



qualifications

A Framework for Qualifications of The European Higher Education Area



Ministry of Science
Technology and Innovation



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of the European Higher
Education Area

Bologna Working Group on
Qualifications Frameworks

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Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation
February 2005

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Executive summary



This report concerns the elaboration of qualifications frameworks as called for by ministers in the Berlin Communiqué; it makes recommendations and proposals for an overarching **Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)**, and offers advice on good practice in the elaboration of national qualifications frameworks for higher education qualifications.

The report includes six chapters that cover:

1. The context – higher education qualifications in Europe
2. National frameworks of qualifications in higher education
3. The framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area
4. Linking frameworks of qualifications in higher education
5. Frameworks for higher education and for other educational areas
6. Conclusions

Chapter one draws the lines from the Bologna declaration of 1999 to the Berlin Communiqué of 2003 in the development of describing qualifications and frameworks. It also demonstrates the impact of this development on the action lines of the Bologna Process. Finally it points to the underlying goals, priorities and assumptions of higher education, which have to be taken into account when developing qualifications frameworks, namely: preparation for the labour market, preparation for life as active citizens in a democratic society, personal development and the development and maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base.

Chapter two examines the nature, development and effectiveness of existing national frameworks for qualifications encompassing ‘new style’ higher education. It reveals a wide pattern of different experiences from which a number of good practice recommendations can be identified. Some useful aspects that can facilitate the creation of successful new national frameworks of qualifications are mentioned, including:

- > the development and review process for producing good national frameworks are most effective when they involve all relevant stakeholders both within and outside higher education.
- > a framework for higher education qualifications should identify a clear and nationally-agreed set of purposes. Frameworks for higher education qualifications benefit from the inclusion of cycles and /or levels, and articulation with outcome-focussed indicators and/or descriptors of qualifications. Higher education frameworks of qualifications can also benefit from being directly linked to credit accumulation and transfer systems
- > frameworks for higher education qualifications should explicitly link academic standards, national and institutional quality assurance systems, and public understanding of the place and level of nationally recognised qualifications. Public confidence in academic standards requires public understanding of the achievements represented by different higher education qualifications and titles.

Chapter three explores the possibilities for formulating a framework for EHEA and recommends that:

- > the framework for qualifications in the EHEA should be an overarching framework with a high level of generality, consisting of three main cycles, with additional provision for a short cycle within or linked to the first cycle.

- > the framework should include cycle descriptors in the form of generic qualification descriptors that can be used as reference points.
- > the Dublin Descriptors developed by the Joint Quality Initiative are proposed for adoption as the cycle descriptors for the framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. They offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with awards that represent the end of each of a Bologna cycle.
- > responsibility for the maintenance and development of the framework rests with the Bologna Follow-up Group and any successor executive structures established by the ministers for the furtherance of the EHEA.

Chapter three also includes guidelines for the range of ECTS typically associated with the completion of each cycle:

- > Short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications - approximately 120 ECTS credits;
- > First cycle qualifications - 180-240 ECTS credits;
- > Second cycle qualifications - 90-120 ECTS credits– the minimum requirement should amount to 60 ECTS credits at second cycle level;
- > Third cycle qualifications do not necessarily have credits associated with them.

Chapter four discusses how national frameworks of qualifications need to articulate in a transparent way with the overarching European framework for qualifications. The process of articulation should involve the careful mapping of national qualifications (their levels, learning outcomes and descriptors) with the cycle descriptors identified for the European overarching framework.

The following criteria are proposed for the verification that national frameworks are compatible with the EHEA framework:

- > 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
- > There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework
- > The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS credits
- > The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent
- > The national quality assurance system for higher education refer to the national framework for higher education qualifications and are consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent Ministerial Communiqués in the Bologna Process
- > The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements
- > The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published

It is proposed that each country should certify the compatibility of its own framework with the overarching framework according to the following procedures

- > The competent national body/bodies shall self-certify the compatibility of the national framework with the European framework

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- > The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies of the country in question recognised through the Bologna Process
- > The self-certification process shall involve international experts
- > The self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall address separately each of the criteria established and shall be published
- > The ENIC/NARIC network shall maintain a public listing of States that have completed the self-certification process
- > 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

The frameworks of qualifications have been identified as a key tool for the realisation of the European Higher Education Area. Therefore it is recommended

that all signatories will complete the self-certification process by 2010.

Chapter five looks at the framework and related initiatives outside of higher education. It takes into account wider European developments in lifelong learning, of which higher education is an intrinsic part, developments in the Lisbon process and the linked future objectives process, as well as development in the Copenhagen process on increased European co-operation in vocational education and training.

The change agenda being advanced through much of this work relates closely with the sorts of changes required by the Bologna process, as reflected through the introduction of national frameworks of qualifications, and an overarching

framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. It is proposed that:

- > national frameworks should include awards that integrate recognition of non-formal and informal learning experiences.

This chapter also notes that an increasing focus on the individual learner rather than learning systems and institutions, which challenges the traditional boundaries within and between different levels of education and training, is also relevant.

The development of the plans of the European Commission towards a European Qualifications Framework is regarded as a helpful and important, and it is anticipated that the approaches developed in this report will support and be compatible with such a framework.

Chapter six provides a summary of conclusions of the report.

Introduction

>

The conclusions of the Berlin conference (September 2003) of the ministers in charge of higher education included:

***Degree structure:** ‘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.

This report was commissioned by the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) in furtherance of these undertakings.

The report includes five chapters that cover:

- > The context – higher education qualifications in Europe
- > National frameworks of qualifications in higher education
- > The framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area
- > Linking frameworks of qualifications in higher education
- > Frameworks for higher education and for other educational areas

Meeting in Dublin in March 2004, the BFUG approved the establishment of a Working Group to coordinate the work on the development of an overarching framework of qualifications for the EHEA, and appointed the following to that Working Group: Mogens Berg (Denmark) as chair, the BFUG Chair (Ian McKenna (Ireland) until 1 July 2004, and Marlies Leegwater (The Netherlands) from 1st July), Jacques-Philippe Saint-Gerand (France), Éva Gonczi (Hungary), and Andrejs Rauhvargers

(Latvia). The Working Group was joined by a number of experts (listed in Appendix 1 to this report).

The terms of reference BFUG (Appendix 2) provided for the Working Group were to:

- > 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;
- > elaborate on an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area;
- > establish key principles for frameworks of qualifications, both at national and European levels.

The Working Group took into account other policy areas, including those within the Copenhagen Process and the wider Lisbon Agenda as articulated in "Education and training 2010"¹. The Working Group, with its experts, met 6 times; in Dublin, Copenhagen, Edinburgh, Stockholm, Budapest and Riga. Prior to this a preparatory group was set up by Denmark, Ireland, the UK (including Scotland), and the President of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee. This preparatory group undertook some coordinating work prior to the formal appointment of the Working Group.

The Working Group has drawn heavily upon work done by others, especially that of the Joint Quality Initiative² who formulated and further developed the 'Dublin Descriptors' and organised an introductory conference in London in January 2004. It has also drawn on experiences in countries that have already established qualifications framework for their national

¹ Title: www.europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/2010/doc/jir_council_final.pdf

² www.jointquality.org

higher education systems, and conducted a comparative study of existing national frameworks.

The Working Group has consulted other organisations and networks that have contributed to the discussions; these include the European University Association (EUA) (which has also acted as coordinator of the ECTS counsellors), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), the National Union of Students in Europe (ESIB), the European Network of Information Centres (ENIC) and the National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC), and the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA). The European Commission (EC) contributed both through their interests in the Bologna process and as coordinator of the Copenhagen process and of the Lisbon process as articulated in “Education and training 2010”.

In widening input into the deliberations, the Chairman presented interim findings of the Working Group at various conferences of important European organisations and networks such as ESIB, EURASHE and the ENIC and NARIC. He also conducted a seminar in Vienna attended by Austrian officials and organisations with regard to their Bologna and EU Presidency (2006). Members of the Working Group have presented reports to Bologna seminars in Edinburgh, Santander and Riga, and attended the Closing Conference on “Tuning Educational Structures in Europe. Phase 2”.

The report was discussed in detail at a Bologna seminar in Copenhagen³ on 13-14 January 2005 and the report was revised following the comments at the seminar. The revised report, taking account of the conclusions and recommendations from the seminar, will be given to the BFUG, who commissioned the work. It will be available for the ministerial Bologna Conference in Bergen in May 2005.

³ Appendix 7

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The work was made possible thanks to financial support from the European Commission through the Socrates Programme. The Council of Europe has contributed to the work through the participation of the President of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee.

1 Context – higher education qualifications in Europe

>

1.1 The Bologna Process, European Higher Education Area and qualifications systems

The identification of first and second cycle studies, within the Bologna Declaration (1999), was the first step towards developing an over-arching qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). By creating this initial division between cycles the first elements of a qualifications framework were established.

The next steps were several national and international initiatives, including the development by the Joint Quality initiative (JQI) of the ‘Dublin descriptors’, the Trans-European Evaluation Project (TEEP), the Tuning project, and developments in national qualification frameworks for example Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, with separate qualifications frameworks for Scotland and the rest of the UK. Various Bologna seminars, e.g. in Helsinki, Lisbon, and Zurich, also provided additional discussion of context and detailed information. These initiatives were followed by the Danish Bologna seminar on *Qualification Structures in European Higher Education*, held in Copenhagen on 27-28th March 2003. This seminar was informed by a background report⁴ that explored alternative approaches for clarifying the cycles and levels in European higher education qualifications. The report and the seminar examined the issues and debates associated with concepts useful for describing qualifications. They also focussed on current European approaches to qualifications structures, alternative methodologies and their theoretical foundations for conceiving different educational levels for all higher education qualifications, including lifelong learning.

⁴ The report, *Qualifications Structures in European Higher education – Consideration of alternative approaches for clarifying cycles and levels in European higher education qualifications* can be downloaded from: <http://www.bologna.dk>

The 2003 Danish seminar resulted in a series of detailed recommendations to higher education stakeholders that were taken up by the ministers at their meeting in Berlin; these are summarised in Appendix 3. Their Berlin Communiqué (2003) called for the creation of an overarching framework for the European Higher Education Area. The following statements are of particular importance in this connection:

Degree structure: ‘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*⁵

Lifelong learning: ‘Ministers furthermore call those working on qualifications frameworks for the European Higher Education Area to encompass the wide range of flexible

⁵ Berlin Communiqué 2003,

*learning paths, opportunities and techniques and to make appropriate use of ECTS credits.*⁶

Additional actions: ‘...Ministers consider it necessary to go beyond the present focus on two main cycles of higher education to include a doctoral level as the third cycle in the Bologna process.’⁷

The challenge was thus to create a European qualifications structure that facilitates the connection between national frameworks of qualifications, in order to provide the basis for introducing more precision to the relationship between different higher education qualifications with Europe. As qualifications originate and exist within national or related systems, the framework should more properly be called a Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA.

An effective overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA is necessary for many reasons. Primarily it should help the Bologna Process establish real transparency between existing European systems of higher education through the development of a shared basis for understanding these systems and the qualifications they contain. This should improve the recognition of foreign qualifications, enhance the mobility of citizens and make credential evaluation more accurate. The overarching framework should also provide guidance to those countries developing their national frameworks. Last, but not least, it provides a context for effective quality assurance.

There are significant direct and indirect connections between the full Bologna agenda and the creation of effective systems for the description and location of qualifications in Europe. The overarching framework for qualifications should play a vital role in the EHEA. The majority of the ten action lines identified

⁶ Berlin Communiqué 2003

⁷ Berlin Communiqué 2003

in the policy documents of the Bologna Process will be affected fundamentally and positively by the development of clear, outcomes-focussed qualifications frameworks that share common methodological descriptors. The adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, that aids recognition, requires these common and clear descriptors. Links to the action lines are provided through:

- > The adoption of a system essentially based on three⁸ main cycles presupposes some agreement about the nature and role of degrees at different cycles/levels and is already the basis for such a framework.
- > The establishment of a system of credits is itself one approach to help describe and quantify qualifications and make them more transparent.
- > The promotion of mobility, of staff, students and researchers, can only be facilitated by a common understanding and the fair recognition of qualifications.
- > The promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance requires transparent and, if possible, common European approaches to the expression of qualifications, qualification descriptors and other external reference points for quality and standards.
- > The promotion of the European dimension in higher education, especially integrated study programmes and joint degrees, can be helped by more transparency between existing courses, curricula and 'levels'.
- > Regarding lifelong learning, any consensus for describing degrees and levels must have beneficial implications for

⁸ The Bologna Declaration formulated this goal with regard to the first and second cycles; while the Berlin Communiqué added the doctoral degree as a third cycle

qualification structures, other higher education qualifications, alternative pathways and degrees, and thus all stages and types of learning.

- > Higher education institutions and students are paramount stakeholders who gain by the creation of effective national and European frameworks. The autonomy of higher education institutions can be strengthened through qualifications frameworks that provide for enough flexibility and are not too rigid.
- > National and European frameworks that provide various transition points, facilitate access for non-traditional learners and thus promote greater social cohesion and strengthen the social dimension.
- > Promoting the attractiveness of the European higher education area would be made easier as the transparency and comparability of European higher education degrees is made real by the development of a common framework of qualifications. Refining of ways to describe degrees and levels in higher education is fundamental to the Bologna Process.
- > A transparent and well-articulated overarching framework, supported by national frameworks, will also be of considerable importance to the recognition, in other parts of the world, of qualifications resulting from the Bologna reforms.

The development of conceptual approaches for describing qualifications is currently an important priority for many countries as they undertake educational reforms in the light of the Bologna process. These developments are not restricted to Europe, or indeed to higher education, and can be seen in other areas of education and training and in other parts of the world as shown by the experiences in, for example, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. Unfortunately, the situation is complicated by the existence of several alternative and

competing approaches. Some stakeholders in the European higher education sector have been aware of the problems associated with the current situation and there are a number of ongoing national and international attempts⁹ designed to resolve these problems and move towards a more common understanding.

There are different ways to express and measure study programmes, including time-based (years) approaches, credit points, identification of learning outcomes and competencies, qualifications and level indicators, subject benchmarks¹⁰.

Traditional models and methods of expressing qualifications structures are giving way to systems based on explicit reference points using learning outcomes and competencies, levels and level indicators, subject benchmarks and qualification descriptors. These devices provide more precision and accuracy and facilitate transparency and comparison. Without these common approaches, full recognition, real transparency and thus the creation of an effective European Higher Education Area, will be more difficult to achieve.

1.2 Qualifications frameworks and the purposes of higher education

The elaboration of a qualifications framework, whether an overarching framework for the EHEA or a national framework, cannot be divorced from the underlying goals, priorities and assumptions of higher education. The Working Group has therefore found it both useful and necessary to briefly sketch the

⁹ For example, the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI), European Network of Quality Assurance (ENQA), Tuning, etc.

¹⁰ Subject benchmark statements is a UK approach that provides the academic community with a means for describing the nature, standards and characteristics of programmes in a specific subject. This approach has also been adopted by the '*Tuning educational structures in Europe*' project.

assumptions on which it has based its work. The issues covered in this chapter have, at least to some extent, been addressed in the Bologna Declaration, as well as the Prague and Berlin Communiqués. They have also been addressed in a number of Bologna seminars, most prominently in the Greek seminar on the social dimension of higher education (February 2003), the Danish seminar on qualifications structures (March 2003), the Czech seminar on lifelong learning (June 2003), and the Council of Europe/Portuguese seminar on recognition (April 2002)¹¹. They were also addressed by the Council of Europe seminar on the public responsibility for higher education and research (September 2004), and were considered at the Slovenian, EUA and ESIB seminar on employability (October 2004), and at the seminar on recognition organised by the Latvian authorities and the Council of Europe in Riga in December 2004¹².

As the Bologna Declaration has been implemented, there has been debate among various stakeholders at national and European levels, particularly within the Council of Europe, and a common understanding of the multiple purposes of higher education is emerging. Broadly speaking, one may identify four main purposes of higher education:

- > preparation for the labour market;
- > preparation for life as active citizens in a democratic society;
- > personal development;
- > the development and maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base.

¹¹ For these seminars see http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/en/bologna_seminars/index.htm

¹² For these seminars see <http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/>

For the purpose of discussion, it may be convenient to separate the four elements. It should nevertheless be underlined that the distinction between the elements is not clear-cut, and the four elements are interlinked. It may also be noted that while for the first three elements, the main emphasis will most likely be on the individual earning the qualification, for the fourth element emphasis may be at the level of society, not least in relating qualifications to employability and other social objectives. Nevertheless, all four elements have individual as well as societal dimensions.

Preparation for the labour market

Preparation for the labour market is the dimension that has over the past generation been most dominant in public discourse on education. Employers have complained that the current education systems of many European countries provide students with insufficient preparation for the labour market, and this concern was one of the driving forces behind the Bologna Process.

Preparation for life as active citizens in a democratic society

While democratic institutions and laws are indispensable to democratic societies, they can only function in societies marked by a democratic culture that is tolerant and accepts diversity and open debate. Democracy ultimately depends on the active participation of educated citizens. Education at all levels thus plays a key role in developing democratic culture. In addition to transferable (transversal) skills, the active participation of citizens requires a broad education in a variety of fields as well as the nurture of democratic attitudes and values and the ability to think critically. This aspect of higher education was referred to in the Bologna Declaration and brought much more explicitly into the Process through the Prague and Berlin Communiqués.

