

EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS: WHAT IT MEANS AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

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I am delighted to have the opportunity to discuss the work of the Bologna Working Group on European Framework for Qualifications. As many of you will recall, Ministers in assigned this task to the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) following their meeting in Berlin last September. Under the heading ‘Degree Structure’, the Berlin Communiqué states:

“Ministers encourage the member States to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile. They also undertake to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area.

Within such frameworks, degrees should have different defined outcomes. First and second cycle degrees should have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs. First cycle degrees should give access, in the sense of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, to second cycle programmes. Second cycle degrees should give access to doctoral studies.

Ministers invite the Follow-up Group to explore whether and how shorter higher education may be linked to the first cycle of a qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area.”¹

This quotation establishes a number of tasks at two main levels. In the first instance, Ministers set the task for themselves to establish National Frameworks within their own jurisdictions, and that degrees within such frameworks should have specific objectives. Secondly, they asked the BFUG to elaborate on an overarching European Framework, which would also take account of shorter higher education programmes such as diplomas and certificate courses.

What I intend to highlight in this paper is approach of the BFUG to the task set by the Ministers. In approaching this task, it is worth revisiting one of the key sentiments of the Bologna Declaration. It said:

“A Europe of Knowledge is now widely recognised as an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth and as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competencies to the challenges of the new millennium, together with an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space.”²

¹ Berlin Communiqué, September 2003
² Bologna Declaration, June 1999

Central to this extract is the notion of European Citizenship – the Bologna Process is not just an education agenda, nor is it solely an economic agenda. There are very strong social and cultural dimensions to this process. Taken in context with the Sorbonne Declaration of the previous year, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is seen as an area where “*national identities and common interests can interact and strengthen each other for the benefit of Europe, of its students, and more generally, of its citizens.*”³ The emerging EHEA also featured at the Lisbon European Council, when the goal was set for Europe to become “*the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.*”⁴ To realise this objective, EU leaders called for a “*challenging programme for the modernisation of ... education systems.*”⁵

At its Dublin meeting in March 2004, the BFUG established a Working Group to progress this task. The Group, which is chaired by Mogens Berg of Denmark, has representatives from France, Hungary, Latvia, Netherlands and Ireland, as well as the support of a Technical Working Group. This latter group draws on expertise from agencies in countries such as Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales, and Denmark where National Frameworks are already in place.

The terms of reference for the Working Group which were agreed by the BFUG, are as follows:

“In order to realise the objectives set by the Ministers, the Working Group shall:

- 1. Identify reference points for national frameworks of qualifications (in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile), which may assist member States in establishing their frameworks*
- 2. Elaborate on an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area;*
- 3. Establish key principles for frameworks of qualifications, both at national and European levels.*

The Working Group must take into account other policy areas, including those within the Copenhagen Process and the wider Lisbon Agenda as articulated in "Education and Training 2010"”

The Working Group has met on a number of occasions, the latest being 30th June 2004 in Edinburgh. It is fair to say that its work is progressing well, and a report will be available for presentation and discussion at a conference in Copenhagen in January 2005.

A starting point for the work of the group has been to define National Frameworks of Qualifications. These, essentially, are descriptions of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes. A framework should seek to identify clear learning and progression paths. In so doing, the learner has a clear vision of the education system. Within that broad definition, all countries in the EHEA should have a national framework. However, the manner in which these are described are different – they can be complex structures designed to meet very specific social, cultural and economic objectives. There are very few countries with formal National Frameworks of

³ Sorbonne Joint Declaration, May 1998

⁴ European Council, Lisbon 2000

⁵ *ibid.*

Qualifications – Ireland, Denmark, Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Looking to these countries, you can get a formal definition of such frameworks. For example, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) has defined the framework as:

