

Council of Europe Forum on Qualifications Frameworks

Strasbourg, 11-12 October 2007

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Background report

1. The Conference

This conference was the first to be organised by the Council of Europe since it was given the mandate by Ministers of the Bologna countries meeting in London in May 2007 to coordinate the sharing of experience in the development of national qualifications frameworks compatible with the overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. The aim of the conference was to launch the process of sharing the experience of developing qualifications frameworks. There was strong representation of Bologna countries, with 39 attending, and Australia and New Zealand also represented.

The following background information was provided for participants: a background report prepared by Professor Stephen Adam; information on the overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area; a weblink to the report of the Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks submitted to the Bergen Ministerial meeting (2005); a copy of the report of the Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks submitted to the London meeting (2007); the self-certification reports of the Irish and Scottish national qualifications frameworks; and a copy of the book *Qualifications: Introduction to a Concept* by Sjur Bergan (Council of Europe Higher Education Series).

The conference benefited also from a number of presentations which helped set the background for

the discussion groups. Delegates heard presentations about the overarching Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area, about some of the relevant issues emerging from an analysis of the various reports prepared for the London Ministerial meeting, about the concept of qualifications and about the interrelationship between learning outcomes, credits and qualifications frameworks. Delegates also heard some very instructive presentations from countries which had developed national qualifications frameworks in quite different contexts.

The Conference took the form of a number of presentations, each allowing room for discussion afterwards, followed by a number of workshops, which allowed more detailed discussion, greater participation by individuals and sharing of experience. The conference then agreed some broad conclusions and more detailed recommendations.

This conference report attempts to draw out the main issues and themes arising from the discussions at the conference. The main body of the report is structured around particular aspects of national qualifications frameworks and/or issues around the relationships between national frameworks and other frameworks or other action lines or parts of the Bologna 'architecture'. Despite the complex and detailed nature of the subject matter, and the quite different experiences and national contexts of the participants, there were a number of common themes and issues which arose within the presentations many of which were reflected in both the workshop discussions and in the plenary discussions.

2. The Context

The London Ministerial meeting in May 2007 recognised the major challenge presented by the commitment of each of the Bologna countries to the development and implementation of a national qualifications framework for higher education. It also recognised that while there had been some initial progress since 2005, “much more effort is required”. Indeed it was in this context that Ministers invited the Council of Europe to take on the task of supporting the sharing of experience in the development of NQFs.

The background report prepared for the conference by Professor Stephen Adam formed an excellent basis for discussions at the conference. Although Ministers had discussed the extent of progress (or lack of progress) towards the development of NQFs across the Bologna countries, Professor Adam's report for the first time analysed the various reports prepared for the London Summit, in order to gain a more complete picture of progress towards implementing NQFs with the EHEA and to draw out any trends, problems, conclusions and issues for further consideration. The background report drew on the following documents: the European University Association's *Trends V Report – Universities Shaping the European Higher Education Area*; the report prepared by the European Students' Union (ESU, formerly ESIB) *Bologna With Student Eyes*, the Eurydice DG EAC report *Focus on the Structure of Higher Education in Europe 2006/2007 – National Trends in the Bologna Process*; and the Bologna Follow Up Group Working Group report, *National Qualifications Frameworks – Development and Certification*.

Broadly, the context is of a strong desire and commitment across the Bologna countries to the development and implementation of NQFs for HE, but there is a lack of progress and still a relatively small pool of experience and expertise, particularly regarding aspects such as the use of learning outcomes. There is also very little time before the target date of 2010 for all the Bologna countries to have an NQF for HE in place.

3. Themes and Issues Arising from the Conference

As previously indicated, there were a number of recurrent themes and issues which arose in one or

more of the presentations, the workshops or the background report, and this report draws heavily on these themes and issues, and attempts to group them coherently and logically. This report does not attempt to recount comprehensively the discussions at the conference nor to mirror the presentations, but to analyse and draw out some helpful messages and pointers for the future. It includes the conclusions and recommendations from the conference. Further information about the conference, including the background paper and powerpoint presentations can be found on the Council of Europe website at <http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/HigherEducation/QF/>

3.1 The Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area

It is important to recognise the different nature, purpose and role of European qualifications frameworks and of national qualifications frameworks. The conference began with a presentation from Mogens Berg, who chaired the Bologna Follow Up Group Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks from 2003-2007. He outlined the role and nature of the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. The full report of the Working Group is an extremely useful guide for countries seeking to develop their national qualifications framework and can be found at http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf.