Personal development

This aspect of higher education has not been explicitly addressed so far in the policy texts of the Bologna Process. While personal development may have been a more explicit goal of education and higher education in earlier generations, it is still an underlying assumption of education in Europe. The assumption may appear to have been challenged through the development of mass education, but it should nevertheless be made explicit that whilst preparation for the labour market is an important purpose of education, the aim of personal development has far from disappeared.

The development and maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base

For society as a whole, it is important to have access to advanced knowledge in a broad range of disciplines. At the most advanced levels of knowledge, this relates to research and research training. It is, however, not limited to research, as advanced knowledge and the transmission of such knowledge play important roles in a wide range of areas and at levels below that of research. Thus, whilst knowledge of advanced skills and methods of, for example welding, as well as the ability to develop them further, may not be characterised as ‘research’, these skills and their transmission are likely to be of considerable importance to a modern, technologically advanced society. This aspect of higher education was addressed by the Berlin Communiqué, in the context of the synergy between the EHEA and the European Research Area and the inclusion of the doctoral degree as the third ‘Bologna cycle’.

1.3 Qualifications frameworks at national and European levels and for different areas of learning

A qualifications framework provides a systematic description of the full range of qualifications within a given education system, as well as the ways in which learners can navigate between them. Qualifications therefore have to be described in such a way as to cover the full purpose of education, so the framework must be multi-dimensional.

This is true for both national frameworks and the emerging framework for the EHEA. The latter will be less detailed than national frameworks, but one of its purposes will be to provide an overarching framework that will simplify mobility, transparency and recognition between national systems. At the same time, it is important to recognise that national frameworks will reflect the respective national discussions on the purposes of higher education and different agendas in higher education policy. To find the right balance between the diversities of national frameworks and the benefits of a close linkages between them is the main challenge for constructing an overarching framework.

Developing qualifications frameworks is a task not only for higher education and the Bologna process. The Copenhagen process aims to develop instruments to enhance the transparency of vocational qualifications and competences, and to increase co-operation in vocational education and training. This is to be promoted by developing reference levels, common principles for certification, and common measures, including a credit transfer system for vocational education and training.

Few countries have developed comprehensive frameworks covering both higher education and vocational education and training, and such a framework does not exist at the European level. The European Commission and the European Council of

Education Ministers have expressed the view that the European labour market cannot function effectively and smoothly without a European Framework to stand as a common reference for the recognition of qualifications. They call for the development of such a framework within the Lisbon process¹³. These questions are dealt with in chapter 5.

¹³ Joint Interim Report: Education and Training 2010 (February 2004)

>

2 National frameworks of qualifications in higher education >

2.1 Introduction

There are a number of concepts associated with and essential to an understanding of national frameworks of qualifications, but there is unfortunately no widespread international agreement on the accepted use of such terms as level, cycle, workload, learning outcome, qualifications framework, etc. Differences in the use of these terms makes an explanation of national frameworks and their co-ordinated development problematic. In order to overcome these difficulties the followings definitions (see box below) are employed in this chapter and throughout the whole report:

Credit: a quantified means of expressing the volume of learning based on the achievement of learning outcomes and their associated workloads.

Cycle: the three sequential levels identified by the Bologna Process (first cycle, second cycle and third cycle) within which all European higher education qualifications are located.

Europe/European: Europe/European refers to those countries that are signatories to the Bologna Declaration, whilst 'national' is used to describe the contexts within each of those countries or education systems.

Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area: an overarching framework that makes transparent the relationship between European national higher education frameworks of qualifications and the qualifications they contain. It is an articulation mechanism between national frameworks.

Learning outcomes: statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a period of learning.

Levels: represent a series of sequential steps (a developmental continuum), expressed in terms of a range of generic outcomes, against which typical qualifications can be positioned.

National framework of qualifications (higher education): the single description, at national level or level of an education system, which is internationally understood and through which all qualifications and other learning achievements in higher education may be described and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between higher education qualifications.

Profile: either the specific (subject) field(s) of learning of a qualification or the broader aggregation of clusters of qualifications or programmes from different fields that share a common emphasis or purpose (e.g. an applied vocational as opposed to more theoretical academic studies).

Qualifications (higher education): any degree, diploma or other certificate issued by a competent authority attesting that particular learning outcomes have been achieved, normally following the successful completion of a recognised higher education programme of study.

Qualification descriptors: are generic statements of the outcomes of study. They provide clear points of reference that describe the main outcomes of a qualification often with reference to national levels.

Reference points: non-prescriptive indicators that support the articulation of qualifications, learning outcomes and/or other related concepts.

Workload: a quantitative measure of the learning activities that may feasibly be required for the achievement of the learning outcomes (e.g. lectures, seminars, practical work, private study, information retrieval, research, examinations).

2.2 Systems of higher education and national frameworks of higher education qualifications

All countries in the Bologna Process necessarily have a system of higher education that includes an understanding of the roles of higher education, of higher education institutions, and of various stakeholders, such as learners, staff in higher education institutions, and social partners. The elements of such national higher education systems are often formally defined, however there may be many aspects of higher education systems that are not precisely defined but are understood within the society in which they operate. Within higher education systems, higher education qualifications themselves are a key element and are often not clearly separated in their definition from the programmes of study leading to them.

In recent years, there has been an increasing national and international debate on higher education qualifications, and in particular how they are organised, recognised and related to each other on national and trans-national bases. In particular, the emerging developments within the Bologna Process have been key factors in stimulating such debates. The OECD has made some advances in this area with its project entitled *The Role of National Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning*. Emerging from this debate has been recognition of the need to have a specific policy focus on the higher education qualifications attained by learners who have successfully participated in programmes of various types.

In simple terms a national framework of higher education qualifications is defined here as:

the single description, at national level or level of an education system, which is internationally understood and through which all qualifications and other learning achievements in higher education may be described and related to each other in a coherent way and which

defines the relationship between higher education qualifications.

Such national frameworks typically have a number of elements; these are discussed in detail in this chapter, and include sets of specific framework criteria, levels of learning outcome and descriptors for qualifications. Some such frameworks encompass many areas of learning whilst others are confined to higher education. Some frameworks may have more design elements and a tighter structure than others; some may have a legal basis whereas others represent a consensus of view of social partners.

2.3 The purposes of national higher education frameworks of qualifications

A comprehensive restructuring of the European landscape of higher education is underway, and qualifications themselves are becoming the focus of more attention as their meaning and relevance are being considered in relation to the realities of the 21st century. Part of this process is a pronounced tendency to create more explicit systems that map and explain the purpose and relationship between different qualifications.

There are various forms of national qualification frameworks; some include all levels and types of qualifications whilst others, for example, specifically separate higher education qualifications from other types of qualifications. There are thus some national systems that employ a single framework whilst others have multiple frameworks that are generally integrated in a more or less formal way. Frameworks differ greatly in the detail of their purposes and components.¹⁴

¹⁴ For example, some are credit-based using the ECTS system, some use other credit systems and some use no credits at all.

Some frameworks have a strong regulatory function based in law, whilst others are descriptions and have evolved by agreement between stakeholders.¹⁵ Modern national qualification structures invariably involve much more than a simple distinction between two cycles and commonly include a range of qualifications, intermediate qualifications and levels. The development of any over-arching European model will need to be flexible enough to encompass such variations.

National frameworks of qualifications in higher education can act in two distinct ways: firstly, by directly achieving certain things; and secondly, by enabling and encouraging other developments. This latter role has been shown to be important as it helps to drive change and improvement within educational systems. These different dimensions can be illustrated by separating and identifying them. National frameworks of qualifications can achieve the following; they:

- > make explicit the purposes and aims of qualifications - by their clear description through the articulation of the learning outcomes, and by clarifying any rights to professional practice and recognition associated with them;
- > delineate points of integration and overlap between different qualifications and qualification types - thereby positioning qualifications in relation to one another and showing routes (and barriers) for progression;
- > provide a nationally agreed framework that guides and reflects the agreement of stakeholders;
- > provide a context for the review, articulation and development of existing qualifications

¹⁵ For example, in Scotland the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) is a detailed agreement between stakeholders that entails no legislation.

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- > provide a context for the design of new qualifications.

National frameworks of qualifications can act as drivers of change in that they can help to:

- > promote the attainment of qualifications - by indicating their role and benefits for citizens, employers and all members of society;
- > nationally and internationally, raise the awareness of citizens and employers in relation to qualifications - by clarification of the various national roles and relationships between qualifications and the opportunities, recognition and mobility that are possible;
- > facilitate and support learners and clarify all of the educational opportunities available to them - by encompassing all higher education qualifications and providing a comprehensive listing of all qualifications including intermediate qualifications and, where appropriate, their credit values;
- > improve access and social inclusion - by creating a variety of alternative routes, with entry and exit points that acknowledge attainment;
- > influence the reform of qualifications to reflect changing societal needs, including the introduction of new qualifications;
- > facilitate curricular change;
- > support (autonomous) higher education institutions in meeting their responsibilities to learners and other stakeholders

promote the attractiveness of the higher education from outside of the country.

There is no precise pattern to the way that national frameworks of qualifications develop. It is quite common for them to be created by bottom-up or top-down approaches or, a fusion of both. Their very development, by consultation between stakeholders (see section 2.6), is often a cathartic procedure which itself is a dynamic learning experience for all concerned. The ownership, control and development of national frameworks of qualifications do not follow a single pattern and this reflects the reality that such frameworks are, quite properly, an area of national autonomy and political decision-making. However, there is a need to explore the adoption of some elements of shared European methodologies and terminology to describe and express qualifications and frameworks of qualifications. This does not, and should not, mean that the content, purpose, organisation and delivery of qualifications should be standardised. Furthermore, it is essential to recognise that national frameworks of qualifications are dynamic structures that need to develop as the national situation and priorities change.

National frameworks of qualifications are important parts of the academic architecture within which autonomous higher education institutions can flourish and be supported. They facilitate the creation of academic independence within a system of responsibility and external reference points. Higher education institutions are provided with clear parameters for the development and validation of their own qualifications. They can thus be held responsible and accountable for their activities (by internal and external quality assurance processes) whilst retaining real ownership of their curricula. Autonomous higher education institutions can then demonstrate that each of their qualifications is allocated to the appropriate level in any national framework.

In Europe a number of countries have, as a means of reform, pioneered new outcomes-focussed approaches to their national higher education frameworks of qualifications as well as the qualifications they contain. They have gone beyond traditional

systems by emphasising not only input factors and formal course characteristics but by also identifying output factors based on learning outcomes. These countries share similar tools and methodological approaches. It is this kind of approach that is important for the development of national frameworks and Framework for qualifications of EHEA. Such frameworks employ clear external reference points (learning outcomes, subject reference points/benchmark statements, levels/cycle descriptors, workload, qualification descriptors, etc.) and provide a context for qualifications that are themselves expressed with greater clarity and precision with regard to their nature, function and skills that they certify.

2.4 Elements of national frameworks

National frameworks of qualifications are typically constructed using similar elements to those indicated in the Berlin Communiqué. Qualifications themselves benefit from being described clearly, and are defined for this report as:

*any degree, diploma or other certificate issued by a competent authority attesting that particular learning outcomes have been achieved, normally following the successful completion of a recognised higher education programme of study.*¹⁶

The award of a qualification indicates that the student has completed a range of studies to a given standard and/or indicates a level of achievement by an individual who is deemed fit to perform a particular role, set of tasks or job. Qualifications are increasingly expressed in terms of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate on the successful completion of the approved programme of learning.

¹⁶ This definition is adapted from article 1.1 of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention, Lisbon 1997

Higher education qualifications benefit from detailed description that reflect their purpose and function and facilitate their international comparisons and recognition. In ‘new style’ qualifications frameworks, qualifications are typically described in terms of workload, cycle or level, learning outcomes, competence and profile. These elements are explored in the following sections. It is these elements that provide the transparency and ultimately the improved recognition required by the EHEA.

2.4.1 Learning outcomes, including competences

Learning outcomes represent one of the essential building blocks for transparency within higher education systems and qualifications; they were the subject of a Bologna Conference held in Edinburgh, 1-2 July 2004, where all aspects of their application were examined in the context of Bologna developments. A background study and the conference report provide detailed information on the implementation of learning outcomes across Europe. Learning outcomes have been defined above as:

*statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a period of learning.*¹⁷

Learning outcomes have applications in many locations: (i) the individual higher education institution (for course units/modules and programmes of study¹⁸); (ii) nationally (for qualifications, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance

¹⁷ Source: the UK ‘Using Learning Outcomes’ background report for the Edinburgh ‘Bologna seminar 1-2 July 2004, section 1.2. This section explores a number of definitions of learning outcomes. The use of the verb ‘do’ in the definition used above underlines the aspect of competence or ability rather than the way in which this ability is demonstrated.

¹⁸ This includes all the study leading to a particular qualification.

regimes); and (iii) internationally (for wider recognition and transparency purposes). They are important for the understanding of qualifications in society, for example by learners and employers.

Learning outcomes statements are typically characterised by the use of active verbs expressing knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation, etc. With ‘outcomes-based approaches’, they have implications for qualifications, curriculum design, teaching, learning and assessment, as well as quality assurance. They are thus likely to form an important part of 21st century approaches to higher education (and, indeed, to education and training generally) and the reconsideration of such vital questions as to what, whom, how, where and when we teach and assess. The very nature and role of education is being questioned, now more than ever before, and learning outcomes are important tools in clarifying the results of learning for the student, citizen, employer and educator.

In terms of curriculum design and development, learning outcomes are at the forefront of educational change. They place a focus on the coherence and aims of the qualification, the judgement of the designer and how the qualification fits within the traditions of the discipline. They represent a change in emphasis from ‘teaching’ to ‘learning’ typified by what is known as the adoption of a student-centred approach, as opposed to the more traditional, teacher-centred viewpoint. Student-centred learning produces a focus on the teaching - learning - assessment relationships and the fundamental links between the design, delivery, assessment and measurement of learning.

Learning outcomes are not just an isolated tool at the level of curriculum design but also represent an approach that plays a significant role in a much wider context that includes: the integration of academic and vocational education and training (VET); the assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL);

the development of qualifications frameworks that accommodate lifelong learning; the development of credit transfer and accumulation systems.

Achieving learning outcomes

The concept of learning outcomes implies that the manner of the achievement of a qualification is not as important as the achievement of the qualification itself. This is very relevant to the recognition of prior learning, which is enhanced by the increased use of learning outcomes. A broad understanding of the recognition of prior learning in relation to qualifications is that this can be for the purposes of:

- > entry to a programme leading to a qualification;
- and also
- > allocation of credit towards an qualification, or exemption from some programme requirements
- > eligibility for a full qualification

The recognition of prior learning can also be directly relevant in terms of facilitating employment. Making a full qualification on the basis of the recognition of prior learning is a relatively new concept. Many countries are seeking to encourage the continuation, expansion and further development of processes for the recognition of prior learning. In France, a national system has been in place for some time; this is explained in Appendix 4. Whilst many higher education institutions within the UK also recognise and accredit prior learning, national guidelines have only recently been published¹⁹.

In June 2004 the Council of European Ministers, and the representatives of the Member States meeting within the

¹⁹ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/apel/guidance.htm>

European Council, adopted Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning²⁰.

It is important to the development and implementation of a European framework that the broad connections between learning outcomes, levels, level descriptors and credits, and teaching, learning and assessment are recognised. Learning outcomes have been described as a basic educational building block and as such they have direct and powerful links with a number of other educational tools. They make possible much more than the simple identification of learning achievements. They have a direct relationship to levels and level indicators. When learning outcomes are written they are created in the context of the institutional/national/international reference points that aid the maintenance of standards and quality. The development of curricula in terms of learning outcomes does not, therefore, happen in a vacuum. Appropriate reference points guide the application of module/unit and programme learning outcomes.

Descriptors of learning outcomes

In the context of the above descriptor of learning outcomes (statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand, and/or be able to demonstrate at the end of a period of learning), there is a need to consider the extent to which common approaches to the understanding and definition of learning outcomes between countries should be explored.

In the Tuning project, the description of competences embraces three strands, ‘knowing and understanding’ (theoretical knowledge of an academic field, the capacity to know and understand), ‘knowing how to act’ (practical and operational application of knowledge to certain situations), ‘knowing how

²⁰ Council 9600/04

to be' (values as an integral element of the way of perceiving and living with others and in a social context). Several countries, including Ireland²¹ and Denmark²² have subtle variations in their approaches to, and definitions of, learning outcomes.

Furthermore, a general distinction can be made between generic outcomes associated with all holders of an qualification and specific outcomes associated with disciplines and fields of learning and their particular qualifications. Both the Tuning project, and the shared qualification descriptors (Dublin descriptors) that were developed within the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI), include generic competences (skills and knowledge) and include attributes such as the capacity to learn, the capacity for analysis and syntheses etc. The Tuning project identified a list of 30 generic competences and has also identified specific outcomes in each of the fields of learning that it has examined.

There has been much discussion about the nature of learning outcomes in higher education and in education generally. So far, there is no agreed approach to describing them in a generic sense. For the purposes of this report, learning outcomes are understood in their broadest sense and, in the case of the Dublin Descriptors and the Tuning project, include competences. Within some discourses competences may have a more precise meaning, for example, in some assessment contexts they are associated with the performance of work-related tasks.

In developing frameworks of qualifications the associated descriptors of learning outcome statements need to be explicit about whether they are, for example, written to represent minimum threshold statements (showing the minimum requirements to obtain a pass), or written as reference points

²¹ See annex 5

²² See annex 5

describing the typical (showing the normal level of achievement of successful learners). Either approach is legitimate but it is important, for the purpose of national and international understanding, that each national framework makes its approach absolutely clear.

