

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”.

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MOBILITY AND RECOGNITION

Comments by Sjur Bergan, Council of Europe

Later today, we will board a train that will take us from Budapest to Wien in about the time it will take to enjoy a good central European dinner. We will enjoy the dinner but we will not be nostalgic for the time when elaborate border controls and identity checks made the journey long and cumbersome.

Would our qualifications be able to travel as easily and speedily as we will do tonight? This, to me, is one of the essential questions for the European Higher Education Area. Are we able to carry our intellectual luggage across borders and put all of our qualifications to good use in our new country - or do mobile learners still run into procedures and practices unencumbered by developments in European cooperation over the past two decades?

The basic rules and regulations to make life easier for mobile learners are in place. The Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention has now been ratified by all Bologna countries except two, and the country that joined us today, Kazakhstan, was among the early signatories. The ECTS is widely used; the Diploma Supplement a little less so but it is still issued in a majority of the Bologna countries.

Practice, however, is less promising. A key principle of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention is that foreign qualifications should be recognized unless you can demonstrate that there is a substantial difference between the qualification for which recognition is sought and the corresponding qualification of the home country. To say that this requires more attention is an understatement. Too often, even minor differences are considered to be a reason for non-recognition and too often recognition practice is not put into the broader context of promoting cooperation and mobility.

Fair recognition requires good policies. The independent assessment is silent about the national action plans submitted by ministers in 2007, but these plans give reason for concern because many are reports on an unsatisfactory state of affairs rather than road maps to better practice in the future. If national policies are too intent on "protecting" their own qualifications system and too little aware of their role in helping learners, fair recognition will not follow. If national policies seek to compare procedures and structures rather than assess students' real knowledge, understanding and ability to act expressed through learning outcomes, fair recognition will not follow. If national policies do not seize upon qualifications frameworks as instruments that make qualifications easier to understand, fair recognition will not follow. And if fair recognition does not follow, the fact that 45 of the now 47 Bologna countries have ratified the only legal text of the European Higher Education Area will not ensure mobility.

Fair recognition alone is of course not enough to ensure mobility. Scholarships, improved visa regulations and work permits and other elements that cannot be detailed in three minutes are also required. But unless all Bologna countries improve their efforts to put the European legal framework for recognition into practice nationally, the European Higher Education Area will not reach its goal of 20 per cent mobile students by 2020. The Council of Europe, UNESCO and the European Commission will continue our work to improve recognition but it is worth underlining that the subsidiary principle is as important to ensuring good practice as it is to making good decisions.

To make the European Higher Education Area an area of academic mobility for students and staff, we must develop institutional and national recognition practices that catch up with the international legal regulations, we must look more for reasons that make it possible to recognize foreign qualifications and less for those that may give us a reason to refuse recognition, and we must approach foreign qualifications with the same openness of mind with which we would like our own qualifications to be considered abroad. To meet our mobility goals, we must take not the nostalgia train but the train to the future; the train that crosses borders with a maximum of speed; the one that uses the legal framework to make recognition possible rather than to prevent it from happening – the train that aims at making the European Higher Education Area a living reality that makes a difference in the lives of students and teachers.