The overarching EHEA framework comprises three cycles, with generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and ECTS credit ranges (credit ranges are given for the first and second cycles only). Broadly, the EHEA framework provides international transparency, facilitates the international recognition of qualifications and the international mobility of learners and graduates. It has been described as a 'translation device', which allows national qualifications frameworks to communicate or to be compared. The cycle descriptors for the EHEA framework, sometimes also known as the Dublin Descriptors, are generic and relate to: knowledge and understanding; applying knowledge and understanding; making judgements; communications skills; and learning skills. These descriptors are not subject-specific, as they are intended to apply across all subjects, across all the Bologna countries and across all types of higher education institution, regardless of the profile or mission of the HEI.

The report of the BFUG Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks also provides for the alignment of national qualifications frameworks with the overarching EHEA Framework. This alignment is based on 4 principles: not external control, but trust building; minimum criteria for verification of compatibility of the NQF with the EHEA Framework; procedures for self-certification of compatibility; and quality assurance. The minimum verification criteria broadly include aspects covering: clarity of responsibilities of the bodies responsible for the development of the national framework; the need for demonstrable links between qualifications in the national framework and the cycle descriptors of the EHEA Framework; the NQF must be based on learning outcomes and qualifications must be linked to ECTS credits; transparency of procedures for the inclusion of qualifications in the framework; quality assurance systems must refer to the national framework; and Diploma Supplements should refer to the national framework. More detailed information on these criteria and on the self-certification procedures are included in Chapter Four of the Working Group's report.

The BFUG Working Group report also described 10 steps in the process of establishing a national qualifications framework compatible with the EHEA Framework. These are: decision to start the process; setting the agenda: the purpose of your NQF; organising the process; designing the framework; consulting with stakeholders; approval of the framework; administrative set-up; implementation at institutional/programme level; inclusion of qualifications in the NQF; and finally self-certification of compatibility with the EHEA Framework.

Thus the EHEA Framework and the report of the Working Group more generally provides an external reference point for countries seeking to develop a national qualification framework as well as giving guidance for countries about the processes involved in developing and implementing their frameworks. It also offers criteria for countries within which to work when testing and verifying their national framework against the EHEA Framework. It is a generic overarching framework which provides the parameters within which national frameworks operate, while functioning as a sort of translation device which helps countries to compare and make sense of each other's qualifications. It is not a straitjacket which restricts national systems, rather it provides a means to help understand diversity.

3.2 National qualifications frameworks

It is clear that national qualifications frameworks must be developed in the national context, not at European level. This point is made clearly in the report of the Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks and is also borne out by the experience of countries who have recently developed national frameworks. The Council of Europe is clear that it has a coordinating role, but has no remit to develop national qualifications frameworks. The Council's role will be fulfilled in four main ways: by organising a limited number of pan-European events; by organising or helping to organise regional and/or topical events; by helping to organise national or regional events; and by chairing and serving the Bologna Coordination Group established by the BFUG to advise the Council in fulfilling its mandate. It is clear that the elaboration of national qualifications frameworks is the role of 'national competent bodies' – these will vary between countries. In Ireland, it is the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, in Scotland, it is the Scottish Advisory Committee on Credit and Access, which is jointly owned by the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland and Universities Scotland (Scotland's rectors' conference). In many Bologna countries, the national competent body will be the Ministry.

In terms of progress in the implementation of national qualifications frameworks, the 2007 Stocktaking report indicates that 7 countries had a national qualifications framework in line with the EHEA Framework in place, 6 had discussed a proposal for a national qualifications framework and a timetable for implementation had been agreed, a further 11 had prepared a proposal for a national qualifications framework in line with the overarching EHEA Framework, 23 had begun a development process, and in 1 country work had not yet commenced.