2.4.2 Levels and typical/generic qualifications

Levels are traditionally the key structural elements on which many national frameworks of qualifications are built. Levels can be understood as:

representing a series of sequential steps (a developmental continuum), expressed in terms of a range of generic outcomes, against which typical qualifications can be positioned.

Levels are pragmatic constructs; they have been developed over the years. Different countries take different approaches in determining the number of levels, the ways in which levels are described, the range of outcomes spanned by levels, and the width and depth of levels.

Some national frameworks while having levels in which qualifications are placed, do not explicitly set out the range of outcomes specifically associated with a level (for example the framework for England Wales and Northern Ireland). Others have what are described as *level descriptors* or *level indicators* (for example Ireland) that set out the range of learning outcomes associated with each level. Where there are no indicators or descriptors these can be understood in the context of the typical qualifications contained within them.

The majority of national frameworks of qualifications employ their own systems of levels, within the broad Bologna cycles, in order to increase the understanding and transparency between their qualifications. These levels need not be directly related to

years of full-time study, in either qualifications or/and credit frameworks e.g. in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) each of the 12 identified levels across all learning is the location of one or more typical qualification and each level is distinguished in terms of the complexity and depth of knowledge and understanding, degree of independence and creativity involved, general cognitive skills, the range and sophistication of practice, etc. The expression of clear levels is an important feature of any qualifications frameworks. They directly facilitate the realisation of the common purposes that qualifications frameworks are created to achieve.

The concept of typical/generic types of qualifications is also one that is incorporated in many national frameworks. The level indicators/descriptors act to assist in the positioning of typical/generic qualifications at levels.

These typical/generic qualifications are the principal class of qualifications made within each level. For most levels, such typical/generic qualifications capture a typical range of achievements in a typical qualification at the level – there may be more than one such typical qualification. They include the learning outcomes as they have been defined in a national framework. For example, many national frameworks incorporate first, second and third cycle degrees, as typical/generic qualifications.

Typical/generic qualifications act as a guide (for curriculum designers and learners) as to the kinds of demand it is appropriate to make of learners. The generic qualifications themselves often have descriptors that define the learning outcomes associated with them; these are normally generic in nature and can be applied across subject disciplines and modes of learning. In higher education they are primarily used by: course designers (developing learning outcomes and assessment criteria); those involved in quality assurance (validating, reviewing and approving programmes of learning); credential

evaluators (nationally and internationally, as reference points to help make accurate recognition judgements).

2.4.3 Credits and workload

The Bologna signatory states identified ECTS as an important component of the European Higher Education Area and encouraged states to employ ‘a system of credits’ to facilitate international student mobility and international curriculum development. A large number of countries have already adopted ECTS by law as an accumulation system. Furthermore, the Zurich Conference on credit transfer and accumulation, held by the European Universities Association (EUA) in October 2002, stressed the central role of ECTS in higher education, which was endorsed by the ministers in Berlin.

A credit framework is a way of valuing, measuring, describing and comparing learning achievement, and credits themselves are a quantified means of expressing the volume of learning based on the achievement of learning outcomes and their associated workload. Credits and levels are tools used to represent learning and measure learning volume. National credit frameworks can provide the broad underlying principles to be shared by higher education institutions and their stakeholders, whilst individual credit schemes can exist at the institutional level and detail the procedures and rules of progression established within them.

The drive to use credits is primarily because they support more flexibility within education systems. They can link diverse forms and types of education. The contribution of credits to national and the overarching European framework of qualifications is that they can provide an additional dimension, an added value, to further improve mobility (student, staff and programmes of learning), recognition and transparency.

The national role of credit frameworks varies between different countries just as their frameworks of qualifications and national systems of higher education vary. Similarly, the detailed nature, purpose and rules behind national credit framework are diverse, and matters of domestic concern and autonomy - as are national frameworks of qualifications. At the national level credits are introduced to achieve a range of objectives including any or all of the following:

- > to promote student mobility (within and between institutions as well as internationally;
- > to improve curriculum design (and innovation) and encourage flexible routes and pathways within and between qualifications;
- > to facilitate the creation of diversity in national higher education qualifications and institutions;
- > to promote the development of multiple higher education entry and exit points;
- > to help encourage widening participation and lifelong learning;
- > to improve the recognition of learning achievements including different modes, locations and types of learning (e.g. distance education and work-based APEL approaches);
- > to provide a reference point for the purpose of quality assurance;
- > to provide a reference point for funding;
- > to assist in the clarification of information to all stakeholders;

- > to prevent overloaded curricula and undue burden on learners.

Currently, many European countries are adopting, or have already adopted national, regional or local credit frameworks/schemes to facilitate the modernisation of their education systems. Increasing numbers of these are based on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) using a tariff of 60-credits per full time year. This development has resulted in a shift in ECTS from its traditional role as a credit transfer, mobility system primarily concerned with the recognition of periods of learning for students who take part of their studies in another country. It is now evolving into a wider pan-European credit accumulation and transfer system which impacts on all higher education programmes of learning.

In the development of national frameworks of qualifications there is a need to show that they are supported by credit systems which are compatible with ECTS and that credits and qualifications are described in terms of learning outcomes, levels and associated workloads. Workload is defined for this paper as:

a quantitative measure of all learning activities that may feasibly be required for the achievement of the learning outcomes (e.g. lectures, seminars, practical work, private study, information retrieval, research, examinations).

The time required for an average student to undertake the workload should inform the national credit system. The feasibility of attaining the learning outcomes required for credit within programmes is important for the credibility of the framework and its helpfulness to learners. It is important, in order to avoid confusion, that there is consistent use of credits in both national and European contexts.

2.4.4 Profile

National frameworks typically include references to ‘profile’; this is an important element for consideration when building any national framework of qualifications. Profile can refer either to the specific (subject) field(s) of learning of a qualification or to the broader aggregation of clusters of qualifications from different fields that share a common emphasis or purpose, for example on applied vocational as opposed to more theoretical academic studies.

Fields of learning are central to the European tradition of higher education. Students typically obtain a degree in some field. The work of the Tuning project has demonstrated how much common ground can be identified by trans-national collaborative efforts within fields of learning. This work will continue and inasmuch as higher learning is by definition always changing, the work is unending. Even the boundaries between fields are evolving. The level of detail with which the boundaries are drawn varies across fields. In some cases there are professional reasons for being quite precise about whether a qualification is or is not within a field, whereas for others some measure of ambiguity about which field a qualification belongs in may be acceptable. Various taxonomies of fields of learning exist. Recent years have also seen the development of a number of trans-disciplinary study programmes and it is recognised that, at least in many fields, a learner’s competence and attractiveness to the labour market may be enhanced by supplementing a concentration or core competence in a given area (e.g. economics or political science) with more limited competence in other areas, such as foreign languages, law, statistics, history, etc.

Profile, in the sense of clusters of qualifications sharing a purpose, is a prominent feature of some qualifications systems and is absent in others. In many cases the origins of the distinctions are rooted in binary (or even more complex) systems of provision. In some cases these distinctions have

been translated into outcomes terms and are a feature of the new post-Bologna system. Other systems have reduced or eliminated these distinctions. The existence of these differences in profile is relevant to the framework objectives as they sometimes influence mobility between cycles, even within countries.

2.5 Quality assurance and national frameworks of qualifications within national contexts

Quality assurance has a double aspect: the internal quality assurance and development at higher education institutions and the external quality assurance undertaken by independent bodies.

In recent years there has been an increasing emphasis on the development and use of explicit criteria and processes for quality assurance that are open to external scrutiny, and the majority of Bologna countries now have quality assurance bodies linked to higher education. Within the Berlin Communiqué, the ministers committed themselves to supporting further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level. They stressed that ‘consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework’. They committed themselves to have national quality assurance systems in place by 2005 meeting four minimum criteria²³. At the European level they stressed the

²³ National quality assurance systems should include:
A definition of the responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved.
Evaluation of programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results.
A system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures.
International participation, co-operation and networking.

need to develop mutually shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance.

A set of common and shared principles for quality assurance is emerging; this is recognised as underpinning quality assurance irrespective of the various national approaches which must, if they are to be effective, reflect local context and culture in the detail of their application. These shared bases for quality assurance are described in detail within the ‘standards and guidelines’ being developed by the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and with EUA, EURASHE and ESIB under the mandate from the ministers in their Berlin communiqué.

Within the EHEA there are however significant differences in approach to quality assurance. Some countries include direct ministerial accreditation of individual programmes, whilst other systems accredit institutions. In yet others the quality assurance processes involve either the review of individual programmes and / or the audit of the institutions responsible for delivering the programmes of study. However, all systems include an element of ‘externality’, whether by external inspectors or by academic peers. There is also a general trend towards increasing the input of students and other stakeholders within quality assurance.

Increasingly, quality assurance involves procedures that are more clearly defined, and it thus relies upon the use of explicit criteria including, where they have been developed, national frameworks of qualifications. Greater transparency of quality assurance procedures is also being supported through inclusion of a wider range of external, and in some cases international, reference points.

In all cases where national frameworks of qualifications have been developed, whether for general, vocational, and/or higher education, they are primarily intended to provide information on qualifications and in particular their inter-relationships; but

they can be and are also used in quality assurance. There are, however, differences in the ways in which the frameworks are used, and intended to be used. Where the delivery of programmes is formally regulated, either by a ministry or other organisation external to the delivering institutions, the framework and its components may be used to establish and/or identify whether specified minimum standards have been met. Such can be the basis of accreditation, although regulation of programmes is not necessarily linked to minimum standards. Elsewhere, and in particular in those countries where the academic institutions have autonomous powers to design their own programmes and set academic standards themselves, qualification frameworks are used as a ‘point of reference’ for both general guidance and within a quality assurance system. In such cases the components of the framework tend to be expressed within a less prescriptive context.

‘Externality’ is increasingly recognised as an essential part of quality assurance, and so it should be within the development and application of new national qualifications frameworks. For such frameworks to be of benefit to stakeholders, including intending and current students, and their employers, the frameworks need to be expressed in terms that are understandable and relevant. These may not always sit comfortably with the precise and detailed language often used or thought to be necessary for regulation.

For pedagogical reasons and to address the needs of stakeholders, the descriptors used within national frameworks are increasingly concerned with identifying ‘achievements’, or the outcomes of learning, rather than referring primarily to ‘input measures’. The inclusion of such an achievements/outcomes based approach will be essential if national frameworks are to meet the needs of all stakeholders and interested parties. This shift in emphasis has a direct impact on quality assurance processes and provides both the rationale and the need to move away from the application of merely mechanistic

approaches, particularly where these are based primarily on ‘input measures’ (e.g. delivered material, time, etc.).

Traditionally within higher education, and largely irrespective of national agendas, programmes have been predominantly planned by the provider(s), with the coherence of the programme setting the context for any quality assurance, whether this is based on implicit/subjective or explicit/objective criteria. With the aspirations of the lifelong learning agendas being promoted at national levels throughout the EHEA, there is increasing emphasis on the role of the stakeholder (student and employer) in programme planning. To accommodate such changes new approaches to quality assurance will be required, including some that can cope with a primary interest in units of study and their combination.

With different emphases in purpose, and marked diversity in quality assurance practices it is inevitable that the application of national frameworks within quality assurance will vary with regard to emphasis and detail of process. Nevertheless, all are essentially concerned with “trust building” and establishing mutual confidence both within national and international contexts. National frameworks have and can continue to provide the stimulus for greater clarity about qualifications and their quality assurance, and progression between them. There is no single model for the application of national frameworks of qualifications within quality assurance whether for assessing the standards of those qualifications or the quality of the provision that leads to them. Experience in those countries that have developed national frameworks has clearly demonstrated that they can be, and are a vital component of the quality assurance environment. It is important to recognise that for national frameworks to fulfil their roles most effectively in supporting effective confidence and “trust” in qualifications, their form, components and application will need to reflect the characteristics of the national context in which they work, including the ‘quality culture’ of the HE community and how it addresses the needs of stakeholders.

2.6 The role of stakeholders in national frameworks

Qualifications are tools for the promotion of trust between the various parties who use these qualifications. There are many elements that go into building up trust. Historically qualifications may have relied for their currency on trust built up among relatively narrow groups of users. For example, such groups include those within a single professional or occupational sector, or those concerned with certain stages of education or training. In the era of lifelong learning, the community of trust surrounding qualifications must be broadened without undermining the strength of the trust itself. There are mechanisms to support the development of trust, such as provisions for setting standards and assuring quality, but it is fundamentally a social and political process as well as a technical one.

The centrality of trust to qualifications was well expressed in the Report of the Study Team on the Implementation of the National Qualifications Framework in South Africa in April 2002.

‘The success of a qualifications framework may be measured by the extent to which its standards and qualifications are valued and used. Unless providers offer them, and unless committed employers understand and demand them, standards and qualifications per se will be inert and disregarded. Thus a qualifications framework cannot stand on its own but needs to be embedded in both the provider community and the communities of users. Trust, which is closely allied to credibility and acceptance, is an essential attribute of successful qualifications anywhere, whether conventional or otherwise. If outcomes-based qualifications are too far removed

from the contexts where learning is done or where qualifications are put to use they will be rejected or ignored'.²⁴

The development of any framework of qualifications must take into account the need to develop trust among the various stakeholders and confidence in the integrity of the resultant framework.²⁵ It is vital to identify the stakeholders and advance consensus-building mechanisms in framework development. An important way to build trust and acceptance is to ensure that any top-down approach is fused with a bottom-up process. There is no perfect way to achieve this and different states have adopted different techniques. Whatever the approaches adopted, it is important to include a variety of stakeholders and a number of ways to build a consensus.

The stakeholders may include: learners/students; providers of education and training; government and appropriate government agencies; awarding bodies; higher education professors/teachers; employers and the business sector; trade unions; community and voluntary organisations; professional bodies; etc. The cooperation of governments, higher education institutions and students based on partnership is an underlying principle of the Bologna Process. Consensus-building mechanisms in the development of national frameworks of qualifications may include a number of measures such as: the broad composition of any statutory body and its executive staff; a publicly advertised consultation phase; publication of papers and submissions, on the internet; international research and consultation; formal survey work with learners and employers; a broadly-based consultative group that meets regularly to

²⁴ Report of the study team on the Implementation of the National Qualifications Framework in South Africa, April 2002, page 58.

²⁵ The concept of 'zones of mutual trust' has also been considered extensively in a recent report for CEDEFOP carried out in support of Copenhagen process for VET: Mike Coles and Tim Oates: European reference levels for education and training, March 2004.

produce extensive, supporting documentation; an open approach by all to questioning the purposes of qualifications and standards; sector meetings (e.g., to consider employment, community, and voluntary sector perspectives); bilateral meetings with stakeholder organisations; the securing of ongoing political support for the initiative; consultation outside the state, particularly with neighbouring jurisdictions; and participation in European and international organisations and meetings.

2.7 Conclusions: good practice for the development of national frameworks of qualifications

An examination of the nature, development and effectiveness of existing ‘new style’ higher education national frameworks of qualifications reveals a wide pattern of different experiences from which a number of good practice recommendations can be identified. The following list indicates some of the most useful aspects that can facilitate the creation of successful new national frameworks of qualifications.

- > The development and review process for producing good frameworks is most effective when it involves all relevant stakeholders both within and outside higher education. Higher education frameworks naturally link to VET and post-secondary education and as such are best viewed and treated as a national initiative. This also makes possible the inclusion of, or links to, other areas of education and training outside higher education.
- > The framework for higher education qualifications should identify a clear and nationally agreed set of purposes (section 2.3 of this report explores a range of possibilities).
- > Frameworks for higher education qualifications benefit from the inclusion of cycles and /or levels, and articulation

with outcome-focussed indicators and/or descriptors of qualifications.

- > The use of learning outcomes in describing units, modules, and whole qualifications aids their transparency, recognition and subsequent student and citizen mobility. The identification of formal links to learning outcomes should play an important role in the development of national frameworks of qualifications.
- > More flexible higher education frameworks of qualifications have the benefit of promoting multiple pathways into and through higher education, and thus through encouraging lifelong learning and the efficient use of resources promote greater social cohesion.
- > Higher education frameworks of qualifications benefit from being directly linked to credit accumulation and transfer systems. Credits are student-centred tools that can enhance the flexibility, clarity, progression and coherence of educational systems when they are expressed in terms of learning outcomes, levels/cycles and workload. Credit systems facilitate bridges and links between different forms, modes, levels and sectors of education and can be instrumental in facilitating access, inclusion and lifelong learning.
- > Higher education frameworks of qualifications should explicitly link to academic standards, national and institutional quality assurance systems, and public understanding of the place and level of nationally recognised qualifications.
- > Public confidence in academic standards requires public understanding of the achievements represented by different higher education qualifications and titles. This confidence and understanding is enhanced by the publication of appropriate institutional audits and/or subject review reports.

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- > The development and application of ‘new style’ national frameworks of qualifications facilitates the development of autonomous higher education institutions by creating clear external reference points that help to promote high quality, responsible and responsive institutions.
- > National frameworks of qualifications need to articulate in a transparent way with the overarching European framework for qualifications. The process of articulation should involve the careful mapping of national qualifications (their levels, learning outcomes and descriptors) with the cycle descriptors identified for the European overarching framework (see chapter four for a discussion of appropriate protocols).

3 The framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area >

3.1 Purposes and nature of the framework of qualifications of the EHEA

A framework for qualifications can fulfil many purposes and the various national frameworks already in existence or development embody diverse purposes. The framework for the EHEA derives its distinctive purposes from the objectives expressed through the Bologna Process. The most directly relevant of these objectives are international transparency, recognition, and mobility.

