indicated, in response to QAA that they would not wish, at this stage, to move to a credit based system because of the structure and organisation of their curriculum. Amongst those institutions that do use credit there are significant differences in the detail of application and a wish by some to retain a shared approach but outside of any national system.

The UK's qualifications frameworks are based on holistic outcomes, rather than solely on credit. In the UK, we tend to view credit as a useful tool to measure the volume and level of learning that a student has acquired, rather than as an end in itself. We place greater emphasis on learning outcomes – what the student can demonstrate that he or she knows and can do – rather than simply the amount of time spent studying. A single framework for credit transfer does exist at national level in Scotland, but not currently across the whole of the UK although, in England, many institutions do have internal credit systems and there are a number of consortia with shared criteria. There are agreements between consortia as well.

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), which applies to students from the age of 14 upwards, includes all Scottish mainstream qualifications in a single unified framework. All HE qualifications should be credit-rated and levelled within the framework by 2003/4. SCQF is not a regulatory framework, but rather a descriptive and enabling one. This allows for the institutional and individual flexibility required in relation to the Bologna process.

The majority of UK institutions participating in Socrates-Erasmus are familiar with the European Credit Transfer System and we anticipate that the use of ECTS will continue to be extended among UK institutions through continued involvement with the Socrates-Erasmus programme. The existence of the national frameworks has made it relatively straightforward for many institutions to introduce ECTS. For institutions not operating within the credit accumulation and transfer system, the widespread existence of the frameworks made them familiar with the concepts and facilitated the introduction of ECTS.

The UK is keeping abreast of ECTS developments and proposals to create a European credit-based framework for lifelong learning, as part of the Bologna process. To this end, we have commissioned the [Higher Education Funding Council for England](#) (HEFCE) to work with key partners in higher education, to develop credit practice. This underscores the European University Association initiative to establish national ECTS counsellors and the helpline which is working closely with the UK Socrates-Erasmus Council. Part of this work is to raise awareness of the ECTS by higher education institutions in England and to encourage developments that both support students and promote compatibility between systems. Because of the experience gained through work related to SCQF, Scotland is keen to contribute to developments in this area within a European context as the principles of SCQF fit well with the objectives of the Bologna and Copenhagen processes.

Most UK higher education institutions have provisions for recognising prior or experiential learning in addition or as an alternative to normal academic entrance requirements. While in a number of institutions this is done on a case-by-case basis, all institutions have specific provisions for admitting mature students and flexible access routes. The percentage of mature students (many of whom do not have standard entrance qualifications) in UK higher education institutions has risen substantially over the last ten years.

In addition, the QAA is preparing guidance for the higher education sector on accreditation of prior learning. The system operating in Scotland has always included an element for the accreditation of prior learning (provided that the learning can be assessed), and one of the key aims of the SCQF is to encourage lifelong learning by facilitating articulation from a variety of routes to ensure maximum flexibility for the learner.

Promoting mobility

The UK is fully committed to promoting mobility. We place a very high value on international exchanges in improving cultural ties and in enhancing the learning experience for home and overseas students.

In addition to our participation in the Bologna process and in EC mobility schemes such as Socrates-Erasmus, and support for the objectives of the proposed Erasmus Mundus programme, we are committed to making it easier for non-EU students to come to the UK by

- streamlining visa arrangements
- giving potential students better information, on opportunities for study and admission requirements both on-line and in person.
- making it easier for international students to combine study with work both during term time and in vacations
- expanding the UK's Chevening Scholarship scheme by up to 1,000 new places.

The higher education funding councils in conjunction with many stakeholder groups, including the Government and the devolved administrations, has recently commissioned a major study of UK students' international mobility.

European co-operation in quality assurance

The primary purposes of quality assurance mechanisms are to ensure confidence in the quality of educational provisions and provide reassurance that standards of awards are being safeguarded and enhanced to give value for money for the considerable public investment in higher education. This will require country specific approaches that have regard to particular structures, systems and requirements at local and national level will be most effective in achieving these aims. This will ensure that arrangements for accountability and continued quality enhancement are both meaningful and manageable. The UK is not in favour of creating a single overarching European quality assurance agency as we believe that a successful quality assurance system should be sensitive to the wider needs of the particular society which higher education establishments serve.

We believe that the best way forward for cooperation in this area would be to establish comparability in relation to outcomes for qualifications as a basis for mutual recognition of qualifications is the prime requirement. After that, there needs to be mutual confidence in the effectiveness of national quality assurance systems. However, that does not necessarily mean that processes necessarily have to be identical, although there are likely to be some common features.

The UK does not operate mutual recognition of accreditation procedures. Our approach is based more on moves towards a mutual recognition of outcomes and qualifications. However, insofar as "accreditation" is defined as the public certification that standards of quality are being met, QAA fulfils that role by publishing

reports on institutions and subjects. A number of institutions which do not have powers to award their own degrees may also offer degree level programmes authorised by, and leading to award of degrees validated by recognised higher education institutions which have degree awarding powers. Within such arrangements, appropriate quality assurance procedures must be applied.

The QAA is an independent body, having a close working relationship with the UK Government, the higher education funding councils, and the bodies representing the higher education institutions. QAA was established in 1997, by the merger of previous activities which were themselves re-scheduled in 1992 after the major reorganisation of the higher education sector. It has many bilateral links with other agencies throughout Europe, mostly involving exchanges of information and experience through conferences and workshops. The QAA is actively involved in the European Network on Quality Assurance (ENQA) and is represented on ENQA's Steering Group.