The importance of ensuring that an element of testing is included during the development stage of the NQF was also stressed. The Hungarian presentation described the development of a national qualifications framework in the Bologna context as “a unique opportunity to review and possibly re-design qualifications and the whole qualification system”. It also stressed the need for a critical debate at national level during the development of the framework and the need for close cooperation between institutions and the quality assurance agency in developing new evaluation criteria. Other presenters also stressed the essential link between the NQF and quality assurance or accreditation systems.

3.3 The relationship between QF-EHEA and NQF

Although the report of the BFUG Working Group is quite clear on the issue, some concern remains in some quarters about the relationship between the EHEA framework and national frameworks. Indeed it appears that there may even be some confusion (although not at this conference) as to the need to develop national qualifications frameworks, given that the EHEA framework has been developed. Professor Adam's background report warns of the danger that some countries regard the adoption of the generic EHEA or 'Dublin' descriptors as sufficient national descriptors for their

national framework. The key to this issue lies in the different nature and purpose of a European framework and of the national frameworks.

The European framework has broad cycles, whereas national frameworks have levels. In many cases, the NQF for HE will have more than three levels. National frameworks contain qualifications descriptors which are more detailed than the cycle descriptors and which have more specific definitions relevant to the country's qualifications. This is also borne out by the experience of countries which have developed NQFs. The Irish, Scottish and Hungarian NQFs all have descriptors which are more detailed than the generic EHEA descriptors, because they need descriptors which are both useful and relevant to their national contexts. However, it is essential that the descriptors in national frameworks are compatible with the EHEA cycle descriptors. Verifying compatibility of the national descriptors with the EHEA descriptors was a central part of the self-certification process for the Scottish and Irish frameworks – indeed the BFUG Working Group congratulated Ireland and Scotland for the thoroughness with which they undertook this aspect of their work – and has also been a significant part of the work undertaken to develop the national Framework in Hungary. It is difficult to imagine that these countries would have spent so much time and effort developing their own descriptors or verifying their national descriptors if they did not provide significantly more value and functionality for their national context than the EHEA descriptors. The alternative would be simply to translate the Dublin Descriptors and use them as the descriptors for your national framework – an approach which Professor Adam's report clearly warns against.

Whereas the European framework has broad credit ranges for end of cycle qualifications, national frameworks often have more detailed and published rules for the use of credit, including minimum numbers of credits at the level of the award, particularly for awards which straddle more than one level. This is the case in both the Scottish and Irish frameworks.

Ministers decided in Bergen not to include short cycle qualifications as an integral part of the EHEA framework, in part, it seems, because a number of countries do not have short cycle or 'intermediate' qualifications and were concerned that to include them in the EHEA Framework might in some way require them to develop short cycle qualifications. However, national qualifications frameworks can and often do include descriptors for short-cycle qualifications. This is true for both the Irish and Scottish Frameworks although in the Hungarian framework, the short cycle is 'officially' not part of the framework yet.

3.4 Different drivers, purposes/aims

As indicated elsewhere in this and other reports, the development of a national qualifications framework consistent with the EHEA Framework is a major undertaking. It requires a great deal of discussion, development and effort on the part of all those responsible and even more work within higher education institutions to implement and it is therefore not something to be embarked upon without careful consideration. The importance of getting this stage of the development right was emphasised by all the participants whose countries had developed an NQF.

Once the decision to develop a national qualifications framework has been taken, the next and perhaps most important step is to discuss and agree the purposes and aims of the framework. All the contributions from countries having developed a national qualifications framework stressed the importance of a national dialogue, involving all the key stakeholders, to agree the purposes and aims of the framework. This is crucial because there may well be different drivers and there will undoubtedly be different policy contexts and decision making structures in different countries.

Internationally, there is considerable variation in the drivers or pressures to develop a national

qualifications framework. The drivers for a national qualifications framework in South Africa were similar, but also included wider social objectives, such as redressing some of the injustices of the former apartheid system. Its objectives include: to facilitate access to education and training; to facilitate mobility and progression within education, training, and career paths; to enhance the quality of education and training; to accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities; and to contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large (SAQA Act of 1995). Learning opportunities would be opened for the disadvantaged, and would ensure that learners could progress through articulated qualification levels and coherent career paths (Departments of Education and Labour 2002).