- > International transparency is at the heart of the Bologna Declaration's call for a system of easily readable and comparable degrees. While other devices, such as the Diploma Supplement, also have a role to play in this objective, it will be difficult to ensure that qualifications can be easily read and compared across borders without a simplifying architecture for mutual understanding, through the construction of a framework,. Moreover the relatively rapid success in the introduction of the two-cycle model through much of the EHEA has in some ways already served to underline that comparable structure of qualifications is not in itself sufficient for genuine comparability and transparency. This realisation led to the call in the Berlin communiqué for an overarching framework to link the national frameworks together in a coherent way.
- > International recognition of qualifications builds on transparency. A framework, which provides a common understanding of the outcomes represented by a qualification rather than a mere assertion of comparability, will greatly enhance the usefulness of qualifications across the EHEA. There are a variety of purposes for the recognition of qualifications – including employment and access to continuing education – involving different stakeholders. The development of a common overarching framework through the collaborative efforts of stakeholders

across Europe will enhance the other actions being made to improve recognition for all of these purposes.

- > International mobility of learners and graduates depends on the recognition of their prior learning and qualifications gained. Learners moving between qualifications or cycles require recognition in order to access more advanced programmes. Students moving within their studies, and their advisors, can benefit from the clarity that may be provided through the specification of the level and nature of the study programmes. These support mobility since learners can have greater confidence that the outcomes of study abroad will contribute to the qualification sought in their home country. A framework will be of particular help in supporting the development and recognition of joint degrees from more than one country.

An overarching European framework has some distinctive objectives, which differ from those of national frameworks. As a meta-framework, it is intended to assist in the identification of points of articulation between national frameworks. It also serves as a point of reference for those developing or reviewing national frameworks of qualification.

The framework for qualifications of the EHEA should be regarded as an overarching framework. That is to say, it provides a meta-framework within which to develop national frameworks and, in broad terms, it stipulates the outline and boundary of national frameworks, and is a device, which helps to provide clearer understanding of how the various qualifications made within the European higher education area, are related to each other and articulate with each other. It expresses how the qualifications systems of the various states in the area are related to each other, especially where these national systems have themselves been incorporated into formal national frameworks. It offers a common set of cycles and levels, with descriptors for those cycles. Much of the detail expressed in national frameworks is neither necessary nor

desirable in an overarching framework. Indeed, one would expect that as national frameworks evolve they would introduce elements that reflect national needs. These may include qualifications for partial completion of cycles or attainment within a cycle. The framework for qualifications of the EHEA does not replace national frameworks. It augments them by providing a series of reference points whereby they can demonstrate their mutual compatibility.

The overarching framework does not prescribe the content or form of national qualifications systems. They are a matter for the competent national authorities and may be achieved through the specification of national frameworks of qualifications.

Not all qualifications included in national frameworks will necessarily correspond to the completion of one of the major cycles in the overarching European framework. Some qualifications fall within cycles. The framework will however also provide some implicit guidance for the assessment of such qualifications. There may also be specialised and minor qualifications, which do not correspond to one of the cycles.

The dimensions and features of some qualifications within national frameworks do not have counterparts in other countries. The overarching European framework will not refer to such features but neither will it exclude them from national systems. One example of such a feature is ‘profile’, as discussed in section 2.4.4, which is an important element in some national qualifications systems but not in others. The overarching framework will not refer to such features; it has no intentions or competence to influence inclusion/exclusion of such features from national frameworks.

3.2 Cycles and levels

A fundamental question for any framework of qualifications concerns its structure and the number of divisions it contains.

For the EHEA framework this question is already largely answered. The Bologna Declaration asserts that there will be two main cycles and the Berlin Communiqué elaborates upon this to specify a third (doctoral) cycle linked to research. The successful completion of the first cycle gives access to programmes of the second cycle. The successful completion of the second cycle gives access to programmes of the third cycle. “Access” is used here in the same sense as in the Lisbon Recognition Convention, namely the right to apply and be considered for admission to a programme of higher education. It does not necessarily imply an automatic right of admission or entitlement to a place on a programme.

In addition, the Berlin communiqué requests that the Bologna Process Follow-up Group explore whether and how shorter programmes within higher education may be included. The short cycle qualifications of interest are those within or linked to the first cycle.

Some national frameworks include further sub-divisions within the three main Bologna cycles, but such sub-divisions are not widely shared across the area. The relationship of qualifications in such subdivisions to those corresponding to the main cycles within the respective national frameworks can and probably will be used informally to indicate their approximate position in relation to the EHEA framework. Such qualifications may also be awarded credit that can contribute towards qualifications of another cycle. The overarching framework of qualifications should play an important role in facilitating fair recognition of such qualifications within national frameworks that do not have similar qualifications by a process of partial recognition.²⁶

²⁶ For Partial recognition see the Recommendation on the Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications, adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee in 2001.

The concept of “cycle” has been used in the Bologna Process to refer to stages in higher education, incorporating qualifications, programmes, and phases of learning. The term “level” is more commonly found in documentation on national frameworks of qualifications.

Level is also used to refer to the provision of education, for example in UNESCO’s International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). Unlike the framework, which has the variety of purposes already discussed, ISCED is primarily a tool for statistical classification.²⁷

The Berlin communiqué refers to basing the framework on “levels”. It is not intended that the EHEA framework would specify conventions on naming qualifications. It is unlikely that conventions such as “bachelor’s level” or “master’s level”, which are used in some though by no means all national systems, would be acceptable. A simple numeric designation such as “level 1”, “level 2” would risk confusion, especially where some national framework have numbered level systems starting well ‘below’ higher education. The link with study programmes suggested by “cycles” is however not inappropriate given that the specifications of the framework must take workload into account. Therefore it is proposed that the three principal divisions in the framework be identified by reference to qualifications corresponding to completion of the cycle:

²⁷ ISCED 1997 recognises that while it is desirable to classify levels on the basis of educational content, the diversity of programmes, curricula and structure make this impossible to do on a worldwide scale without employing additional criteria such as entrance requirements, duration and national qualification structure. ISCED Level 5 and 6 refer to tertiary education. Level 5 is defined as tertiary education not leading to an advanced research qualification. It is further divided in 5A and 5B, using a set of subsidiary criteria. Level 6 refers to tertiary education leading to an advanced research qualification.



- > First cycle (higher education) qualifications
- > Second cycle (higher education) qualifications
- > Third cycle (higher education) qualifications

The Berlin communiqué asked that shorter higher education linked to the first cycle be considered. For the purposes of this report this is referred to as the short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle). Qualifications corresponding to successful completion of the short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) can be identified. Such short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications are not universally employed, and comparable qualifications do not exist in all national systems. There is no intention to mandate the creation of such a qualification where the national system does not see fit to include it. However, since short cycle qualifications are found in many countries it is important to give them a place in the framework. This will help for the mutual recognition of the qualifications between those states that have them. It will also help to develop recognition of short cycle qualifications in those states which do not use them in their national systems but who receive holders of such qualifications. At the same time it is recognised that some states have a variety of qualifications in or about this level, with diverse purposes and structures. Some are part of higher education and some are classified as being outside of higher education. The short cycle descriptor is not intended to cover all of the diversity of qualifications that fall within, but do not complete, the first cycle.

Programmes leading to a first cycle qualification (or a short cycle within or linked to the first cycle where it is used) have a 'start point'. This is sometimes spoken of as an entry route. Strictly speaking this is not a qualification and is thus not part of the framework for qualifications of the EHEA. Moreover there are diverse pathways into the various forms of higher education within some states, which make it difficult to define a

‘level’ for entry in higher education; indeed, ‘level’ may not be the most appropriate concept to apply. However, it is thought useful that some reference is made to the starting point(s) for the framework. For the purposes of the EHEA framework it is generally considered sufficient to refer to Article IV of the Lisbon Recognition Convention concerning qualifications giving access to higher education:

“Each Party shall recognise the qualifications issued by other Parties meeting the general requirements for access to higher education in those Parties for the purpose of access to programmes belonging to its higher education system, unless a substantial difference can be shown between the general requirements for access in the Party in which the qualification was obtained and in the Party in which recognition of the qualification is sought.”

3.3 Descriptors of learning outcomes, including competences

A key element in contemporary qualifications frameworks is the specification of outcomes. There are various ways in which the range of outcomes can be categorised and specified. Traditionally higher education was relatively explicit about the knowledge (outcomes) to be achieved, or at least the knowledge covered by the curriculum. It was however somewhat less explicit on the skills or competences required for the award a given qualification. Competences, such as those of critical evaluation, were and are embedded or implicit in the assessment values and practices. It is becoming increasingly widespread practice that as wide a range of the outcomes as possible are specified. Such explicit specification facilitates the comparison of qualifications.

The generic outcomes for a qualification, that is the learning outcomes common to all holders of a particular type of qualification, may be expressed in a ‘qualification descriptor’.

The descriptors for a European framework must of necessity be quite general in nature. Not only must they accommodate a wide range of disciplines and profiles but they must also accommodate, as far as possible, the national variations in how qualifications have been developed and specified. For practical purposes, the descriptors should be short and easy to understand. They should avoid technical language, bearing in mind that they will be used in reference to national qualifications systems expressed in a variety of languages.

After the Prague Ministerial Conference (2001), it became increasingly clear that the structure of cycles introduced through Bologna would have to be supplemented by more detail on the outcomes of these cycles if the objectives of transparency, recognition and mobility were to be met. An informal group of higher education specialists from a variety of countries met under the umbrella of the Joint Quality Initiative (www.jointquality.org). This grouping developed a set of descriptors that have come to be referred to as the ‘Dublin Descriptors’. The initial descriptors for the first and second cycle were commended to the ministers’ meeting in Berlin by the Amsterdam Consensus. Subsequently the group has developed a descriptor for the third cycle. Recently, a descriptor for a short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle), following the pattern of the other three cycles, has also been produced. These descriptors (especially for the first and second cycles) have been found to be useful in various ways by national quality assurance agencies, developers of higher education standards, and designers of higher programmes. So far, no significant revisions have been proposed.

Qualification descriptors are usually designed to be read as general statements of the typical achievement of learners who have been awarded a qualification on successful completion of a cycle. The concept of typical qualification cycle descriptors was developed within the Joint Quality Initiative. This concept found wider acceptance and applicability than possible use of broader level descriptors. Level descriptors are typically more

comprehensive and attempt to indicate the full range of outcomes associated with a level.

The Dublin descriptors have been developed as a set and are intended to be read with reference to each other. They are primarily intended for use in the alignment of qualifications and hence national frameworks. National frameworks may themselves have additional elements or outcomes, and may have more detailed and specific functions.

The Dublin descriptors were built on the following elements:

- > knowledge and understanding;
- > applying knowledge and understanding;
- > making judgements;
- > communications skills;
- > learning skills.

The Dublin Descriptors offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with qualifications that represent the end of each of a Bologna cycle. They are not meant to be prescriptive; they do not represent threshold or minimum requirements and they are not exhaustive; similar or equivalent characteristics may be added or substituted. The descriptors seek to identify the nature of the whole qualification. The descriptors are not subject specific nor are they limited to academic, professional or vocational areas. For particular disciplines the descriptors should be read within the context and use of language of that discipline. Wherever possible, they should be cross-referenced with any expectations/competencies published by the relevant community of scholars and/or practitioners. In adopting the Dublin descriptors the Working Group recognise that further elaboration of the existing elements and/or introduction of new elements will be part of the evolution of them as reference

points to the framework for higher education qualification of the EHEA.

The Dublin descriptors (December 2004) include:

*Qualifications that signify completion of the **higher education short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle)** are awarded to students who:*

- > have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education²⁸ and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks; such knowledge provides an underpinning for a field of work or vocation, personal development, and further studies to complete the first cycle;*
- > can apply their knowledge and understanding in occupational contexts;*
- > have the ability to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems;*
- > can communicate about their understanding, skills and activities, with peers, supervisors and clients;*
- > have the learning skills to undertake further studies with some autonomy.*

*Qualifications that signify completion of **the first cycle** are awarded to students who:*

- > have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education²⁷, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported*

²⁸ General secondary education also includes vocational education with a sufficiently general component.

by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study;

- > can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional²⁹ approach to their work or vocation, and have competences³⁰ typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study;*
- > have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues;*
- > can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences;*
- > have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.*

*Qualifications that signify completion of **the second cycle** are awarded to students who:*

- > have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with the first cycle, and that provides a basis or*

²⁹ The word ‘**professional**’ is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense, relating to those attributes relevant to undertaking work or a vocation and that involves the application of some aspects of advanced learning. It is not used with regard to those specific requirements relating to regulated professions. The latter may be identified with the profile / specification.

³⁰ The word ‘**competence**’ is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense, allowing for gradation of abilities or skills. It is not used in the narrower sense identified solely on the basis of a ‘yes/no’ assessment.

opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research³¹ context;

- > *can apply their knowledge and understanding, and problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study;*
- > *have the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements;*
- > *can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously;*
- > *have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.*

*Qualifications that signify completion of **the third cycle** are awarded to students who:*

- > *have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field;*

³¹ The word ‘**research**’ is used to cover a wide variety of activities, with the context often related to a field of study; the term is used here to represent a careful study or investigation based on a systematic understanding and critical awareness of knowledge. The word is used in an inclusive way to accommodate the range of activities that support original and innovative work in the whole range of academic, professional and technological fields, including the humanities, and traditional, performing, and other creative arts. It is not used in any limited or restricted sense, or relating solely to a traditional ‘scientific method’.

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- > *have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity;*
- > *have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication;*
- > *are capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas;*
- > *can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise;*
- > *can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge based society.*

The Joint Quality Initiative has also compared the descriptors and identified the step changes found between cycles in each of these elements. See Appendix 6.

3.4 Credit and workload

The advantages associated with national credit systems can to some extent be replicated at the European level. Furthermore, there would be additional benefits in the adoption of a suitable common credit system that could support the qualifications framework and could potentially:

- > provide national frameworks of qualifications with a common credit language (based on learning outcomes and student workload) for describing and locating diverse national qualifications;

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- > help promote the widespread development and implementation of learning outcomes and competences with credits used as a method of quantifying and expressing learning achievement;
- > build upon a wide existing European base of experience amongst institutions associated with the international credit developments;
- > facilitate the precise location of learning by linking credits to national systems of levels and the overarching Bologna cycle descriptors;
- > act as an additional set of reference points to facilitate Europe-wide quality assurance and the understanding of national frameworks of qualifications;
- > provide a seamless bridge between higher education and other education, particularly enabling the development of a consistent and common European framework for lifelong learning that integrates all forms and modes of learning;
- > aid the development and construction of international joint degree programmes and programme collaborations by facilitating flexible learning paths and a range of different qualification profiles;
- > facilitate the global articulation of the European Higher Education Area (and the recognition of its qualifications) with other credit-based systems.

The Berlin communiqué noted that “ECTS is increasingly becoming a generalised basis for the national credit systems.” ECTS was initiated in 1989 as a credit transfer system but is now developing as a system for credit accumulation as well as for transfer. Additionally, and importantly, although ECTS was initially conceived of as a measure of work load, it has also been further developed to include the concepts of learning outcomes, and in some of the national implementations of

ECTS there are examples of the use of ‘notional learning time’ to relate ECTS to volumes of learning outcomes.

While some national frameworks are styled as frameworks for credit and qualifications, in which it is possible to assign units of learning directly to the framework without regard to a specific qualification, such an approach is not necessary or feasible for an overarching European framework. The overarching framework for the EHEA is intended to facilitate the comparison of qualifications as awarded within national qualifications systems, or less frequently jointly between two or more national systems under a joint degree arrangement.

It is proposed that credits are assigned to qualifications within national systems, and credit systems developed and implemented within national qualifications frameworks should be compatible with the ECTS.

The discussions in recent years about the first and second cycle qualifications, notably the Bologna Process seminars of 2001 and 2003 in Helsinki, have discussed qualifications in terms of the range of ECTS credits associated with them. Approaches to ECTS weightings for the short cycle, were considered in the work of the JQI and EURASHE. There has not been any detailed consideration of ECTS and the third cycle. This topic was considered at the Austrian-German-EUA Seminar in Salzburg in February 2005 but a conclusion was not reached³².

Building on these discussions, the following are proposed as guidelines for the association of credits with qualifications within national frameworks:

³² A joint statement by the Rector’s Conferences in Austria, Germany and Switzerland indicates that an appropriate limit on the time to doctorate is, as a rule, three years. UK, France and Denmark have the same limit.

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- > Short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications may typically include / be represented by approximately 120 ECTS credits;
- > First cycle qualifications may typically include / be represented by 180-240 ECTS credits;
- > Second cycle qualifications may typically include / be represented by 90-120 ECTS credits – the minimum requirement should amount to 60 ECTS credits at second cycle level;
- > Third cycle qualifications do not necessarily have credits associated with them.

3.5 Profile

Profile is used here to refer to the specific field of learning of a qualification. Fields of learning are central to the European tradition of higher education, with learners typically obtaining their degree in a particular field. The work of the Tuning project has demonstrated how much common ground can be identified by trans-national collaborative efforts within various fields of learning. Such work will continue and, in as much as higher education is by definition always changing, the work is unending. Even the boundaries between fields are evolving, and the level of detail with which the boundaries are drawn in itself varies across fields. In some cases, there are professional reasons for being quite precise about whether a qualification is or is not within a field, whereas for others some measure of ambiguity about which field a qualification belongs in may be acceptable. Whilst various taxonomies of fields of learning are available, notably that of ISCED, it does not appear useful at this stage to specify that such a taxonomy should be a feature of the framework.

