



BOLOGNA SEMINAR ALIGNING NATIONAL AGAINST EUROPEAN QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORKS: THE PRINCIPLES OF SELF CERTIFICATION

Tbilisi, November 27 – 28, 2008

Tbilisi State University

Organized by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia in cooperation with the Council of Europe

BACKGROUND DOCUMENT FOR THE DISCUSSION GROUPS



CONTEXT AND PRACTICAL ARRANGEMENTS

The discussion groups are an important part of the program of this conference. The groups are intended to provide participants with a better opportunity to contribute to the debate and to exchange experience.

The group discussions will take place on Thursday, November 27 from 15.30 until 17.30 and on Friday morning from 09.00 until 10.00. They will in other words take place after the main elements of the conference have been presented in plenary session, so that participants may draw on these elements in their discussion.

Two of the three parallel discussion groups will benefit from interpretation between English and Georgian, while the third will be held entirely in English. All participants will be assigned to a group. The reason for this is that the organizers wish to ensure that each group may benefit from a mix of national and institutional experiences. For the same reason, participants are asked to participate in the group to which they are assigned unless very strong reasons (e.g. of language) make this impossible.

Each group will have a chair and a rapporteur. These, as well as the composition of the groups, will be indicated in a separate document. The presenters from the plenary sessions will participate in the group discussions as resource persons.

TOPICS

On Thursday afternoon, the emphasis of the group discussions should be on the exchange of national experiences. It is therefore important that all participants come well prepared to contribute to the discussion on the background of their own experience, and also that they seek to analyze their own experience with a view to what elements of it that might be of particular relevance and interest to other participants. The groups should seek to move beyond a simple narrative of “the experience of my country” to an analytical approach trying to identify issues that were seen as difficult, identify how these issues were resolved and why – or why they were not. In other words, the groups should seek to identify what solutions have worked in what circumstances.

For this part of the discussion, it may be useful to refer to what the 2005 and 2007 Bologna working groups on qualifications frameworks have said about self certification as well as about the steps in developing qualifications frameworks (see Appendices 1 and 2 to this document). These should, however, only be taken as an indication, and the groups should neither feel bound to discuss these documents in detail nor be prevented from raising other issues.

On Friday morning, the discussion should focus on how the Bologna process might help with self certification. For this part of the discussion, it is important to bear in mind that participants will come from a range of backgrounds. Some will already have participated

in a self certification exercise, others will be planning the exercise, while others again will only recently have started making preparations or are entirely new to the issue.

For most countries, the self certification of their national qualifications framework against the overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area is still some time into the future. It is therefore important to identify, on the basis of the presentations and of the discussion of national experiences on the first day, what role the Bologna Process might play in facilitating this quite demanding exercise. The Bologna Process should be understood as the BFUG and the Coordination Group on Qualifications Frameworks, but also information sharing and the exchange of experience between the different parties to the Bologna Process, bilaterally, regionally or between countries that may be far apart geographically but that face similar issues. As an example, countries with a federal structure may face a specific set of issues even if they are not geographical neighbors. Similarly, countries with similar legal frameworks and traditions may have common concerns.

The groups should seek to identify a set of recommendations from each day's discussion.

After the group discussions on Friday morning, the group rapporteurs will briefly present the main conclusions and recommendations to the plenary session. They will also meet with the General Rapporteur on Thursday evening, after the end of the group discussions.

APPENDIX 1

CRITERIA AND PROCEDURES FOR SELF CERTIFICATION

A. Criteria & Procedures for Verification of Framework Compatibility (Extract from Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks Report, 2005)

Criteria for verifying that national frameworks are compatible with the Bologna framework are as follows:

1. The national framework for higher education qualifications and the body or bodies responsible for its development are designated by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education
2. There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework
3. The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS compatible credits
4. The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent
5. The national quality assurance system for higher education refer to the national framework of qualifications and are consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent communiqué agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process
6. The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements
7. The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published.

Procedures for verifying that national frameworks are compatible with the Bologna framework are as follows:

1. The competent national body/bodies shall certify the compatibility of the national framework with the European framework.
2. The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies in the country in question recognised through the Bologna Process
3. The self-certification process shall involve international experts

4. The self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall be published and shall address separately each of the criteria set out
5. The ENIC and NARIC networks shall maintain a public listing of States that have confirmed that they have completed the self-certification process [www.enic-naric.net]
6. The completion of the self-certification process shall be noted on Diploma Supplements issued subsequently by showing the link between the national framework and the European framework.