The New Zealand Register of Quality Assured Qualifications is a framework for all quality assured qualifications in New Zealand, including the qualifications of universities. The register aims to: show relationships between qualifications; facilitate candidates' ability to choose programmes and to transfer credit; clearly identify all quality assured qualifications; and assist in the international recognition of New Zealand qualifications.

In Ireland, a consensus was developed between 1992 and 1999 on the need to develop a national qualifications framework. It was agreed that there was a need for a coherent national policy approach to qualifications and for qualifications to support a lifelong learning society. A key aim of the framework is to promote and facilitate greater access to education and training and progression from one qualification to another. The framework aims to put the learner at the centre of education and training in Ireland and to make it easier for learners and employers to compare and contrast different qualifications.

In Hungary, the aims of the NQF for higher education are to provide information to end users (employers, parents, institutions, potential students) on the conditions for obtaining an award and on the content of qualifications; to assist student choice by informing students about possible progression routes in the lifelong learning context; to give guidance to higher education institutions in defining their own academic standards; and to give guidance to external evaluation bodies in defining reference points for external evaluations.

In Scotland, the main driver was a national inquiry into higher education, itself part of a wider United Kingdom inquiry, which reported in 1997. A strong and clear consensus emerged that there was a need for an integrated lifelong learning credit and qualifications framework which could build on existing qualifications frameworks and a successful credit system which was already used across the whole HE sector. The aims of the framework were focussed on the learner, on improving mobility between different education and training sectors. It was also agreed that it would be a descriptive, rather than a regulatory framework, but that there would need to be quality assurance of all learning to be included in the framework.

We can see that, although there are different drivers or pressures which have led to the development of these NQFs and they do not all have the same aims, there are a number of commonalities between them. These are largely focussed around creating greater transparency for learners and other stakeholders, clearer information about qualifications, allowing comparison between different qualifications and helping learners and other stakeholders navigate a course through lifelong learning. It is also clear, from the presentations and discussions at the conference, that each country has developed its framework in its own way, finding approaches which suit its particular structures and policy context. In a number of cases this development and even 'pre-development' of frameworks has been lengthy and sometimes difficult. One of the benefits of the presentations and discussion at the conference was that the presenters were open about the difficulties and setbacks they faced and the lessons learned from their experience. Delegates were urged not to develop

frameworks simply because they were asked to do so by the Commission, or Governments or Ministries, but because it will benefit learners.

The frameworks cited vary in terms of scope, administrative arrangements, quality assurance arrangements, but the national frameworks from each of the European countries mentioned above appear to fit well within the parameters of the EHEA Framework. Of course, within the Bologna Process, there are a number of drivers which create the demand for the development of NQFs, including a growing recognition that NQFs are of central importance to the achievement of the Bologna objectives. The London Communiqué re-emphasises the need for NQFs, compatible with the EHEA Framework, and in particular the need for them to be “designed so as to encourage greater mobility of students and teachers and improve employability.”

3.5 No single/correct model.

NQFs are still a relatively new concept and the more established frameworks (e.g. Ireland, New Zealand, Scotland) all suffer to an extent from being in the vanguard of NQF developments.. All have found ways of reviewing their frameworks and drawing on more recent and ongoing developments. Delegates from each of these countries made it clear that, although they were happy to share their experiences and information about their own NQF, it was important for every country to develop its own framework to fit its own national context.

This message was reinforced by the Hungarian experience, which is that, although they had studied the experience and diversity of other NQFs internationally, it was difficult to adapt methodologies from existing NQFs in different countries to the Hungarian context. Although they had learned from the experience of others, they were clear that they needed to develop a framework which fits their own national context.

There is diversity between existing NQFs in terms of the number of levels. Some countries may choose to have a several levels and, like the Scottish and Irish frameworks, subdivide the first cycle into levels. Others may choose to have three levels, which would correspond with the three cycles of the EHEA Framework. The Hungarian framework currently only has the three cycles, although it was suggested that this may not be sufficient to reflect Hungary's very complex HE system. What is clear is that decisions about level descriptors and the number of levels are decisions to be taken by individual countries.