There have been a number of developments within the EHEA, where academic and professional bodies have come together and shared expertise to ‘tune’ their curricula and in some cases harmonise them. While these developments can be helpful in promoting recognition and mobility, it must be noted that professional profile is a matter for national sovereignty. Developments within a discipline on a voluntary basis at European level cannot supplant the competent national responsibility for standard setting. The function of recognition is also a matter for each state and is facilitated through the ENIC/NARIC network.

3.6 Further development

The ownership of the overarching framework rests collectively with the ministers of the signatory states. Responsibility for the maintenance and development of the framework rests with the Bologna Follow-up Group and any successor executive structures established by the ministers for the furtherance of the EHEA. Ongoing tasks following the establishment of the framework could include the development, monitoring and revision of the criteria and procedures to link national frameworks with the overarching framework, periodic review of the framework structure, including the descriptors, and liaison with groups working across Europe more widely on vocational education and training and (other) integrated frameworks.

3.7 Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter has set out and supported the objectives of a framework for qualifications of the EHEA. It is important that all members recognise that such a framework will contribute to transparency and mobility but only if it is underpinned by commitment and trust. Whilst such a European framework is ‘overarching’ it must have the capacity to influence the developments of national frameworks. Compatible elements of

good practice for the development of national frameworks are set out in section 2.7, and where national frameworks are built on such principles it will greatly facilitate the role of the European framework as an important element within the EHEA.

Recommendations:

The framework for qualifications of the EHEA should be an overarching framework with a high level of generality, consisting of three main cycles, with additional provision for a short cycle within or linked to the first cycle.

The framework should include cycle descriptors in the form of generic qualification descriptors to be used as reference points.

The Dublin Descriptors are proposed for adoption as the cycle descriptors for the framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. They offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with qualifications that represent the end of each of a Bologna cycle.

Guidelines are proposed for the range of ECTS typically associated with the completion of each cycle.

4 **Linking frameworks of qualifications in higher education** >

4.1 Introduction

Forty different independent national frameworks, which are not linked together in a coherent way, would not fulfil the learners' expectations of a European Higher Education Area of transparency and mobility where qualifications are easily recognised across borders. The way in which the national frameworks are aligned to the overarching framework is therefore of outmost importance.

In order to facilitate fair recognition it is necessary for foreign partners to trust that national qualifications also in practice correspond to the levels to which they are attached. In this context, the quality assurance system, however it is organised nationally, has a role to play.

There are already many transparency instruments at the disposal for learners, higher education institutions, employers and recognition centres. They might be rendered more effective by the introduction of qualifications frameworks nationally and internationally.

4.2 Quality assurance and national frameworks of qualifications within the context of the EHEA

Although higher education has, to a large extent, historically reflected national cultural contexts it has also always included an international dimension in the establishment of its qualifications and their standards. Similarly, the mobility of staff and students has introduced an international element to quality assurance although again this is generally based predominantly on national contexts. In both areas the contribution of such an international element may have been somewhat implicit and there has until recently been little use of clear and explicit, internationally recognised criteria for supporting quality assurance processes or making objective

assessments. ‘Trust’ has to a large extent been based on personal knowledge within a limited community and ‘reputation’.

The development of the Bologna process brings with it increased expectations around an international ‘marketplace’ for students, employees and employers. If the process is to be successful it will inevitably need to address ‘trust’ within a much wider context, and particularly increased expectations of greater transparency about (national) qualifications, their standards and their quality assurance.

The roles of national frameworks for qualifications in the description and assurance of standards has been described above (chapter 2.5), but they can also have particular roles where there is international interest in the nature of qualifications. It is perhaps inevitable however that the greater international interest is likely to be in comparison *between* frameworks and the qualifications they include. Comparability is an important element particularly where students are seeking to utilise their qualifications within an international arena.

The Bologna process provides a platform for supporting such trust through improving knowledge and understanding; the national frameworks are integral and essential elements within this. Their value is reinforced through the establishment of an overarching European framework that can provide a reference point to establish comparabilities between national frameworks and their component qualifications.

Such an overarching European framework can provide a mechanism through which national frameworks and particularly their qualifications can, at a somewhat generic level, be compared. Neither a European framework nor indeed national frameworks can by themselves be expected to provide discipline specific detail, but they can provide a guide (and in some cases depending upon national contexts perhaps also a guarantee) of the range and extent of competencies that holders

of particular types of qualification can be expected to have. Qualifications frameworks help provide the basis for confidence in whether an applicant has the relevant skills for employment or further study at a particular level.

In addition to providing a template for national frameworks, a European framework can provide a means for building international confidence in the standards of qualifications by setting quality assurance within trans- and inter-national contexts. It is not possible for a qualifications framework to do this by itself. In addition this requires an understanding and application, perhaps only within a national context, of a series of principles for quality assurance that are agreed within an international context.

Such a set of common and shared principles is emerging within the Bologna Process. These principles are recognised as underpinning quality assurance irrespective of the various national approaches. These shared bases for quality assurance are described in detail within the ‘standards, procedures, and guidelines’ being developed by the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and with EUA, EURASHE and ESIB under the mandate from the ministers in their Berlin communiqué.

4.3 Criteria and procedures for verifying the compatibility of frameworks with the framework for qualifications of the EHEA

The regulation of qualifications is linked to the education system within which the qualifications are issued. The EHEA framework is not a regulatory instrument. It serves as a reference point to help national authorities (and other agencies, institutions and individuals) in determining how their qualifications might be compared to others within the EHEA. The development or formalisation of national frameworks in a way that takes note of the overarching framework will greatly

facilitate the objectives of transparency, recognition and mobility in the future. It is for national authorities to determine which qualifications are included in national frameworks. While the linking of qualifications to Frameworks is a national matter, it is vital for the development of mutual trust on an international basis that the manner in which this happens at national level is rigorous and transparent. Furthermore, for the functioning and reputation of the Framework for the EHEA as a whole, it is also important that there will be a clear and demonstrable national process for aligning national frameworks within the European Framework. Thus, it is proposed that criteria should be put in place for the verification that national frameworks are compatible with the EHEA Framework. Furthermore it is proposed that the criteria adopted should set out the minimum requirements that a national framework must fulfil, before it is likely to be considered acceptable to its peers in other signatory states, by the other stakeholders for the European Higher Education Area. It is also important to note that section 2.7 of this report sets out a list of the most useful aspects identified by the working group to facilitate the creation of successful new national frameworks of qualifications and the review of existing such frameworks.

A number of criteria are proposed below for the verification process. A primary criterion is that the national ministry with responsibility for higher education must designate a body or bodies who are responsible for the development of the framework. This is important because it is necessary that the national ministry establishes who is responsible and that the framework development process can be initiated in this way. Furthermore, it is vital that there is a clear and demonstrable link between qualifications in national frameworks and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European Framework (Dublin descriptors). Another important element is that the framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and linked to ECTS or ECTS compatible credits. While it is recognised that it will take some time to fully implement a learning outcomes based approach for all higher

education qualifications, it is considered necessary that the national framework itself will be demonstrably based on such learning outcomes and that there are links to credit arrangements. The manner in which qualifications are included in national frameworks will vary depending on the national arrangements and may, for example, involve an accreditation arrangement that in future should establish the compliance with the criteria mentioned below. It is important to note that the responsibilities with the various domestic parties to the National Framework need to be clearly determined and published and this will help in the transparency.

It is considered important that the National Framework refers to the national quality assurance system for higher education that is in place in the jurisdiction to which the Framework relates. At the time of the writing of the report, the advice of ENQA to the Bologna Follow-Up Group on the implementation of the quality assurance requirements in the Berlin Communiqué had not been made³³. It is not the intention in this report to second-guess such advice, but rather to set out that there is a need to ensure that national quality assurance systems are consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent ministerial communiqués in the Bologna Process. These arrangements will ensure the link between the Framework and quality assurance. It is also important that the Framework links with other instruments of the Bologna Process, such as the diploma supplement and that these are incorporated into the criteria for national frameworks.

Accordingly, building on this rationale, the following criteria are proposed for the verification that national frameworks are compatible with the EHEA framework:

- > The national framework for higher education qualifications and the body or bodies responsible for its development are

³³ See chapter 2.5 for Berlin Communiqué on quality assurance.

designated by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education

- > There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework
- > The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS compatible credits
- > The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent
- > 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 communiqués agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process
- > The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements
- > The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published

It is considered that there is no necessity for the creation of a new trans-national agency to validate and certify the fulfilment of the compatibility of criteria listed above. Furthermore, from the consultation undertaken by the working group, there is no desire that any such arrangement be put in place. Indeed, the general view is that there should be as little additional administrative burden as possible on existing resources and networks should be used where possible, rather than to deploy new ones.

It is important to consider the process by which each country will certify the compatibility of its own framework with the overarching framework. Furthermore, it is considered that the manner in which each country does this should be published. Accordingly, it is proposed that procedures of such compatibility will apply for self-certification by each country. A number of elements are proposed for such a self-certification of compatibility procedures.

A primary procedure, which is proposed is that the competent national body or bodies shall oversee the self-certification process. This parallels the recommendation that a criterion be established that national ministries will identify the body or bodies responsible for the development of a National Framework. It is also important that all national quality assurance agencies in the jurisdiction to which the Framework relates which are recognised through the Bologna Process will be involved in the self-certification of compatibility process. While the precise outcome of the ENQA work has yet to be determined, it is envisaged that a peer-review process will be put in place, which will identify national quality assurance bodies and that it is necessary that all such national bodies in any jurisdiction be involved in the self-certification process. A further key element is that the self-certification process should not only be a national one and should involve international experts.

It is also important that the evidence supporting the self-certification process should identify each of the criteria proposed and that this should all be published. Where needed, translations of this evidence into English should be provided. It is through the publication of the evidence that greater trust can grow among countries about the developments. It is envisaged that the evidence will involve addressing each of the criteria in turn and will involve the inclusion of the formal record of the decisions and arrangements that are put in place in relation to the Framework. It is important that this will not result in a single short letter from a ministry signing off that all of the

arrangements be put in place. Rather, a much more detailed procedure is envisaged which will address each of the elements and give specific evidence in turn, for example, including templates for diploma supplements which reference the national framework and the alignment with the European Framework.

A further key element is that it is proposed that the ENIC and NARIC networks will maintain a public listing of states that have confirmed that they have completed the self-certification process. Also, paralleling the criteria for the verification that national frameworks are compatible with the EHEA framework, it is proposed that the completion of the self-certification process should be noted on diploma supplements by showing the link between the National Framework and the European Framework.

Accordingly, building on this rationale, the following procedures are proposed for self-certification of compatibility:

- > The competent national body/bodies shall self-certify the compatibility of the national framework with the European framework
- > The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies in the country in question recognised through the Bologna Process
- > The self-certification process shall involve international experts
- > The self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall be published and shall address separately each of the criteria set out
- > The ENIC and NARIC networks shall maintain a public listing of States that have confirmed that they have completed the self-certification process

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- > 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.

Only following the self-certification process should any link be made between section 8 of the Diploma Supplement “information on the higher education systems” and the overarching framework for qualifications of the EHEA.

The framework of qualifications has been identified as a key tool for the realisation of the European Higher Education Area. Therefore it is recommended that all signatories will complete the self-certification process by 2010 and that ministers recommend this in their Bergen communiqué.

4.4 National frameworks of qualifications and recognition and transparency instruments

National frameworks of qualifications obviously interface with the existing array of European instruments, which include legal instruments but which also serve the purpose of increasing transparency, in particular:

- > the Council of Europe / UNESCO Recognition Convention and its subsidiary texts
- > EU Directives

as well as transparency instruments such as the Diploma Supplement, ECTS, Europass, the ENIC and NARIC networks, and national recognition centres.

These tools differ in nature, application and impact but all share a common aim to promote good practice and improve the national and international recognition and understanding of study components, qualifications, higher education institutions

and education systems. They are designed to advance transparency and improve the mobility of qualified citizens.

The interaction between transparency instruments and national frameworks of qualifications is complex. They are all designed directly and indirectly to help learners and holders of qualifications as well as all relevant stakeholders including employers, credential advisers, academics, civil servants, etc. The Bologna process has strongly supported the implementation and development of these instruments and it is useful to explore how they impact on new national frameworks of qualifications and the European framework of qualifications, and how they relate to the individual.

In any national system the individual learner (as well as employers, parents, prospective students, etc.) need to know, understand and judge the nature, achievements and attributes represented by different qualifications (and higher education institutions). The individual needs to make informed choices and feel confident that there is worth, value and subsequent recognition in what they study. In addition, detailed information is needed to assist the learner in identifying potential progression routes that they might utilise as they progress through a series of qualifications. In this way national frameworks of qualifications support learners by clarifying the learning opportunities available to them. Furthermore, once a qualification has been obtained the learner is aided, by reference to the frameworks, when they seek fair local, national or international recognition of their achievements.

The various transparency instruments play an important role as they interact with both national and the European Framework of Qualifications. The main role of transparency instruments is that they help:

- > record and transmit detailed information about the individual's achievements (e.g. Diploma Supplement, Certificate Supplement);

- > interpret and explain the place and role of qualifications (e.g. NARICs, ENICs);
- > provide good practice to credential advisors and evaluators (e.g. Lisbon Recognition Convention);
- > identify where information and recognition advice can be obtained as well as act as a main source of information (e.g. NARICs, ENICs);
- > improve curriculum comparability in valuing, describing and comparing learning achievement by employing credits as a quantified means of expressing learning equivalence (e.g. ECTS);
- > aid the recognition and recording of learning wherever it takes place (e.g. Mobilipass).

In fulfilling such roles these tools often serve to empower the learner. They also have an important mediating role between the learner and often complex, and sometimes non user-friendly education systems.

New-style national frameworks of qualifications will strengthen existing transparency instruments by simplifying what they have to transmit. The value of Diploma Supplements will be reinforced, as they will be able to locate qualifications against precise national and European frameworks of qualifications. They will also be strengthened when they can refer to nationally and internationally understood learning outcomes, levels and qualifications descriptors. In this context the part of the Diploma Supplement describing the national education system is particularly important; it should describe the national or other relevant system in terms of its qualifications framework. Similarly, the ECTS Information Packages will become more transparent as modules, units and programmes of study are expressed in terms of outcomes.

The Diploma Supplement already requests issuing bodies to place the qualifications covered by the Diploma Supplement within the context of the ‘the national higher education system’ (section 8 of the Supplement). This information is designed to help guide credential evaluators. Obviously the creation of national frameworks of qualifications will provide a further context within which to place any qualification. Furthermore, following the self-certification process it is sensible that the national framework is directly cross referenced to the framework of qualifications for the EHEA – in particular to the Bologna cycles. The inclusion of such information can serve as evidence that the self-certification process has taken place. This is one concrete example of the way a transparency instrument can benefit from qualifications frameworks.

The use of a common language and approach to express frameworks of qualifications will improve mobility, transparency and recognition. Existing transparency tools, as well as qualifications frameworks, benefit from this mutually reinforcing process. This was recognised by the Riga recognition seminar 3-4th December 2004, ‘Improving the recognition system of degrees and study credit points in the European Higher Education Area’³⁴. This seminar explored a number of strong links between recognition, transparency and qualifications frameworks. The international recognition of qualifications builds on transparency. Frameworks, which provide a common understanding of the outcomes represented by a qualification rather than a mere assertion of comparability, will greatly enhance the usefulness of qualifications across the European Higher Education Area.

The international mobility of learners depends on the recognition of their prior learning and qualifications gained.

³⁴ The full conference report and recommendation of the Riga seminar can be obtained from: <http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/>.

Learners moving between qualifications or cycles require recognition in order to access more advanced programmes. Students moving within their studies, and their advisors can benefit from the clarity that may be provided through the specification of the level and nature of the study programmes. Learners can have greater confidence that the outcomes of study abroad will contribute to the qualification sought in their home country. A framework will be of particular help in supporting the development and recognition of joint degrees from more than one country. Improved international recognition has benefits for employment, access to further qualifications, exemptions from parts of study, access to continuing education, etc.

It is clear that qualifications frameworks are likely to have a large impact on existing recognition tools and practices. The potential benefits to recognition from qualifications frameworks can be summarised as follows. Qualifications frameworks:

- > improve the transparency of qualifications, make credential evaluation easier (for higher education institutions and other stakeholders) and judgements more accurate;
- > act as a common language/methodological approach that internationally can improve recognition and understanding between educational systems;
- > facilitate the recognition of prior experiential learning and lifelong learning between states;
- > simplify our understanding and improve the expression of the curriculum between countries through the use of common reference points;
- > facilitate the application of the 1997 Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon 'Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education'.
- > ease the pressure of work on the ENIC-NARIC network;

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- > make European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) based on learning outcomes and levels more effective;
- > allow higher education institutions and credential evaluators to move away from measurement indicators that focus on formal procedures (admissions criteria, length of studies, qualification titles, years/hours of study undertaken) to focus on the results of learning.

4.5 Conclusions and recommendations

Criteria for verifying the compatibility of national frameworks with the overarching framework for qualifications of the European higher Education Area are recommended. A set of procedures for the transparent self-certification of compatibility by member states is recommended. It is proposed that all signatories will have completed this self-certification by 2010, the target date for the establishment of the European Higher Education Area.

Recommendations:

The following criteria are proposed for the verification that national frameworks are compatible with the EHEA framework:

- > *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*
- > *There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework*

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- > *The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS compatible credits*
- > *The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent*
- > *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 communiqués agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process*
- > *The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements*
- > *The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published*

It is proposed that each country should certify the compatibility of its own framework with the overarching framework, and that details of this self-certification be published.