**B. Recommendations to be considered by countries in undertaking the verification process
(Extract from Qualifications Frameworks Working Group Report, 2007)**

Procedures:

- *In developing their National Frameworks, countries should be have a eye on the need to align the National Framework to the Bologna Framework while noting that the Framework development process and the subsequent alignment are separate processes.*
- *countries should ensure that there is some element of testing or implementation of a national framework before the process of aligning it to the Bologna Framework is completed*
- *it might be helpful for small groups of countries to co-operate in undertaking alignment processes*
- *while some countries have qualifications recognition agreements with other countries, sometimes outside of Europe, and the Working Group suggests that consultation be undertaken by a country aligning a national framework to the Bologna Framework with any such country with which it has a qualifications recognition agreement. Furthermore, countries with a tradition of having award holders move to other (perhaps neighbouring) countries may also wish to discuss any alignment process with those countries or perhaps involve peers from such countries in their alignment process.*
- *the small steering group model, together with consultation with stakeholders on a transparent basis is a good model for all countries. At the same time, the Working Group recognises that different models may work well for other countries.*
- *It is important that there is clarity on the arrangements for requiring the stated agreement of certain stakeholders of the verification when a verification process is initiated.*

- *the manner in which Scotland and Ireland have involved international experts in their work through membership of the steering group has been exemplary*
- *there are issues that will need to be addressed in the future about the availability and financing of experts to assist countries in their verification processes. There will be linguistic challenges, particularly where a verification process is undertaken in a national language whose use is not widespread across Europe and, certainly at this stage in the development of national frameworks, there is not a significant number of potential experts available. One option which the working Group suggests could be explored is that the Council of Europe might assist some countries in the identification of potential international experts for national verification processes.*
- *The format of the Scottish and Irish reports can act as exemplars for the formats of the reports of other countries.*
- *there is a need for two outcomes from each self-certification process:*
 - *The first is the detailed verification document analysing in detail all issues and addressing each of the criteria and procedures*
 - *The second is a simple summary of the outcomes for communication to the general public*
- *all future alignment processes should take note of any alignment that has been completed.*

Criteria (Note the working group made no recommendations regarding criteria 3, 4, 6 or 7) :

- **Criterion 1 – The national framework or higher education qualifications and the body or bodies responsible for its development are designated by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education.**
 - *that while there were not any particular issues arising for Ireland and Scotland in relation to the designation of the body with responsibility for the Framework in each country, this could be an issue for other countries. For such countries, the national actors who initiate Framework development may not be the same as the body ultimately responsible for the Framework. This is a natural development and does not undermine the ultimate legitimacy of the Framework which will eventually need to be adopted in a formal way in each country.*

• **Criterion 2 – There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework**

- o *that the work of the ENIC and NARIC networks in examining issues relating to the concept of substantial difference be informed of issues arising in the verification process and that consideration be given to the development of formal linkages to this work.*
- o *that in making report all countries should seek to address progression issues.*
- o *that there will be issues for many countries in terms of having more than one level in a National Framework relating to a Bologna cycle and of having intermediate qualifications and levels and that the approaches undertaken in the Scottish and Irish Reports, in terms of identifying these can act as examples for other countries which have intermediate qualifications/levels.*
- o *The Working Group recommends that countries should identify intermediate qualifications in their verification processes and examine the possibility of aligning any first cycle intermediate qualifications with the Joint Quality Initiative’s descriptor for the higher education short cycle.*
- o *The concept of ‘best fit’ is a crucial one. It is not expected, nor is it desirable, that there will be an exact match between descriptors of different frameworks, which will have different purposes and contexts. The pilots showed that many qualifications will have elements which fit to a higher or lower level of the framework than the level at which the qualification as a whole is placed. The purpose of frameworks is to help understand both similarities and differences between different qualifications which do not have exact matches or equivalences.*
- o *there is a need to ensure that national verification reports address the issue of labour market relevance of first cycle completion.*
- o *The working group notes that it has been very difficult for Scotland and Ireland to address such recognition issues [i.e., recognition by higher education institutions in other countries of Scottish and Irish qualifications and of other country qualifications by Irish and Scottish institutions] given the state-of-play in the implementation of the national frameworks incorporating the Bologna cycles. Nevertheless, the Group considers that given that this is one of the key aims of the Bologna Framework, it is important that all countries endeavour to seek appropriate information in this regard as part of their verification work. The Group considers that this is an area where the ENIC and NARIC networks can be of assistance.*

- o *that all countries should provide for the review of the verification of the alignment of their National Framework to the Bologna Framework where there have been any major amendments to their National Framework.*
 - o *that it is important that legacy awards (awards that will no longer be made but which are important as there will continue to be many holders of such awards) are included in, or related to, National Frameworks as they are being developed and implemented and that these are taken into account in the verification of the alignment with the Bologna Framework.*
- **Criterion 5 – The national quality assurance systems for higher education refer to the national framework of qualifications and are consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent communiqué agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process**
 - o *that in the implementation of the verification process countries should demonstrate that their national systems – at institutional and agency level – are deliberately seeking to implement the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and that the state-of-play in relation to reviews in line with the Standards and Guidelines should be set out while at this time such review need not to been undertaken. The working group notes that it is the intention of many countries to implement the standards and guidelines within the next four years and considers that any verification report should be added to and the Council of Europe notified where a review in line with the Standards and Guidelines has been completed. Additionally, the Working Group recommends that for any self-certification process underway after 2010, it should be a requirement that agency reviews in line with the standards and guidelines are completed in a satisfactory way prior to the completion of any self-certification process.*