The report of the Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks also recognises that there is no single model or template to follow, nor is there a single 'correct' approach to developing a national qualifications framework. It is for this reason that the report offers guidance in the form of principles and criteria, rather than offering prescriptive or narrowly-defined solutions. This does not, of course, give countries 'carte blanche' to develop whatever NQF they choose – the NQF must be designed to fit within the parameters of the EHEA Framework. The criteria and principles for the self-certification process are important safeguards to ensure that for any NQF to be deemed consistent with the EHEA Framework, it will have to go through a rigorous assessment, including by international participants.

3.6 National Qualifications Framework for HE or integrated Lifelong Learning Framework?

The background report for the conference reports some confusion and concern about the roles and relationships between the EHEA Framework and the Commission's EQF for Lifelong learning. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some countries appear to believe that by developing a single national lifelong learning framework, they would not be required to develop an HE framework. Other players have suggested strongly that all countries must develop a single integrated lifelong

learning framework. However, the London Communiqué clearly indicates that Ministers “are satisfied that national qualifications frameworks compatible with the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area will also be compatible with the proposal from the European Commission on a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning’ (this was also the view of the BFUG Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks). Ministers also committed themselves to “fully implementing such national qualifications frameworks, certified against the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA, by 2010.”

Of course, individual countries are free to make their own decisions about their national qualifications framework, including whether or not they develop a single framework encompassing lifelong learning, or a separate framework for HE or even different models with varying degrees of integration or linkage between frameworks. Once again, the key issue is that the arrangements should be 'fit for purpose' and therefore designed to suit the national context, while fitting within the overarching European arrangements.

Interestingly, the two countries so far whose NQFs have successfully undergone the self-certification process, Scotland and Ireland, have integrated lifelong learning frameworks. As the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) is not a regulatory framework, the HE qualifications framework in Scotland has its own regulatory arrangements, and it was the HE part of Scotland's lifelong learning framework which was self-certified against the EHEA Framework. Hungary has an HE framework but the Government has also decided to design and implement a national qualifications framework for lifelong learning. The work to develop an HE NQF is undertaken by a Working Group for the HE Qualifications Framework, under the auspices of the National Bologna Committee. The HE Group is also linked to a larger Committee to develop the lifelong learning framework for Hungary. It is clear that there is already a variety of models under development within the EHEA, ranging from a fully integrated lifelong learning framework, regulated by a single authority (e.g. the Irish National qualifications framework), through to frameworks developed as standalone HE frameworks, such as the Danish framework.

One message which was clearly articulated in the presentation of the New Zealand experience is the need to ensure that, if a decision is taken to develop an integrated lifelong learning framework, then it needs to properly recognise degrees. The proper inclusion of degrees was a significant problem during the development of the NQF in New Zealand, which was only resolved with the later development of the Register of qualifications, and the inclusion of degrees was also problematic in the South African experience. A particular problem arises where an overly mechanistic approach is proposed, which seeks to suggest that degrees can simply be composed from small units of learning without a decision by the university regarding the overall coherence of the qualification.

A clear message came from the European Commission that, although some parties remained to be convinced of the rationale to develop a parallel framework, both the EHEA Framework and the Commission's EQF for lifelong learning “are here to stay” and it was emphasised that there are a number of points where the frameworks meet.

3.7 The importance of Learning Outcomes

The crucial and transforming role of learning outcomes within NQFs was a recurrent theme of the discussions at the conference. This is hardly surprising, as their importance was stressed repeatedly in the London Communiqué. Learning outcomes were described as basic building blocks of the Bologna Reforms. Presenters from countries with outcomes-based NQFs were keen to stress that the shift to learning outcomes is difficult and takes a great deal of effort and time. The impact of learning outcomes should not be underestimated and there is evidence from established outcomes-based NQFs that if used properly they do have a positive impact on all aspects of learning, teaching

and assessment as well as on the relationship to each of these facets of the process of higher education.