The following procedures are proposed for self-certification of compatibility:

- > *The competent national body/bodies shall self-certify the compatibility of the national framework with the European framework*
 - > *The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies of the country in question recognised through the Bologna process*
 - > *The self-certification process shall involve international experts*
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- > *The self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall be published and shall address separately each of the criteria set out*
- > *The ENIC/NARIC network shall maintain a public listing of States that have completed the self-certification process*
- > *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.*

The framework of qualifications has been identified as a key tool for the realisation of the European Higher Education Area. Therefore it is recommended that all signatories will complete the self-certification process by 2010.

It is important that national frameworks be developed or revised to provide detail and clarity regarding the qualifications within national systems and how they correspond to the cycles described in the European framework.

All qualifications should be subject to appropriate systems of quality assurance.

The development and use of a shared and common language and approach is recommended for expressing frameworks of qualifications to improve mobility, transparency and recognition.

5 Frameworks for higher education and for other education areas >

5.1 Context – Lifelong Learning perspective

Whilst lifelong learning was referenced in the Bologna Declaration, when Ministers met in Prague in 2001 they included a strong reference to lifelong learning in the communiqué that followed:

Lifelong learning is an essential element of the European Higher Education Area. In the future Europe, built upon a knowledge-based society and economy, lifelong learning strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and the quality of life.

At their subsequent meeting in Berlin (2003), the communiqué again stressed the relevance of lifelong learning:

Ministers underline the important contribution of higher education in making lifelong learning a reality. They are taking steps to align their national policies to realise this goal and urge Higher Education Institutions and all concerned to enhance the possibilities for lifelong learning at higher education level including the recognition of prior learning. They emphasise that such action must be an integral part of higher education activity. Ministers furthermore call those working on qualifications frameworks for the European Higher Education Area to encompass the wide range of flexible learning paths, opportunities and techniques and to make appropriate use of the ECTS credits. They stress the need to improve opportunities for all citizens, in accordance with their aspirations and abilities, to follow the lifelong learning paths into and within higher education.

The concept of lifelong learning as set out in the two communiqués indicate the Ministers' view that lifelong learning is an inclusive way to define all learning activity and, within this, that higher education has a vital role. This understanding is very much in line with developing thinking within the European

Union. Whilst looking at European Union developments, it should be noted that 15 countries, which participate in the Bologna process are not members of the European Union. There are currently forty countries participating in the Bologna process, including the 25 member-states of the European Union. It is further noted that an additional five countries party to the European Cultural Convention have applied for accession to the Bologna Process, and that the Bergen Ministerial meeting will decide whether to accept these applications.

In the mid 1990s there was, within the European Union, a revival of the concept of a continuum of lifelong learning; first mooted in the 1970s, the EU designated 1996 as the European Year of Lifelong Learning. Despite separate legal bases for education and vocational training in the EU Treaty, distinctions between parts of the education and vocational education and training systems were, by this stage, becoming more blurred. There was greater integration between general and vocational curricula, and provision and increased “bridging” between education and vocational education and training pathways. In addition, there were emerging approaches to training and competences in economic sectors, for example in the information and communications technology.

The EU definition of lifelong learning covers learning from pre-school age to post-retirement and includes formal, non-formal and informal learning. It encompasses all activities in life that improve knowledge, skills and competences, regardless of where and how they are acquired. The concept of lifelong learning places the focus on the individual learner rather than learning systems and institutions. This challenges the traditional boundaries within and between different levels of education and training. It also challenges the principles underlying the development, packaging, delivery and evaluation of knowledge and know-how, the nature of institutions, the teaching and learning processes and how learning is valued. The concept of qualifications is precisely that which links peoples’ learning achievements with the recognition of these in a formal way for

society and all of its dimensions. This might mean that there is a need for some re-thinking of the nature of qualifications. While we must broaden our understanding of the range of qualifications and the variety of learning outcomes associated with these, it is important that there is a need for a sign-off on behalf of society that such learning outcomes have been attained and this is the value-added that having a qualification brings.

The focus on lifelong learning began to influence systemic reform processes, mainly due to its relevance to the changing profile and needs of learners. It also gave rise to the emergence of new sub-sectors at the interfaces between basic education and vocational education and training, and between higher education and vocational education and training. This was accompanied by a growing trend to recognise learning which had taken place in less formalised environments, creating new challenges concerned with how learning is assessed and validated and by whom. It also increased the need for improved learner support mechanisms, including the provision of information about learning opportunities, and guidance and counselling to assist learners to make suitable choices. In the late 1990s EU Member States recognised the necessity to develop and support the principles of lifelong learning and began the process of introducing the necessary reforms to help make it a reality.

This report has been drafted from a lifelong learning perspective. National Frameworks of Qualifications have a key role in encouraging lifelong learning within countries. Indeed, National Frameworks, and their related features such as the links to credit accumulation and transfer, moving towards a learning outcomes based approach and the recognition of non-formal and informal learning that is enabled by a real learning outcomes approach, all facilitate and encourage increased lifelong learning and international research shows that these are important elements of many countries approaches to encouraging lifelong learning. Bringing all of the frameworks

together within the Framework for the EHEA, brings all of these developments together on a European basis and enables countries' qualifications systems to relate to each other.

5.2 Initiatives inside “Education and training 2010” (the Lisbon Strategy)

In the Lisbon conclusions of March 2000, the EU Heads of State and Governments set out the strategic goal that the European Union should, by 2010, have become the world's most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. Education and training are considered to be key factors in achieving this goal. In order to develop, sustain and benefit from this evolving economic and social order, and to become a world-class workforce, EU citizens needed to acquire and update, on an ongoing basis, the requisite knowledge, competences and skills. As part of its strategy the EU aims to make its education and training systems a world quality reference by 2010 and has undertaken a commitment to provide access to new and enhanced learning opportunities throughout life for all of its citizens.

Responding to the challenge set at Lisbon requires major efforts to strengthen co-operation on education and training policy. At the request of the Stockholm European Council in 2001, a set of future objectives for education and training systems was defined, and a work programme agreed, the fulfilment of which will constitute a large step towards the Lisbon goal. The Barcelona European Council in March 2002 underlined these ambitions by pointing out that education was one of the bases of the European "social model" and that Europe's education systems should become a "world quality reference" by 2010. An important part of the objectives process is the definition of indicators and benchmarks which can measure the progress of each country and of Europe as a whole towards the objectives set for 2010.

The Council of EU Education Ministers and the European Commission agreed a Joint Interim Report on 26 February 2004; 'Education and Training 2010' reviewed progress in implementing the working programme on the future objectives and set out a number of priority areas for future work. The report called for the establishment of a European framework to stand as a common reference for the recognition of qualifications. The Report further indicated that, given the diversity across Europe in structures and organisation, it is the learning outcomes and competences acquired through the programmes or training periods that should be regarded as important reference levels for the description of qualifications. The report also indicated that a framework of this kind for Europe should naturally be based on national frameworks, which themselves must be coherent and cover higher education and vocational education and training.

While elements of the Bologna Process are broader than the Lisbon strategy, and the Bologna process involves many countries outside the European Union, there are many parallels between the two processes. Furthermore, the Lisbon Strategy has had regard to developments in the Bologna Process in its own development. The Lisbon goals of making European Union education and training systems a world quality reference by 2010 very much parallel the goals of the Bologna Process for all countries within the process by 2010. There has already been extensive reform within the Bologna process, notably quality assurance initiatives, transparency developments, developments in relation to the recognition of international awards, the setting up of National Frameworks of Qualifications and now the establishment of an overarching Framework of Qualifications. These will do much to enhance the European labour market across all countries in the Bologna Process. In many ways, it could be argued that the Bologna process has been a major contribution to the implementation of the Lisbon agenda on a broader basis than just within the European Union.

5.3 Initiatives inside the Copenhagen Process

At the European Union political level, the Education Council adopted, on 12 November 2003, a Resolution on the promotion of enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training. In addition, the Copenhagen Declaration was adopted at the informal ministerial meeting on 29-30 November 2003, taking up the same principles and priorities for enhanced cooperation as the Resolution. The Declaration commits the 31 countries and the Social Partners to giving priority to

Investigating how transparency, comparability, transferability and recognition of competences and/or qualifications, between different countries and at different levels, could be promoted by developing reference levels, common principles for certification, and common measures, including a credit transfer system for vocational education and training

In addressing this priority, a technical working group on credit transfer in vocational education and training was set up in November 2002. The group was, inter alia, asked to make proposals on common reference levels for vocational education and training. The group has developed a number of important concepts in relation to the reference levels as follows:

- > a vertical dimension of eight levels each divided into three sub-levels. The sub-levels seem to be designed as an operational tool to allow for an assessment of the extent of compliance of an qualification with a reference level to support a pragmatic “best-fit” approach;
- > a horizontal dimension, which will be occupied by prototype descriptors of knowledge, skills and competences, linked to broad occupational profiles or work processes, which are in the process of being developed;
- > general descriptors in relation to existing qualifications structures.

It is of note that the reference levels incorporate a broad understanding of vocational education and training which includes many people's understanding of higher education qualifications, expressed from a vocational perspective.

A major stock taking review of the Copenhagen process took place in autumn 2004 and was completed before the Ministers of the states involved met in Maastricht in December 2004. The stocktaking report includes progress reports of national, vocational and education training systems towards Lisbon objectives, and covers innovations in teaching and learning and progress towards building competences for a European labour market. When meeting in Maastricht, the Ministers issued a communiqué that reviewed progress and indicated the areas to which priority should be given in the next two years. Among these, the Ministers agreed to give priority to the development of an open and flexible European Qualifications Framework, founded on transparency and mutual trust. Furthermore, the ministers agreed to prioritise the development and implementation of the European Credit Transfer System for Vocational Education and Training.

5.4 Towards a European Qualifications Framework for the EU

The call of the Council and Commission, in its Joint Interim Report, 'Education and Training 2010', for the development of a European framework to stand as a common reference for the recognition of qualifications, is referenced above.

In addition, the Irish Presidency conference (March 2004) on "common themes in higher education and vocational education and training" recommended that a European Qualifications Framework be taken forward within the framework of the 'Education and Training 2010' work programme, with a view to linking together the common reference levels framework for vocational education and training and the Qualifications

Framework currently being developed for the European higher education area.

On the basis of the mandate in the Joint Interim Report, in November 2004 the European Commission established an expert group on a European Framework for Qualifications (EFQ) which is to build on the results of the Bologna process in higher education and the Copenhagen process in vocational education and training, and to take into account existing qualification and competence frameworks at national, European and international levels with a view to:

- > clarifying the conceptual basis for a EFQ;
- > assisting the Commission in the collection and analysis of information relevant to the development of a EFQ;
- > identifying the main components of a EFQ, and in particular address the functions and links between common reference levels, learning outcomes, guiding principles and supporting instruments;
- > supporting the Commission in formulating a draft proposal by mid-April 2005 for a EFQ, to be used as a basis for an extensive consultation of relevant stakeholders throughout Europe;
- > assisting the Commission in the planning and organising of a consultation process on a EFQ to be carried out in 2005.

The establishment of this expert group with a view to assisting the Commission in preparing a European Framework for Qualifications is seen as a very helpful development. It is anticipated that the broad and deep consensus represented in this report will be reflected in the approaches that are developed by the European Commission in its proposals for the European Framework for Qualifications. This report intends to make an important and valuable contribution to these developments, and should serve as a model for the European Commission's

proposals. It is important that this synergy continues as the European Commission continues its work in this area. At this stage, an initial proposal from the Commission is anticipated in advance of the Ministers' meeting in Bergen. The plans of the Commission are that there would be an extensive consultation process prior to the establishment of the European Framework for Qualifications in 2007.

5.5 Conclusion

In the drafting of this report the working group has taken into account wider European developments in lifelong learning, of which higher education is an intrinsic part, developments in the Lisbon process and the linked future objectives process, as well as development in the Copenhagen process on increased European co-operation in vocational education and training. The change agenda being advanced through much of this work inter-relates closely with the sorts of changes required by the Bologna process and reflected through the introduction of national frameworks of qualifications, and an overarching framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. The change agenda also gives rise to the need for national frameworks to include qualifications that result from the recognition of non-formal and informal learning experiences. In addition, the increasing focus on the individual learner rather than learning systems and institutions, which challenges the traditional boundaries within and between different levels of education and training, is also relevant.

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6. Conclusions

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This report concerns the elaboration of an overarching framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It builds on the assumption that qualifications are primarily a matter of national concern and articulated in national qualifications frameworks and that such national frameworks can be inter-connected through linkage to the overarching framework of EHEA.

The Working Group and its expert panel, who were invited by the Bologna Process Follow-up Group to undertake the work, provide a series of recommendations and proposals regarding the framework for qualifications of the EHEA, and advice on good practice in developing national (or equivalent) frameworks.

It is recommended that:

- > the framework for qualifications in the EHEA should be an overarching framework with a high level of generality, consisting of three main cycles, with additional provision for a short cycle within or linked to the first cycle;
- > the framework should include cycle descriptors in the form of generic qualification descriptors that can be used as reference points. It is *proposed that*:
 - > the Dublin Descriptors are adopted as the cycle descriptors for the framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. They offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with awards that represent the end of each of a Bologna cycle.
- > responsibility for the maintenance and development of the framework rests with the Bologna Follow-up Group and any successor executive structures established by the ministers for the furtherance of the EHEA.

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- > all signatories will complete the self-certification process by 2010.

It is proposed that:

- > *guidelines* for the range of ECTS typically associated with the completion of each cycle include:
 - > Short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications may typically include / be represented by approximately 120 ECTS credits;
 - > First cycle qualifications may typically include / be represented by 180-240 ECTS credits;
 - > Second cycle qualifications normally carry 90-120 ECTS credits -- the minimum requirement should amount to 60 ECTS credits at second cycle level;
 - > Third cycle qualifications do not necessarily have credits associated with them.
- > *criteria* for the verification that national frameworks are compatible with the EHEA framework include:
 - > 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
 - > There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework
 - > The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS credits
 - > The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent

- > 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 communiqués agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process
- > The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements
- > The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published
- > each country should certify the compatibility of its own framework with the overarching framework, and that details of this self-certification be published, with the following *procedures* used for self-certification of compatibility:
 - > The competent national body/bodies shall self-certify the compatibility of the national framework with the European framework
 - > The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies in the country in question recognised through the Bologna Process
 - > The self-certification process shall involve international experts
 - > The self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall be published and shall address separately each of the criteria set out
 - > The ENIC/NARIC network shall maintain a public listing of States that have completed the self-certification process

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- > 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
- > national frameworks should include awards that integrate recognition of non-formal and informal learning experiences.

Advice on good practice to facilitate the creation of successful new national frameworks of qualifications includes:

- > the development and review process for producing good national frameworks are most effective when they involve all relevant stakeholders both within and outside higher education. Higher education frameworks naturally link to vocational education and training and post-secondary education and as such are best viewed and treated as a national initiative. This also makes possible the inclusion of, or links to, other areas of education and training outside higher education.
- > a framework for higher education qualifications should identify a clear and nationally-agreed set of purposes. Frameworks for higher education qualifications benefit from the inclusion of cycles and /or levels, and articulation with outcome-focussed indicators and/or descriptors of qualifications. Higher education frameworks of qualifications can also benefit from being directly linked to credit accumulation and transfer systems.
- > frameworks for higher education qualifications should explicitly link academic standards, national and institutional quality assurance systems, and public understanding of the place and level of nationally recognised qualifications. Public confidence in academic standards requires public understanding of the achievements represented by different higher education qualifications and titles.

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The report stresses the importance of national authority in the development of national frameworks and their associated instruments, and the importance of considering the EHEA framework, the Dublin descriptors, and the guideline ranges on ECTS credits as *'reference points'*.

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Appendices

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1. Working Group and experts
2. Terms of reference
3. Bologna Seminar on Qualification Structures in Higher Education in Europe,
27-28 March 2003, Copenhagen Denmark:
Recommendations
4. La validation des acquis de l'expérience.
L'expérience française (with a summary in English)
5. Some National Qualification Frameworks in Europe
6. Dublin Descriptors ("step changes")
7. Bologna Conference on Qualifications Frameworks,
Copenhagen 13 – 14 January 2005.
Report by the General Rapporteur
8. The Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA

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Appendix 1

Working Group and experts

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BOLOGNA WORKING GROUP	Mogens Berg (Chair)	Denmark
	Andrejs Rauhvargers	Latvia
	Eva Gönczi	Hungary
	Ian McKenna	Ireland
	Jacques-Philippe Saint-Gérand	France
	Marlies Leegwater	Bologna Presidency (NL)
EXPERTS:	Seán Ó Foghlú	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
	Séamus Puirseil	Higher Education and Training Awards Council Ireland
	Nick Harris	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, UK
	David Young	Universities UK
	David Bottomley	QAA, Scottish Office
	Gerard Madill	Universities Scotland
	Anne-Kathrine Mandrup	Danish Centre for Assessment of Foreign Qualifications
	Tue Vinther-Jørgensen	Danish Evaluation Institute
	Albin Gaunt	Ministry of Education, Sweden
	Bastian Baumann	ESIB
	Sjur Bergan	Council of Europe
	Peter van der Hijden	European Commission EAC
CONSULTANTS	Robert Wagenaar	EUA
	Stephen Adam	University of Westminster, UK
	Bryan Maguire	IADT, Dun Laoghaire, Ireland

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TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR WORKING GROUP ON OVERARCHING FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATION FOR THE EHEA

Introduction

In Berlin, 19th September 2003, Ministers with responsibility for Higher Education decided to “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”.