APPENDIX 2

STEPS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

(Steps 1 -10 are contained in the 2007 report by the Bologna Working group on qualifications frameworks, while step 11 – establishing a web site for national qualifications frameworks, has been added by the present Coordination Group)

1. Decision to start: Taken by the national body responsible for higher education (minister?)
2. Setting the agenda: The purpose of our NQF WG-Report nr. 1 (section 2.3)
3. Organising the process: Identifying stakeholders; setting up a committee/WG
4. Design Profile: Level structure, Level descriptors (learning outcomes), Credit ranges
5. Consultation National discussion and acceptance of design by stakeholders
6. Approval According to national tradition by Minister/Government/legislation
7. Administrative set-up Division of tasks of implementation between HEI, QAA and other bodies
8. Implementation at institutional/programme level; Reformulation of individual study programmes to learning outcome based approach
9. Inclusion of qualifications in the NQF; Accreditation or similar (cfr. Berlin Communiqué)
10. Self-certification of compatibility with the EHEA framework (Alignment to Bologna cycles etc.); WG Report nr. 1; Pilot projects
11. Providing a web site for the national qualifications framework. This site may contain new material and/or it may provide, easily accessible through one site, links to relevant existing sites.

The sequence of steps need not be identical in all countries.

Comments by the 2007 Working Group (for step 11 by the Coordination Group). The 2006 workshops refer to four regional workshops organised by the Working Group.

The stepladder was used by the Stocktaking group in a simplified form for the scorecard on progress on qualifications framework.

A. Organising the process

- Initial decision
- Purposes
- Identifying stakeholders
- Setting up a committee/working group

The point here is how to get the process started: who should take the decision (Parliament, minister or a board concerned). Should the framework be part of a higher education reform agenda or should it just reflect *status quo*? Who should be responsible for and involved in the project and would the project need a staffed project organisation or would a working group be sufficient?

In most countries the decision to start would be taken by the minister in charge of higher education and the framework be part of a higher education reform agenda. There was broad consensus in regional workshops organised in 2006 about having stakeholders from all areas of higher education, including labour market organisations, represented in a working group or steering committee.

B. Design of Framework

- Cycles and levels
- Profiles
- Award types
- Learning outcome/Output descriptors/Dublin descriptors
- Credits and Workload

The points are the number of levels needed in the participating countries. How profiles could or should be reflected in binary systems. Could award types be the building stones in the framework or would you like to go further down to clusters of subject areas? How could learning outcomes be described in generic terms? Would a translation of the Dublin Descriptors fulfill the purpose? Should the framework at all levels include credits?

Many of the countries participating in the 2006 workshops expressed the opinion that they would need more than three levels first and foremost because they had short cycle programmes within their higher education. Those countries with binary systems intended to have different award types but there were exceptions

C. Consultation and approval

- Broad consultation to reach all that are later involved
- Formal approval

These points did not give much occasion for discussion in the 2006 workshops. It was generally agreed that the consultation on the proposal for a national qualifications framework should at least involve those stakeholder that would take part in the implementation of the framework. The formal approval would be in accordance with national practice and normally the same that has taken the initial decision.

D. Administrative set up

- Which bodies are involved
- Distribution of functions
- Inclusion of qualifications into the framework
- Implementation at institutional level

If an adopted qualifications framework has to be an entity in public life and not just another piece of paper it has to be decided which bodies are going to use the framework and what their specific tasks should be. It is of equal importance to decide how new qualifications are connected to the framework. And of no less importance is the question of how the framework and the learning outcomes approach are implemented at higher education institutions.

The bodies most likely to be involved at the national level, apart from the ministries and related agencies, would be the academic recognition information centre (NARIC) and the quality assurance agency. Some countries would in addition to that have an accreditation body with a role to play. The procedures for inclusion of new awards or award types in the framework is crucial for the trust other countries might have in the right placement on awards on the appropriate level. The procedure must be transparent and documentation available. Implementation of the award type descriptors at institutional level in the programme descriptions is certainly the most challenging part of the process.

E. Self-certification

- Verifying the compatibility of national frameworks of qualifications with the framework of qualifications of the EHEA
 - Criteria
 - Procedures

The main lesson from the Irish and Scottish pilot studies in 2006 was that the criteria to be met in the self certification process have to be taken into account at the very beginning of the framework developing process.

F. Providing a web site for the national qualifications framework..

This site may contain new material and/or it may provide, easily accessible through one site, links to relevant existing sites. The earlier in the process this site is established; the better it will serve a purpose of communication between the competent public authorities and other stakeholders in the development of the QNF. While much of the information will be in the national language(s), the site should also provide information in English aimed at international partners.