

BOLOGNA MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE 2010

DEGREE AND CURRICULUM REFORM

Comments by Sjur Bergan, Council of Europe

Reforming Europe's degree structure has undoubtedly been one of the major achievements of the Bologna Process. The European Higher Education Area will be characterized by a three tier degree structure. While this pattern has deep roots in European culture – think only of the three estates of bygone days – the three levels of higher education qualifications represent something of a revolution. In many countries the prevailing patterns had been one long, so called “university degree” followed by a doctorate, and in the minds of many students as well as academics, speed was not of the essence in obtaining either.

The European Higher Education Area is united around this three tier structure and committed to developing it into national qualifications frameworks focusing on learning outcomes and on how learners can move within and between education systems. Many paths may lead to one and the same qualification, and there may be several qualifications at the same level. The link between quality and qualifications is crucial: if you cannot ascertain that a given qualification is “good enough”, the discussion stops then and there.

The difficult part is putting the concept to practice. Qualifications frameworks will help learners only if we make structures a reality, only if we self certify what really deserves to be self certified as compatible with the overarching “Bologna framework” and only if we manage to make the focus on learning outcomes a living reality and not a mere policy statement or formal description divorced from the daily lives of students and teachers. That challenge includes finding a proper place for short cycle qualifications. The cooperation with the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and hence with the European Commission must continue.

I am optimistic that Europe will succeed, but to succeed we must recognize the difficulty of the challenge. We must recognize that none of us has succeeded perfectly, we must be relatively open about where we need further improvement and we must be willing to learn from each other. As the Bologna Process turns into the European Higher Education Area, this spirit of constructive humility and cooperation that has characterized it must continue.

We must also dare address an issue that we have not been eager to attack. Qualifications do not exist in a vacuum. They build on our academic heritage and they must meet the needs of society. One of our main challenges in Europe is that we define the needs of society far too narrowly. Economic development *is* important, but so are *personal* development and the development of the kind of societies in which we want to live. Whether we talk about subject specific or generic competences, we cannot afford to limit these to what is immediately useful. A few years ago, the Bologna Follow Up Group had

a chance to admire a correspondence course in the Morse code, complete with cassettes for independent practice. That course was certainly immediately useful at the time but the mastery of dots and strokes had limited lasting value, which is why the course is now in the Technical Museum in Berlin.

Qualifications frameworks, then, have an important formal and structural aspect and I believe we are reasonably close to meeting our goals, even if a few problems remain. National plans for the development of national frameworks now seem more realistic than they did a year ago.

Secondly, qualifications frameworks must exist not only as structures but as living practice. This is a steeper challenge since it involves changing attitudes and habits. This will take longer but we will succeed if we recognize both the difficulty of the challenge and the importance of succeeding.

Thirdly, qualifications frameworks are an instrument not only to further a knowledge *economy*, however important that is, but to develop a *society* based on knowledge, understanding and the ability to act; one based on democratic culture, European values and the ability to dialogue with those who come from different backgrounds; one built through *joint efforts* by students, staff, higher education institutions, social partners and political decision makers. Here, in particular, we would be wise to echo the words of Robert Frost: “we have promises to keep and miles to go before we sleep”.