In the context of Life Long Learning, Ministers furthermore called “those working on qualifications frameworks for the European Higher Education Area to encompass the wide range of flexible learning paths, opportunities and techniques and to make appropriate use of the ECTS credits.”

Terms of Reference

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

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
Elaborate on an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area;
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 Group will submit reports to the BFUG, and have its working papers accessible for all BFUG members on the web.

MEMBERS OF WORKING GROUP

The members of the Working Group are:

Mogens Berg, Denmark (chair),
BFUG Chair
Ian McKenna, Ireland (after 1 July)
Jacque-Philippe Saint-Gerand, France
Éva Gonczi, Hungary
Andrejs Rauhvargers, Latvia.

BOLOGNA SEMINAR ON QUALIFICATION STRUCTURES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE

27-28 March 2003

Copenhagen Denmark

RECOMMENDATIONS

The participants in the conference on Qualification Structures in European Higher Education, organized by the Danish authorities in Copenhagen on March 27 – 28, 2003 recommend:

1. The Ministers meeting in Berlin in September 2003 should encourage the competent public authorities responsible for higher education to elaborate national qualifications frameworks for their respective higher education systems with due consideration to the qualifications framework to be elaborated for the European Higher Education Area.
2. The Ministers' meeting should also be invited to launch work on an overarching qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area, with a view to providing a structural framework against which individual national frameworks could articulate with due regard to the institutional, historical and national context.
3. At each appropriate level, qualifications frameworks should seek to describe the qualifications making up the framework in terms of workload, level, quality, learning outcomes and profile. An EHEA framework should seek to describe qualifications in generic terms (e.g. as first or second cycle degrees) rather than in terms specific to one or more national systems (e.g. Bachelor or Master)

4. Qualifications frameworks should also seek to describe these qualifications with reference to the objectives or purposes for higher education, in particular with regard to four major purposes of higher education:
 - (I) preparation for the labor market;
 - (II) preparation for life as active citizens in democratic society;
 - (III) personal development;
 - (IV) development and maintenance an advanced knowledge base.
5. While at national level, qualifications frameworks should as far as possible encompass qualifications at all levels, it is recommended that, at least as a first step, a framework for the European Higher Education Area focus on higher education qualifications as well as on all qualifications giving access to higher education. As far as possible, an EHEA framework should also include qualifications below first-degree level.
6. Within the overall rules of the qualifications frameworks, individual institutions should have considerable freedom in the design of their programs. National qualifications frameworks, as well as an EHEA framework, should be designed so as to assist higher education institutions in their curriculum development and design of study programs. Qualifications frameworks should facilitate the inclusion of interdisciplinary higher education study programs.
7. Quality assurance agencies should take the aims of the qualifications frameworks into account in their assessment of higher education institutions and/or programs and make the extent to which institutions and/or programs implement and meet the goals of the qualifications framework of the country concerned, as well as an EHEA framework, an important element in the overall outcome of the assessment exercise. Higher education institutions should also take account of the qualifications frameworks in their internal

quality assurance processes. At the same time, the qualifications frameworks should define their quality goals in such a way as to be of relevance to quality assessment.

8. While an EHEA qualifications framework should considerably simplify the process of recognition of qualifications within the Area, such recognition should still follow the provisions of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention. The Ministers meeting in Berlin in September 2003 should therefore invite all states party to the Bologna Process to ratify this Convention as soon as possible.
9. The main stakeholders in higher education within the EHEA should be invited to contribute to a dialogue on a qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area as well as give consideration to how such a framework could simplify the process of recognition of qualifications within the framework. Considerations of national frameworks could benefit from taking into account experience with other frameworks.
10. Transparency instruments such as the Diploma Supplement and the ECTS should be reviewed to make sure that the information provided is clearly related to the EHEA framework.
11. Whether at national level or at the level of the European Higher Education Area, qualifications frameworks should make provision for the inclusion of joint degrees and other forms of combination of credits earned at the home institution and other institutions as well as credits earned through other relevant programs or experiences.
12. Qualifications frameworks, at national level as well as at the level of the European Higher Education Area, should assist transparency and should assist the continuous improvement and development of higher education in Europe.

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LA VALIDATION DES ACQUIS DE L'EXPÉRIENCE L'EXPÉRIENCE FRANÇAISE PRÉSENTATION & ÉVALUATION

1. AVANT LA LOI DU 17 JANVIER 2002 EXISTAIT LA VALIDATION DIPLOMANTE DES ACQUIS PROFESSIONNELS

La validation des acquis professionnels, instituée par la loi n° 92-678 du 20 juillet 1992 qui complétait d'autres dispositions propres à l'enseignement supérieur et fixées par des décrets de 1985, figure à l'article L 335-5 du *Code de l'éducation*. Avant la *loi de modernisation sociale*, un diplôme ne pouvait être obtenu par la seule validation des acquis professionnels. Or, il existe deux modes d'attribution de diplôme :

- > l'un *par l'État*, par exemple par le Recteur, du CAP au BTS,
- > et l'autre *au nom de l'État* par des établissements habilités à cet effet.

Dans l'enseignement supérieur, le diplôme est délivré *au nom de l'État* par le président de l'université ou le directeur de l'école qui a été habilité pour le faire pour un diplôme donné.

Dans les faits, la validation existe dans l'enseignement supérieur depuis 1934 avec le titre d'ingénieur diplômé par l'État (*Commission du titre d'Ingénieur*). Actuellement, il est délivré environ une centaine de titres par an.

2. LA VALIDATION DES ACQUIS DE L'EXPÉRIENCE DANS LA LOI DE MODERNISATION SOCIALE

Fort de l'expérience acquise depuis 1994-1995, principalement par l'Éducation nationale, la loi n° 2002-73 du 17 janvier 2002,

dite de *modernisation sociale* et le décret n° 2002-590 du 24 avril 2002, visent d'une part à instituer le droit pour tous, d'une part à demander la validation des acquis de son expérience et à en étendre le principe à tous les titres et diplômes, d'autre part à aménager certains aspects de la procédure.

La validation des acquis est prononcée par un jury spécifique, particulier pour chaque diplôme, au vu d'un dossier réalisé par le candidat et à l'issue d'un entretien complémentaire.

Les candidats peuvent bénéficier, s'ils le souhaitent, d'un accompagnement proposé par les dispositifs universitaires de formation continue. Il s'agit d'une aide apportée aux personnes pour leur permettre :

- > de mieux entrer dans la démarche,
- > de déterminer plus sûrement le diplôme adapté à leur parcours et à leur expérience professionnelle, et
- > d'identifier les points forts de leur expérience, avant l'entretien avec le jury qui reste souverain en matière de validation.

La nouvelle loi reprend donc les principes fondamentaux de la loi du 20 juillet 1992 mais en modifie nettement certains aspects, et notamment les suivants :

- > La durée d'activité exigible pour prétendre à la validation des acquis professionnels est réduite de cinq à trois ans;
- > Est ouverte la possibilité de faire reconnaître des compétences professionnelles acquises dans des activités salariées, non salariées, ou bénévoles. Les activités sociales devraient également être prises en compte.
- > Un diplôme peut être obtenu en totalité par la seule validation des acquis de l'expérience;

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- > Pour l'enseignement supérieur, l'entretien avec le candidat est obligatoire et permet d'analyser l'activité professionnelle du demandeur tant en fonction de la branche professionnelle de l'entreprise dans laquelle il travaille que de l'organisation du travail de cette entreprise. Ceci est très important pour les métiers transverses.
- > Le jury détermine les épreuves complémentaires auxquelles le candidat devra se soumettre s'il n'a pas obtenu la totalité du diplôme postulé.

Ces modifications donnent un nouveau souffle à la validation des acquis de l'expérience. Elles ont, d'ores et déjà, des conséquences importantes à divers niveaux pour l'éducation nationale, notamment en ce qui concerne :

- > La mise en oeuvre des diplômes, puisque celle-ci devra intégrer totalement ce nouveau mode de délivrance,
- > Les modes de constitution et de délibération des jurys, puisque ces derniers pourront délivrer un diplôme à partir de la seule expérience d'un candidat et hors de toute épreuve d'examen;
- > La méthodologie même des examens qui permet de prendre en compte d'autres expériences que professionnelles *stricto sensu*, dans le processus de validation,
- > Les instruments et supports qui fournissent aux candidats le moyen de présenter leur expérience (travaux réalisés, dossiers analytiques, etc.)
- > L'organisation pratique et la mise en acte de la procédure, dans la mesure où la demande est rapidement devenue importante.

3. AXES PRIORITAIRES DE LA PROCÉDURE

La validation des acquis des acquis de l'expérience figure dans le *Code de l'éducation* et constitue une avancée majeure pour les systèmes de formation et de certification. Elle permet :

- > De rendre visibles et lisibles les acquis, compétences, aptitudes et connaissances issus du parcours de chacun, dans sa diversité et sa singularité,
- > De valoriser le rôle formateur que peut revêtir l'activité professionnelle,
- > D'articuler en un *continuum* l'indispensable formation initiale, la formation continue et les apprentissages issus de l'expérience, dans le cadre de la formation tout au long de la vie (*lifelong learning*);
- > D'éviter de mettre des adultes expérimentés en situation d'apprentissage de savoirs et savoir-faire qu'ils maîtrisent déjà,
- > De placer des adultes dans une situation plus adaptée à leurs parcours personnels que ne peuvent l'être des épreuves d'examen,
- > D'accroître et étendre les possibilités et les chances d'accès au diplôme et à la certification,
- > De réduire les durées, donc les coûts des formations conduisant à un diplôme.

Dans de nombreux établissements d'enseignement supérieur, des dispositifs susceptibles d'ouvrir à tous la validation des acquis de l'expérience ont *été* conçus, dans le but de :

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- > Développer des systèmes de certifications lisibles et crédibles sur le marché du travail dans le cadre du LMD (licence, master, doctorat) ;
- > Inscrire les acquis de l'expérience dans la conception des dispositifs de qualification et de certification;
- > Assurer l'accessibilité aux études supérieures à des publics qui ne possèdent pas nécessairement le baccalauréat (premier grade de l'enseignement supérieur français, et non pas simple diplôme de sortie de l'enseignement secondaire);
- > Concevoir des processus qui conjuguent souplesse et fiabilité avec le système des crédits (ECTS) dans l'enseignement supérieur;
- > Concevoir des méthodologies et des instruments qui répondent à la diversité des situations;
- > Développer l'information en direction des publics potentiellement bénéficiaires;
- > Développer les partenariats avec les branches professionnelles et avec les entreprises;

Pour l'enseignement supérieur, les textes sont interministériels et concernent aussi bien les universités que les écoles d'ingénieurs et d'une manière générale l'ensemble des établissements, tant les écoles vétérinaires pour le ministère de l'agriculture par exemple que celles relevant des autres ministères.

4. PRATIQUE DES DIFFERENTES PROCEDURES DE VALIDATION D'ACQUIS

Les procédures dites de *validation des acquis professionnels* (VAP) permettent d'être dispensé :

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- > soit du diplôme normalement requis pour s'inscrire dans une formation (décret 1985),
- > soit d'une partie des épreuves pour obtenir un diplôme ou un titre (décret 1993).

Le dispositif de validation des acquis de l'expérience (VAE), mis en place en 2002, ouvre la possibilité de se voir octroyer tout ou partie d'un diplôme par validation des acquis de son expérience (professionnelle ou bénévole).

Ainsi, à l'université et au *Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers*, 18 600 personnes environ ont bénéficié, en 2002, d'une procédure de validation de leurs acquis (dont 16 363 au titre du dispositif 1985 (VAP), et 1 171 + 1 140 au titre des dispositifs de 1993 et 2000 (VAE).

La validation des acquis professionnels dans le cadre du dispositif de 1993, sous la forme d'une dispense d'une partie des épreuves aux examens, ne représente plus que 6,2% des validations du fait du passage à la VAE. Les validations délivrées au titre des acquis de l'expérience pour obtenir tout ou partie d'un diplôme, qui s'y substituent, ont représenté dès la première année d'application 6% des validations.

Quatre demandes sur cinq ont fait l'objet d'une décision favorable. La progression du nombre de validations accordées par les universités depuis plusieurs années se poursuit : + 16,4% en 2002 contre 19,6% en 2001.

La dispense d'un diplôme pour s'inscrire à une formation et améliorer sa qualification ou développer ses connaissances (VAP) reste la procédure la plus utilisée notamment par les femmes, soit près de neuf cas de validation sur dix. Malgré le temps nécessaire à l'organisation et à la mise en œuvre des différentes phases de la nouvelle procédure de la validation des acquis de l'expérience, plus d'un établissement sur deux s'est déjà engagé dans la démarche.

Ainsi la part des actifs en emploi parmi les bénéficiaires se renforce avec la VAE.

68,3% des dispenses de diplôme pour accéder à une formation, 79,1% de dispenses d'épreuves pour accéder à un diplôme, et 83,5% des dispenses délivrées par validation des acquis de l'expérience concernent des actifs ayant un emploi.

Si les professions intermédiaires constituent la majorité des bénéficiaires, le passage de la VAP à la VAE pour l'obtention d'un diplôme semble davantage bénéficier aux cadres. Les professions intermédiaires, dont font partie les techniciens, représentent 55,5% des bénéficiaires d'une dispense d'épreuves pour obtenir un diplôme dans le cadre de la VAP, mais seulement 49,4% des bénéficiaires de validations dans le cadre de la VAE et 44,3% de ceux d'une dispense de diplôme poursuivre une formation.

Les cadres sont largement représentés parmi les bénéficiaires d'une dispense de diplôme pour suivre une formation puisqu'ils regroupent 31,1% des actifs concernés mais sont un peu moins nombreux (27,8%) parmi les bénéficiaires de l'attribution de tout ou partie d'un diplôme (VAE). Cependant, ils y occupent une place plus importante (23,8%) que parmi les bénéficiaires d'une dispense d'épreuves (VAP).

En revanche, ce n'est pas le cas pour les femmes qui sont un peu moins nombreuses parmi l'ensemble des bénéficiaires de la VAE. Les employés et surtout les ouvriers restent très peu nombreux (au regard de leur poids dans la population active) quel que soit le dispositif de validation d'acquis

Majoritaires parmi les bénéficiaires de la validation des acquis, les 30-45 ans représentent plus de la moitié des candidats à la validation. Ils sont relativement plus nombreux dans les formations suivies dans le cadre de la dispense d'épreuves pour obtenir un diplôme (décret 1993) que dans celui de la dispense

de diplôme pour suivre une formation (69,5% contre 56,6%). La prise en compte de l'expérience (VAE) dans sa globalité (y compris personnelle et bénévole) renforce légèrement leur poids (59,5%). comme celui des moins de 30 ans. La part des moins de 30 ans est en effet légèrement plus importante dans le cadre de l'attribution de diplôme par la VAE (19,5%) que dans l'ancien dispositif de la dispense d'épreuves (18,5%).

5. QUELQUES ENSEIGNEMENTS ISSUS D'UNE ENQUÊTE DE SATISFACTION

Des disparités de mise en œuvre sont observables selon les établissements.

Le développement de la validation des acquis reste inégal au sein des universités. La dispense de diplôme pour l'accès aux formations (décret 1985) continue de se développer. En 2002, seulement quatre universités françaises ont délivré moins de dix validations dans ce cadre contre une dizaine en 2000. À l'autre extrême, une quinzaine d'universités ont accordé plus de 300 dispenses de diplôme pour suivre une formation. Elles n'étaient qu'une douzaine en 2001 et six en 1998.

La VAP dans le cadre du décret de 1993 est en nette diminution avec le passage à la VAE.

Près d'une université sur trois a utilisé ces deux procédures et une quinzaine d'universités n'ont fait appel à aucune des deux.

La VAE n'a été instituée dans les universités qu'en 2002. Dans les cinquante-deux établissements qui l'ont mise en place, la moyenne des dossiers déposés est de trente, avec de grandes disparités d'un établissement à l'autre. On trouve plusieurs types d'universités, celles dont les décisions favorables attribuant tout ou partie d'un diplôme ont été plus nombreuses et ont moins donné lieu à la délivrance d'un diplôme dans sa totalité et, à l'opposé, celles dont les décisions favorables ont été moins

importantes mais qui ont permis plus souvent d'octroyer un diplôme dans sa totalité. Cependant, l'analyse des décisions favorables, par rapport d'une part aux dossiers déposés et d'autre part au pourcentage de diplômes attribués dans leur totalité, est très délicate en raison du faible nombre de dossiers concernés et d'autant plus que l'on manque d'informations sur la qualité des dossiers déposés.

Les formations suivies sont diversifiées.

Au total quatre demandes de validation sur cinq ont fait l'objet d'une décision favorable. Les bénéficiaires d'une dispense de diplôme pour accéder à une formation dans l'enseignement supérieur suivent majoritairement une formation en licence classique: ils sont 29% dans ce cas. Mais les formations spécialisées sont également très recherchées : 23% de ceux qui bénéficient de dispense de diplôme préparent un DESS ou un DEA.

Ces diplômes sont également très demandés dans le cadre de l'attribution d'un diplôme par validation des acquis de l'expérience : 22% des bénéficiaires de la VAE ont pu obtenir grâce au dispositif tout ou partie d'un DESS ou d'un DEA. Il sera intéressant de voir ce que la procédure donnera dans le cadre actuel des *Masters*, puisque ceux-ci opposent les diplômes à orientation *recherche* et ceux à orientation *professionnelle*, bien qu'à terme l'on s'oriente vers un seul type de *Master*, compte tenu de l'adossement inaliénable de la formation et de la recherche dans les études supérieures.