Within the UK, QAA operates a number of review methods, which differ between countries. In England, institutional audits have been introduced in 2003 to succeed previous programmes of institutional and subject based assessments. These resulted from collaboration between the institutions, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and QAA, and offer judgements on the confidence that can be placed in the management of academic standards and quality in individual institutions.

Given its distinctive education system, arrangements for quality assurance are slightly different in Scotland. The [Scottish Higher Education Funding Council](#) (SHEFC) has statutory responsibility to assess the quality of provision within publicly funded higher education institutions; in partnership with SHEFC and those institutions, QAA has developed an institutional review method that particularly highlights quality enhancement. This model, which places greater emphasis on student involvement in the evaluation process, is currently being implemented in partnership with appropriate stakeholders. This approach which operates only in Scotland includes a national student development service for students wishing to be involved in quality assurance, and national quality enhancement themes. The first Scottish enhancement themes in 2003-04 are 'assessment' and 'meeting student needs'.

In Wales a different institutional review method is also being implemented, again involving collaboration between the [Welsh Higher Education Funding Council](#) (HEFCW), the Welsh higher education institutions and QAA, drawing on aspects of both the Scottish and English approaches.

All of these various review processes will provide comparable overall judgements on the assurance of academic quality and standards of each institution.

The European dimension in higher education

As all higher education institutions in the UK are autonomous bodies, the extent to which higher education institutions engage with the European dimension through curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes, integrated programmes of study, training and research is essentially a matter for individual universities and colleges to decide for themselves. The Bologna process gives impetus to encouraging the European dimension in all aspects of higher education. The UK Socrates-Erasmus Council works tirelessly to encourage partnerships and mobility through promotion of the EC Socrates-Erasmus inter-university programme within higher education institutions and more widely in the UK.

QAA publishes a *Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards* for the higher education sector to use. This covers a number of topics including transnational provision originating in the UK, and delivered in other countries through partner institutions. QAA also publishes guidelines on distance learning.

Under the proposed Erasmus Mundus programme, UK higher education institutions would benefit from running joint Masters with other European HEIs, both through developing closer academic links and in offering attractive courses to international students. UK higher education institutions are already working on about a dozen pilot European Masters courses supported by the European Universities Association, with funding from the Commission. This will help universities and colleges to build strong links with European partners in terms of developing courses, carrying out joint research, staff and student exchanges.

Lifelong Learning

The UK Government is committed to encouraging lifelong learning so that more people can fulfil their potential and operate effectively in a changing labour market, throughout their working lives. Higher education policies support the maximisation of participation in and attainment through learning. In England, the White Paper '[The Future of higher education](#)' (January 2003) sets out the Government's plans for radical reform and investment in universities and higher education colleges. It includes proposals for changes to the student finance system, and plans to make higher education more accessible.

Widening access to higher education is also an important aspect of higher education policy in Scotland and a core part of the Scottish Executive's [Framework for Higher Education in Scotland](#) which was published on 20th March 2003. This document sets out strategic objectives for higher education in Scotland over the next decade.

[The Lifelong Learning Strategy for Scotland](#), published in February 2003 sets out the Scottish Executive's priorities and plans in that area over the next five years. The strategy provides an overarching framework and sets out aspirations for the future which all higher education institutions will play their part in delivering. The strategy sets out five people centred goals which encompass all forms of learning in

Scotland, including provisions within the further and higher education sectors. The Scottish Executive believes that articulation from further to higher education is a key means of widening access to higher education for traditionally under-represented groups.

Higher Education Institutions and Students

Student representatives are included as full members of governing bodies of higher education institutions. The governing body is ultimately responsible for all the affairs of the institution. It exercises its responsibilities in a corporate manner with decisions being made by members acting as a body. Student members are integral to the decision making process. In QAA's English and Welsh institutional audits, students have a central role as participants; in Scotland the [Enhancement-Led Institutional Reviews](#) include a student as a member of the reviewing team. To ensure that students can play a full part in the process, there will be a national development service for students wishing to be involved in quality assurance procedures.

Within the confines of its open and transparent appointment process, the Council of SHEFC has sought to encourage applications from members of the public who have a background in representing students, or providing student support. The Council also ensures that the National Union of Students in Scotland is represented on its learning and teaching committee to provide ideas and feedback from the student perspective which are used to enhance delivery in those areas.

Promoting the Attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area

We are promoting the international competitiveness of the UK's higher education institutions through the Prime Minister's campaign to attract more international students, and are encouraging these students to develop their entrepreneurial skills.

The UK Government and devolved administrations have funded the British Council to launch a major five-year world-wide marketing initiative for UK education to encourage greater numbers of international students to consider studying in the UK.

As part of that campaign, we have launched the [EducationUK](#) brand, which is designed to help UK higher education institutions in promoting themselves internationally. Other UK higher education stakeholders, particularly individual UK universities and colleges, have an important role to play here too. There are also a range of other activities and initiatives currently being undertaken at country, regional and institutional level which aim to capitalise on the interest generated by UK wide initiatives of this nature.

Conclusion

The Bologna process does not lead to a need for fundamental reform of the UK higher education structures. But we are not resting on our laurels. The two cycle

system, including three-year degrees, is in place. We are working on developing that further and the use of compatible credit systems and other elements of the Bologna process to build a European higher education area.

We welcome the chance to work with our European partners on the Bologna Process. Our goal is to develop together a flexible and responsive higher education system in Europe, drawing on the best experience from across Europe, allowing diversity to flourish, promoting flexible structures of qualifications frameworks and quality assurance systems and strengthening co-operation between stakeholders in all areas.