Given that some evidence suggests that there may be some countries which take the view that translations of the cycle descriptors would be sufficient to describe a national qualifications framework for HE, the conference produced some timely advice for countries seeking to develop their NQF. Learning outcomes need to be written at a variety of levels within the national context including national level, institutional level, programme level, module and can also be written to reflect the detailed outcomes of each individual class, lecture, tutorial or practical. A good deal of evidence exists to support the argument that the introduction of learning outcomes is a major and transformational undertaking. Equally, there is little point in expressing an NQF and even individual qualifications in terms of learning outcomes if it is done in a minimalist way, as a means to satisfy external interests, but the learning outcomes are not then used in ways which have a positive impact on the relationship between teaching, learning and assessment, or on student mobility.

The experience of countries implementing outcomes-based frameworks is nevertheless that there is a degree of resistance from academics when they are first expected to write programmes, modules, individual lessons as learning outcomes. It was stressed that if learning outcomes are adopted positively and written properly, it is both challenging and rewarding for academics. Representatives from the countries which now have established HE frameworks based on learning outcomes all indicated that the culture change, while broadly established, had not fully permeated to all academics and that there remained variation in the effectiveness and quality of the descriptions of learning outcomes written by individual academics.

3.8 The importance of the link with ECTS

There was a very interesting discussion at the conference on the relationship between Learning Outcomes, credit, and qualifications frameworks. The London Communiqué, drawing on the evidence of the various reports prepared for the London Ministerial meeting, emphasised the need for HEIs to develop modules and study programmes based on learning outcomes and credits. The EUA's *Trends V* report and the European Student Union's *Bologna With Student Eyes* raised serious concerns about the extent to which ECTS was being used properly, with significant issues about the extent to which workload is being measured or estimated and also with concerns that there was not yet an adequate link between ECTS credits and learning outcomes in most countries. *Bologna with Student Eyes* identifies only 3 countries where it is reported by the national student union that student workload is properly measured and credits are adequately linked to student workload. The concerns raised were not about ECTS itself, but about it not being properly implemented.

Members also heard that an analysis of the various reports (and other related information) for the London Ministerial meeting examining the use of ECTS indicated that around 20 countries have an existing national credit accumulation system or rules which are compatible with, are based on, or work within the parameters of ECTS. This indicates that a good deal of credit accumulation experience exists in a large number of Bologna countries and HEIs and that this experience could usefully be shared within the Bologna countries. In several NQFs, qualifications straddle levels and have credits awarded at different levels of the NQF, providing a direct link between credits and learning outcomes. Perhaps the key to achieving better implementation of ECTS lies in proper development of national qualifications frameworks based on learning outcomes, linked to ECTS credits? Issues were raised about the workload assumptions included in current drafts of the ECTS Key Features document. Some contributors suggested that the assumptions of 25-30 hours per credit and 1500-1800 hours per full-time academic year were too high. There was some concern at the suggestion that ECTS was in some sense a 'meta-system' for credit accumulation, but the

consensus which emerged was that the important aspects are the need for some flexibility and the need for a link between learning outcomes and credits.

3.9 Interdependence of Bologna reforms

Evidence from the various reports developed for the London Ministerial meeting shows that countries which have developed national qualifications frameworks consistent with the EHEA Framework also scored highly in the Bologna Stocktaking Scorecard. This is recognised explicitly in the 2007 Stocktaking Report (p 17). The interdependence of Bologna reforms was also a recurring theme of this conference. Aspects which were raised at the conference as of particular significance to the development of NQFs include: quality assurance; ECTS, lifelong learning, learning outcomes and recognition.