“The single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards”⁶

However, even within the limited models available, there are variations. For example, the national framework in Ireland ranges from level 1 of Vocational Education and Training to the Doctoral Degree. In Denmark, it covers the higher education sector alone. The Scottish model would be similar to Ireland in terms of range, but would also incorporate credits. Again, these variations reflect national priorities. Therefore, there is no single model, and as such, the question may well be asked – *‘Why bother elaborating a European Framework for Qualifications?’*

In many respects, this work is justified on the basis of mobility and recognition. The principles articulated by the Working Group are no different than those identified by other groups or projects such as Tuning or the Joint Quality Initiative. These include:

- The promotion of increased access, mobility, flexibility and recognition within the EHEA;
- Enabling the learner to make sense of the diverse range of qualification available across the European Landscape;
- Increasing the understanding and transparency associated with European Qualifications by providing a commonly understood and accepted description in terms of learning outcomes and competencies;
- The provision of a framework for all higher education awards – academic, professional etc;
- Facilitating movement towards greater co-operation in quality assurance by the provision of a common language and reference points;
- The provision of a means to promote life-long learning, by linking to other forms of education;
- Assisting employers throughout Europe in interpreting appropriateness of qualifications for employment purposes;

From these objectives, *is it possible to describe the European Framework?* It may be premature at this particular point in time, but some patterns are emerging. As this work develops, there have been many descriptions of the European Framework, and perhaps, the most appropriate is one of a box into which national authorities place their awards according to the three Bologna cycles.

This is also at the heart of the deliberations of the Working Group. It must define the relationship between the National Framework and its European counterpart. For example, national frameworks may have a legislative base, with many policy objectives. On the other hand, higher education is outside of the EU legislative remit. A European Framework, while ultimately a collaborative and voluntary process along the Bologna Process model, cannot dictate the structure of national framework. **This is a matter for national authorities.** However, it should influence national authorities

⁶ Outline National Framework of Qualifications – Determinations made by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland October 2003

insofar a strong European Framework is required. It will require certain structures and common reference points if it is to meet agreed and shared objectives. Simply requesting national authorities to place their awards on a map without ‘mutual trust and understanding’ will militate against the very objectives it seeks to meet. Each State must have confidence in each other’s decisions. Here again, this must be balanced with the need to avoid the development of a bureaucratic structure. These are amongst the issues to be resolved by the Working Group – should the placement of awards from the national structure to the European Framework be overseen by a third party? What role should ECTS have to play within a European Framework context? Should there be a mediation role between States in the event of dispute? This is not to say that these are impossible tasks – rather they must be addressed by the Working Group as it prepares for the Copenhagen meeting.

It is worth noting that while higher education is outside the EU legislative framework, the EU Commission has a strong interest in this work. A number of its most recent policy statements, including the Spring Council meeting in 2004 emphasise the need to promote mobility and transparency. The Commission is spearheading similar work within Vocational Education and Training, and it is clear that if life-long learning is to become a reality, it is important for exchanges and communications to take place between both streams of education. This exchange clearly reflects the outcome of the “Common Themes Conference in March 2004, which was held as part of the Irish Presidency programme.

It is evident from this brief review that the value and success of a European Framework will ultimately depend on the perception of the stakeholder. For example, increased transparency will serve both the learner and the higher education institutions. Programme providers will now have a framework for development of new programmes, and indeed, other opportunities such as joint/ dual programmes. Recognition authorities will also have a tool which assists in setting standards for recognition. This would also apply to accreditation agencies. Finally, the labour market would have the capacity to establish the competences and learning outcomes associated with European Qualifications.

It is important to note that a European Framework is only one of a number of instruments designed to facilitate transparency and mobility – we should not ignore the equally important Lisbon Recognition Convention or the EUROPASS proposal. But, at the end of the day, the achievement of the objectives rest on the willingness of all of us to embrace and work with the various instruments. Nora Joyce once said to her husband James “*Why don’t you write books people can read?*” I hope that the report of the Working Group will be a Framework that we all can use!