

**WORKING GROUP 2, Chair: Eva Gönczi, Rapporteur: Stephen Adam.**

## **DEVELOPING NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS AND THEIR ALIGNMENT TO THE EHEA FRAMEWORK**

### **Introduction**

- A wide and lively discussion took place in both working group sessions and many topics were covered, including some raised by the conference plenary speakers.
- The overall report and its recommendations were welcomed.
- There was unequivocal support for the approach taken in Chapter 2 on National Frameworks of Qualifications (NFQ) and the 'good practice guidelines' concluding section.
- There was an agreement that the development of 'national frameworks of qualifications' together with 'learning outcomes' were the key developments that would have more significant practical impact on states and higher education institutions (HEIs) than the overarching framework. The overarching framework would be important as a contextual device but the real changes would manifest themselves through these national and institutional changes.
- The working groups explored some pre-set questions but soon strayed to consider wider issues.

### **Recommendations and Observations:**

The two working group sessions covered several issues and the main outcomes can be reduced to the following seven points:

1. It was emphasised that the development of national frameworks of qualifications must include all stakeholders and the process of creation involves the simultaneous development of a shared understanding of cycles, levels, qualification descriptors, quality assurance and learning outcomes. The national process by which a framework is agreed should be a cooperative exercise that takes into account 'good practice' identified in the report as well as the input of help, cooperation and experience from experts from other countries. Support and cooperation between Bologna countries should be a feature that helps mark out the European Higher Education Area.
2. The development of learning outcomes was seen as a crucial reform and it will be essential to secure and encourage the wholehearted participation of academics in their development. This is not necessarily easy. In order to be successful we must intensify cooperation and share good practice experience. Similarly, all stakeholders need to be motivated to take a full role in the process. It is essential that there is considerable bottom-up involvement and that appropriate national strategies are adopted to ensure the right balance between bottom-up and top-down approaches.
3. The Diploma Supplement and other recognition tools need to be revisited to check their consistency with the new developments. The guidance notes associated with such devices may require updating.

4. It was agreed that good practice occurs when credit transfer and accumulation systems encourage flexible routes and pathways between and within qualifications and employ multiple exit and entry points. National frameworks often have more subdivisions than the three Bologna cycles and these need to be awarded credits that can contribute towards qualifications of another cycle. Learners should be able to move between qualifications and cycles. This sort of flexibility is important for the national and international mobility of learners. The details and rules of national and/or institutional credit accumulation and transfer systems are a matter of national/local autonomy but flexibility is important for all European citizens.
5. Concern was raised in relation to regulated professions and the relationship between such qualifications and the Bologna cycles. Integrated programmes that lead directly to second cycle qualifications are a subject for future exploration. We need to think about how to bring the guilds/professional bodies into the Bologna Process.
6. It was recommended that doctoral degrees were given a credit value to encourage mobility. However, the working groups deemed it a pleasure to throw this difficult question to the forthcoming Salzburg seminar! It was remarked that there are difficulties in this complex area not least exactly what was understood by a year of study - an academic year or 12 months.
7. There was a detailed discussion about the 'self-certification process' identified in the report (Chapter 4). The alignment of national frameworks of qualifications with the overarching framework was seen as too inexplicit. Self-certification was seen as a pragmatic solution as well as the right way forward but too weak as presently described. It was recommended that it needs to be strengthened by:
  - a) ensuring the process of creating national frameworks of qualifications involves international cooperation and consultation with outside experts;
  - b) building into the procedures a 'peer-review' element within the internal process of development;
  - c) including a specification in the process (and conference recommendations) that the alignment self-certification criteria specify that learning outcomes need to be expressed at both module/unit level as well as at the level of the qualification. Currently, the report does not make this explicit (reference: section 4.2, paragraph 133ii, page 39 and repeated sections 4.5, paragraphs 156-159, page 43-44.). There is a danger that learning outcomes are not seen to 'cascade' throughout the frameworks;
  - d) ensuring that self-certification involves some reflections on the links between the domestic quality assurance system and the 'new-style' qualifications frameworks. They have huge implications for each other. The relationship between them needs further exploration as new-style qualifications frameworks may well necessitate possible reforms to current national approaches to quality assurance. Similarly, there may be implications for the relationship between education ministries and autonomous HEIs.