3.10 Timing Issues

The overwhelming evidence from countries which have developed national qualifications frameworks is that the development and implementation of an NQF is a major undertaking and one which takes a great deal of time and effort. Countries which have “pre-Bologna” frameworks in place took between 8 and 15 years to develop and put in place their NQFs. Generally, these are integrated lifelong learning qualifications frameworks and for reasons which are touched on elsewhere in this report, designing and achieving a consensus on a fully inclusive lifelong learning framework can take a considerable amount of time. Arguably the development of a national qualifications framework for HE alone should not require quite so long to develop and implement. It is also arguable that Bologna countries which are currently developing a national qualifications framework now have the benefit of the EHEA Framework and the report of the BFUG Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks to provide guidance and parameters within which to design and develop their national frameworks. While much has been done by the BFUG Working Group and more recently, the Council of Europe, to support countries in elaborating their own NQFs, the evidence of the stocktaking and other reports prepared for the London Summit show that progress has been relatively slow. It is also clear that countries must develop their own frameworks to suit their national context and it is simply not feasible nor appropriate for countries to either adopt the framework of another country or simply adopt the EHEA Framework as a national framework.

There is a balance to be struck between trying to put the framework in place by 2010 and ensuring that it is adequate to achieve its aims and that it has a sufficient degree of ownership amongst the key stakeholders for it to be properly implemented. There is a danger that a hurried implementation of a national framework could lead to a failure of the self-certification process. This point is made by Professor Adam in his background report for the conference. He suggests that a target date of 2010 for all Bologna countries to have in place a national qualifications framework compatible with the overarching framework is highly ambitious. Section five of the background offers some further issues for consideration and provides a checklist of questions for countries to consider at different stages in the process.

3.11 Areas of Difficulty/ Issues for further discussion

Given some of the concerns about timescales for implementation, there is a danger that if countries rush the design and development of their NQF it could lead to a framework which is not well implemented and needs major reform later.

There needs to be clarity about what constitutes national qualification descriptors. This is evidenced by significant variation in the length and clarity of comments in national stocktaking reports about qualifications descriptors in the NQFs.

Likewise there appear to be misunderstandings about what is meant by 'levels' in the context of outcomes based qualifications frameworks. For example, some delegates argued that sub-levels were needed in order to distinguish between vocational and academic HE and others indicated that in some countries, levels are defined in terms of duration.

Language and translation difficulties can compound the difficulties mentioned in previous paragraph. They can also cause difficulties in countries where change requires legislation.

There is a danger in assuming that models and approaches such as those in Ireland and the United Kingdom, where much is developed by informal (? – since legislation also requires consensus, but this then needs to be formalized) consensus, rather than by legislation, are easily transferable to other contexts, particularly those where most change is effected by legislation. Detailed 'reference points' are not appropriate for legislation and even if they were not put in legislation, there is a danger that in some countries, they would be treated as though they were legislation.

Ownership of a national qualifications framework – particularly by HEIs, but also by learners, is seen as crucial to its success. This point was stressed in the report of the BFUG Working Group on qualifications frameworks and also by countries which have developed NQFs. Likewise, a perceived lack of 'ownership' has been cited as causing major difficulties in the development and success of NQFs, and has been a particular problem for inclusive lifelong learning frameworks.

Full consultation of all relevant stakeholders is widely regarded as important, yet many delegates indicated that their Ministry does not consult them properly, or that in their country the process was very 'top-down'. However, many also argued that the universities in their country were already overstretched and didn't have the capacity to develop an NQF.

Issues about the status of NQFs and in particular levels. For example in some countries, levels of attainment carry rights, such as career progression, access to specific jobs, or to salary levels. There is a danger that NQFs and particularly levels, might be used by stakeholders, including trades unions and governments for purposes for which they were not intended.

4. Conclusions of the Conference

- Outcomes-based NQFs represent a paradigm shift – a change of focus, from teacher to learner and are not a cosmetic exercise
- NQFs are a new way of describing qualifications and systems and how they compare and relate to each other
- Implementation takes a considerable amount of time and effort and is an ongoing process, which should include reviews of progress and impact
- If the full benefits of the NQF are to be achieved, ownership by HEIs and learners is crucial
- Negotiation of the NQF needs balanced relationships between HEIs and national authorities and clarity about the responsibilities of each of the players
- There is a need to clarify and strengthen the roles and relationships between ECTS and NQFs
- Workload is approximate and notional, but must also be realistic and checked/reviewed
- There needs to be clarity about how systems locally estimate and use workload for curriculum planning
- Quality assurance of credit allocation and assessment is essential
- There is a need to ensure that ECTS and ECVET articulate
- A 'best fit' approach to the development of NQFs is important – the EHEA Framework is not

a straitjacket!

- Countries which have developed and implemented NQFs can inform and assist countries developing an NQF – but they don't have all the answers and can't provide a template for each national context
- Countries with NQFs already in place can learn from those who develop their NQF with a knowledge of the EHEA Framework
- Experience suggests that NQFs will develop levels within cycles, particularly the first cycle – these provide more functionality and greater benefits for learners and academics
- NQFs need to develop a common vocabulary which is clear, simple and accessible to many audiences
- The NQF needs to be generic enough to represent the diversity of the HE system, including covering institutions with different profiles
- The links between qualifications frameworks for HE and those for lifelong learning and VET will become increasingly important

5. Recommendations from the Conference

The participants in the Forum made the following recommendations:

to national public authorities

Participants recommend that competent public authorities of members of the Bologna Process:

- seek to develop national qualifications frameworks compatible with both the overarching framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA framework) and the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF)
- make explicit the roles and responsibilities of various actors in the development of national qualifications frameworks;
- take due account of related developments in areas like ECTS and quality assurance provision;
- in particular, take account of the interface between national qualifications frameworks and all the Bologna action lines;
- engage actively with higher education institutions, students, staff and other stakeholders in the development of their national qualifications frameworks;
- make information on the development of their national qualifications frameworks easily available through dedicated web sites;
- provide the Council of Europe and the Bologna Secretariat with information on the web sites and on significant updates so that relevant information may be easily shared with other members of the Process;
- make clear the scope of the national qualifications framework and its relationship with the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA as well as with the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning;
- appoint a “qualifications frameworks correspondent” (see recommendation to the Council of Europe, below) and ensure that relevant information on the development of qualifications frameworks in other countries as well as on European developments is disseminated and shared within each country.

to higher education institutions, Rectors’ conferences, the European University Association and EURASHE

Participants recommend that higher education institutions:

- be explicit about how they estimate and use workload for curriculum planning;
- involve students in the definition of workloads;
- engage with national authorities and other partners to develop and implement national qualifications frameworks;
- support the proper implementation of ECTS based on learning outcomes and student workload, in particular as regards the accumulation function;
- develop and deepen the use of learning outcomes across all aspects of learning, teaching and assessment.

To student unions and to the European Student Union

Participants recommend that student unions and the European Student Union:

- engage with other key players to encourage and support the proper use of learning outcomes and workload in implementing ECTS and qualifications frameworks;
- raise awareness among students of the roles and functions of qualifications frameworks and the importance of learning outcomes.

To quality agencies and their stakeholders:

Participants recommend that quality agencies and their stakeholders:

- when developing/reviewing national quality systems, ensure that these encompass arrangements for review of use of qualifications frameworks, learning outcomes and allocation of credits.

to the Council of Europe, under its mandate to support the sharing of experience

Participants recommend that the Council of Europe:

- develop a specific section of its higher education web site dedicated to the sharing of experience in the development of national qualifications frameworks and through this web site make pertinent information available to a wide audience;
- establish a mailing list of “framework correspondents” comprising all Bologna members, upon nomination by the competent public authorities, and seek to disseminate information regularly through this mailing list;
- establish a base of experts that may assist the members of the Bologna Process, upon request, in the development of their national frameworks and that, together, represent a diversity of national and institutional experiences;

to the European Commission, as coordinator of the European Qualifications Framework

Participants recommend that the European Commission, in its support for the development of national frameworks compatible with the EQF,

- ensure sufficient emphasis on compatibility with the overarching framework of the EHEA;
- influence the development of ECVET so that it is compatible with ECTS;
- ensure that the Coordination Group for the overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area is represented in the coordination structures for the EQF.

to the ENIC and NARIC Networks

Participants recommend that the ENIC and NARIC Networks and their member centres:

- make full use of the potential of qualifications frameworks in facilitating the recognition of qualifications;
- as far as possible base recognition on an assessment of learning outcomes.

Bibliography

In addition to the materials provided for the conference itself, this conference report drew on the following publications:

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