Parmi les 1131 bénéficiaires d'une dispense d'épreuves délivrée pour préparer un diplôme (VAP dispositif de 1993), 17,4% préparent un Diplôme Universitaire de Technologie, Diplôme d'Étude Universitaire de Sciences et Technologie ou un Diplôme National de Technicien Supérieur. Ils n'étaient que 16% en 2001.

L'unanimité se réalise ainsi sur le principe de la validation des acquis de l'expérience.

Les universités voient généralement d'un bon œil le système de validation des acquis professionnels tels qu'ils sont définis dans les textes de 1984-1985, largement mis en œuvre : *un système simple, efficace*, note l'université Paris XI - Orsay. Elles sont souvent plus critiques sur la VAP de 1992, *beaucoup plus difficile car elle exige une analyse précise des compétences des candidats en termes de modules de formation*, analyse Paris IX - Dauphine. Paris XI - Orsay se montre à ce sujet encore plus sévère : *La VAP 1992 est difficile et rebutante à mettre en œuvre car les études et diplômes ne sont pas identiques au niveau national ce qui rend la certification d'un diplôme guère négociable d'une université à l'autre et enlève toute portée au dispositif*.

Quelques établissements, comme Lille III - Charles de Gaulle, reprochent également à la VAP d'avoir été *détournée de son but premier, la validation des études l'emportant sur la validation de l'expérience professionnelle*. Et d'ajouter que *la procédure reste encore fortement liée aux "cultures pédagogiques*.

Le principe de reconnaissance professionnelle demeure cependant plébiscité : pour l'université Rennes II, la VAP a *permis de rapprocher le monde universitaire du monde professionnel et de démocratiser l'accès au savoir en ouvrant une autre voie à l'université et à ses diplômes*.

Un autre établissement pense que le bénéfice a été important pour les enseignants, confrontés à un nouveau public, celui des adultes en reprise d'études. L'Université de Cergy-Pontoise insiste sur l'amélioration des relations avec le monde professionnel : *En interne, la construction du dispositif avec les enseignants a permis d'échanger sur les métiers et sur l'organisation du monde du travail*. En externe, l'expérience de la VAP a encouragé le développement de partenariats avec des *organisations socio-économiques, mais aussi avec des*

employeurs intéressés par la gestion prévisionnelle des emplois et des compétences. Finalement, ajoute l'université, cette connaissance approfondie du monde du travail a aussi facilité l'insertion ultérieure des étudiants, qu'ils soient ou non passés par un dispositif de validation des acquis...

Paris XIII - Villetaneuse (Paris - Nord) insiste sur le rôle privilégié de la validation des acquis (professionnels ou de l'expérience) au sein de son organisation : *Un énorme travail a été effectué pour la constitution progressive d'un service à part entière et le président en a fait un axe majeur dans le contrat d'établissement.*

Une organisation stratégique réfléchie se met donc peu à peu en place dans les universités.

Dans la quasi-totalité des réponses à une enquête lancée en 2003, les services VAE des universités, lorsqu'elles existent, gèrent l'ensemble des Unités de Formation et de Recherche (UFR). Certains établissements comme Paris XI - Orsay ont adopté une organisation à deux niveaux, avec une mission centrale définissant les grandes orientations et une cellule auprès de chaque composante pour assurer l'accueil, le conseil et le montage des dossiers.

La mission VAE se situe généralement, mais pas systématiquement, dans le prolongement de la cellule VAP existante. Sa responsabilité incombe le plus souvent à la direction de la formation continue (dans une quinzaine de cas sur quarante-cinq), mais aussi à un enseignant (une douzaine de réponses), certaines universités prônant l'instauration d'un binôme enseignant-administratif.

Presque tous les établissements (deux seulement répondent par la négative) ont prévu de former leur personnel à la VAE. Les formations proposées par la *Conférence des Directeurs de Service Universitaire de Formation Continue* sont les plus fréquemment citées. Accueil, accompagnement pour

l'élaboration du dossier, formation pour les membres du jury... l'ensemble du dispositif universitaire est concerné. La majorité des établissements a déjà mis sur pied un dispositif d'accueil et de traitement des dossiers. Cette nouveauté fait apparaître la nécessité d'une solidarisation des différentes composantes administratives, pédagogiques, scientifiques des établissements pour répondre aux demandes de candidats souvent désorientés.

Dans le cadre d'un projet accompagné par le *Fond Social Européen* (FSE), Paris XII – Val de Marne (Créteil), Paris XIII - Villetaneuse (Paris Nord) et l'Université de Marne-la-Vallée ont rédigé des documents communs et organisé des journées communes d'information pour ce public. Certaines autres universités ont pris les devants et disposent déjà de *référentiels métiers* ou de *compétences* outils indispensables à l'évaluation des dossiers, mais encore rares. L'Université de La Rochelle développe actuellement *une méthodologie de reformulation des diplômes en termes de "capacité à faire"*.

L'intention générale est de poursuivre l'expérience et de la développer.

Les projets évoqués par les universités s'inscrivent principalement dans la droite ligne des réalisations déjà effectives. Il s'agit d'une part de développer les outils de référence indispensables, d'autre part, et c'est le cas le plus fréquemment rencontré, d'amplifier le flux de bénéficiaires par une meilleure communication. L'Université de Cergy-Pontoise mentionne la nécessité de *nouer des partenariats avec les acteurs économiques et institutionnels pour informer les salariés, avoir une veille sur le monde de l'emploi, trouver des membres du jury*. L'Université de Reims projette d'étendre la VAE à tous les diplômes, *sans exception*.

Laconiquement, Paris XI - Orsay indique pour seul projet : *continuer...* Certains établissements voient plus loin et tentent d'imaginer les solutions les mieux adaptées à ce public nouveau.

L'Université de La Rochelle s'interroge ainsi sur la possibilité d'abandonner *l'épreuve pour la preuve*, en validant les acquis du candidat *via* des outils plus proches du monde professionnel : projet à mener, mémoire, soutenance...

Seule université à mentionner la formation à distance, Aix - Marseille III envisage de développer de tels modules afin de favoriser les parcours individualisés après la validation.

Cependant, les moyens logistiques et financiers ne sont pas toujours au rendez-vous...

Sans surprise, nombre de difficultés mentionnées par les universités concernent une insuffisance de moyens : pour certaines, il s'agit du manque de personnel formé, pour d'autres, d'une pénurie de personnel tout court! Un des établissements de l'enquête déplore la précarité des personnels employés pour la VAE, puisqu'il s'agit essentiellement d'emplois-jeunes et de contractuels...

Sur quarante-cinq établissements ayant répondu à l'enquête, moins d'une dizaine disent avoir pu recruter du personnel spécifique pour le nouveau dispositif, l'ensemble représentant moins d'une vingtaine de postes.

Pourtant, l'Université de La Rochelle note que *l'accompagnement administratif des candidats et des jurys devient essentiel. On assiste à l'émergence d'une fonction indispensable et qui demande des compétences techniques, organisationnelles et relationnelles.*

Pour Paris II – Panthéon-Assas, *l'obligation d'entendre chaque postulant alourdit démesurément la procédure.* Les appréhensions sur la charge de travail sont récurrentes; la plupart des établissements notent un fort accroissement de la demande, à l'instar de l'Université de Tours qui parle même d'une véritable *explosion* avec une hausse des demandes de près de 100%, touchant l'ensemble des disciplines.

Seule l'Université Paris VI – Pierre et Marie Curie avoue sa déception : *Le nombre de demandes est relativement faible par rapport à nos ambitions*, et l'explique par un *manque d'attrait pour les filières scientifiques*.

D'autres critiques concernent davantage l'organisation : la VAE rend nécessaire la collaboration des différents métiers au sein de l'université. Or, les enseignants sont parfois *indifférents*, voire *réticents* devant une procédure qui remet en cause l'exclusivité de la validation académique.

Paris 6 – Pierre et Marie Curie prône les vertus de la rencontre pour résoudre la difficulté : *Les échanges entre enseignants et Professionnels dans les jurys contribuent beaucoup à l'acceptation du dispositif*. Cette concertation, clé de voûte de la VAE, pourrait aussi être la solution à l'une des autres difficultés rencontrées par les universités : la complexité d'analyser des compétences professionnelles et de définir des critères d'évaluation. *Les critères d'évaluation des candidats ne sont pas simples à déterminer*, témoigne ainsi l'Université Jean Monnet (Saint-Étienne).

Subsiste le danger de faire naître de faux espoirs de reconnaissance et de certification.

Entre candidats et universités, la rencontre autour de la VAE ne se fait donc pas toujours simplement. Certes, le public a été informé par voie de presse et y a répondu très favorablement puisque les universités notent un accroissement de la demande. Mais cette campagne, jugée *démagogique* par un établissement, aurait fait naître de *faux espoirs*. Les candidats se montrent parfois naïfs, convaincus que la délivrance du diplôme est quasi automatique. Mais *l'université n'est pas un supermarché aux diplômes!* Déclare l'Université de Bretagne Occidentale (Brest). Pour l'Université de Franche-Comté (Besançon), l'accueil a été *très (trop) favorable* : *les candidats croient souvent qu'il suffit de demander et que le diplôme leur est dû !*

Les universités de Clermont-Ferrand I et II (Auvergne et Blaise Pascal) renchérissent : *Beaucoup de candidats pensaient qu'en donnant un simple CV ils allaient recevoir un diplôme!* Un simple CV... ou même une carte de visite d'après Paris IX - Dauphine, qui reconnaît tout de même que les démarches *sérieuses*, existent également Ces anecdotes ont le mérite de mettre en lumière une certaine incompréhension qui peut aller jusqu'à l'abandon de la procédure lorsque le candidat en découvre la complexité (sans parler du coût !). L'Université de La Rochelle parle d'un *intérêt touristique* et note que *seuls 10% des candidats vont jusqu'au bout*. Une estimation confirmée par d'autres établissements qui constatent le fort décalage entre demandes initiales et dossiers effectivement déposés.

Face à la complexité du dispositif, l'accompagnement du public semble donc indispensable. Pour Paris XIII – Villetaneuse (Paris Nord), c'est *le seul moyen de recadrer et de faire aboutir des demandes parfois farfelues, au départ*. Cette mission d'accompagnement, très régulièrement mentionnée parmi les tâches du service VAE, est de deux sortes :

- > un accueil initial pour expliquer les grandes lignes du dispositif,
- > puis, lorsque le candidat a décidé de se lancer dans l'aventure, un accompagnement plus poussé est alors nécessaire pour l'aider à définir son projet et à remplir son dossier.

Ainsi, Paris XIII – Villetaneuse (Paris Nord) développe actuellement un projet d'accompagnement en ligne et d'organisation d'ateliers axés sur l'écriture et la connaissance des métiers. L'Université de Tours, quant à elle, estime à vingt-quatre heures la durée de l'accompagnement individuel nécessaire, un chiffre qui dit bien l'ampleur du dispositif à adopter.

Il en résulte un coût parfois dissuasif pour les deux parties.

Cet accompagnement a comme contrepartie une augmentation quasi générale de la participation financière du candidat. Pour les précédentes validations des acquis, elle se chiffrait en quelques dizaines d'euros, alors que le coût moyen de traitement d'un dossier est désormais estimé entre 500 et plus de 1 000 €. L'Université de Franche-Comté (Besançon) juge même cette somme *astronomique dans la période de mise en place*. Fort heureusement, ces montants ne sont pas toujours répercutés au candidat : les plus chanceux ne déboursent pas un centime, les frais pouvant être couverts par le *Fonds Social Européen*, par l'employeur ou par un *Organisme Paritaire Collecteur Agréé*. Mais cette situation pourrait fort bien être transitoire : nombre d'universités manifestent en effet leur projet de passer au système payant une fois la période de rodage terminée.

En sens inverse, certaines universités répercutent dès maintenant la totalité des frais sur le candidat : une somme qui peut se révéler dissuasive en cas de motivation incertaine... L'aspect financier représenterait ainsi un obstacle au-delà même de la phase de validation. Certaines universités insistent sur la difficulté à trouver des sources de financement en cas de reprise d'études : le recours à des emprunts bancaires, s'il s'avère nécessaire, pourrait alors freiner fortement la logique d'apprentissage tout au long de la vie

Ces procédures ont toutefois un impact indéniable sur la formation.

Plusieurs universités ont déjà délivré des diplômes directement, sans formation complémentaire. Seize sur quarante-cinq d'entre elles disent l'avoir fait au moins une fois. Les premiers diplômés VAE arrivent donc sur le marché de l'emploi. Quelques établissements déclarent douter de cette possibilité, peu crédible à leurs yeux, ainsi qu'à ceux des candidats et des entreprises. L'Université de La Rochelle préfère ainsi ne pas donner d'emblée un diplôme, mais opte pour *des épreuves de validation proches des situations professionnelles*. Car, explique-t-elle, *cela rassure les candidats, les entreprises et l'université*.

Les universités s'accordent davantage sur l'impact de la VAE sur leur offre de formations. Une université pose ainsi une question pertinente : est-il envisageable de pouvoir accueillir les candidats à tout moment de l'année?

A terme, la VAE devrait entraîner un profond bouleversement dans la définition des diplômes. L'individualisation des parcours doit conduire à une modularisation des programmes prenant en compte les *référentiels* métiers et compétences utilisés par les jurys VAE. Cette refonte répond en fait à un double objectif, celui de la VAE en tant que telle, mais aussi celui de l'harmonisation européenne des diplômes qui exige des descriptions sous forme d'unités de valeur capitalisables (dans le cadre de l'*European Credit Transfer System*) afin de favoriser la mobilité intracommunautaire des étudiants.

L'introduction des ECTS aura sûrement plus d'impact que la VAE sur l'organisation interne des universités et des parcours de formation, note l'Université de La Rochelle. L'Institut National Polytechnique de Grenoble (INPG) mentionne pour sa part la difficulté de faire coïncider les deux logiques: *Comment faire le lien avec la notation ECTS en cas de validation partielle?* s'interroge l'établissement

En dépit des nombreuses questions soulevées par la VAE, le dispositif, cependant, est très indiscutablement lancé.

6. DÉVELOPPEMENTS RECENTS

À l'université et au Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, 17 710 personnes ont bénéficié, en 2003, d'une procédure de validation de leurs acquis: 14 930 au titre du dispositif de 1985 qui permet d'accéder à une formation par dispense du titre normalement requis pour s'y inscrire, et 2 780 au titre de la validation des acquis de l'expérience (VAE) mise en place en 2002.

Si les validations délivrées au titre des acquis de l'expérience pour obtenir tout ou partie d'un diplôme 1 progressent fortement, représentant 15.7% des validations en 2003 contre 6% l'année précédente, les validations délivrées dans le cadre de la dispense de diplôme pour suivre une formation (VAP, décret 1985) enregistrent. Quant à elles, leur première baisse depuis 1998 (- 8,8% en 2003 par rapport à 2002). Au total, le nombre de validations d'acquis accordées dans l'enseignement supérieur diminue.

La validation des acquis dans le supérieur touche avant tout les actifs ayant un emploi et non les chômeurs, 68,5% des bénéficiaires sont dans ce cas, ce qui correspond à 66% des dispenses de diplôme pour accéder à une formation et 82% des diplômes ou parties de diplômes délivrés par validation des acquis de l'expérience.

Les cadres et les professions intermédiaires constituent la grande majorité (7%) des bénéficiaires de la validation des acquis ayant un emploi, encore plus dans le cadre de la VAE. Les cadres regroupent en effet 41% des actifs qui, ayant un emploi, cherchent à acquérir un diplôme universitaire validant les compétences acquises dans leur activité professionnelle. Ils sont un peu moins représentés parmi les bénéficiaires d'une dispense de diplôme pour suivre une formation (35%). Les professions intermédiaires, dont font notamment partie les techniciens, occupent, en revanche, la première place parmi les bénéficiaires d'une dispense de diplôme pour suivre une formation.

Les employés restent très peu nombreux (au regard de leur poids dans la population active) quel que soit le dispositif de validation d'acquis: un sur quatre dans le cadre du dispositif de 1985 et un sur cinq pour la VAE. Les ouvriers sont à peine 1%.

Parmi les candidats ayant déposé un dossier de validation des acquis de l'expérience dans le but d'obtenir tout ou partie d'un diplôme, les candidats de sexe masculin sont majoritaires (près

de trois sur cinq) mais ils ne représentent que 47% des candidats ayant déposé un dossier pour dispense(s) de diplôme.

Majoritaires parmi les bénéficiaires de validation des acquis, les personnes de 30-45 ans sont relativement plus nombreuses dans le cadre de l'attribution de diplôme par la VAE que dans le cadre du décret de 1985 (66% contre 55%).

Le développement de la validation des acquis reste contrasté dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur. Dans le cadre du décret de 1985, c'est-à-dire sous la forme de dispenses de diplôme pour accéder à une formation, le nombre de validations délivrées varie fortement d'une université à l'autre. Toutefois, la baisse constatée dans le nombre de validations accordées dans le cadre de ce dispositif est quasi générale: en 2003, onze universités (auxquelles il faut ajouter le Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers) ont accordé plus de 300 dispenses de diplôme pour suivre une formation. Elles étaient quatorze en 2002. À l'autre extrême, deux universités ont délivré moins de dix validations (contre quatre en 2002).

La validation des acquis de l'expérience, quant à elle, progresse : 74 établissements de l'enseignement supérieur (hors le CNAM) ont mis en place la VAE en 2003, contre 52 en 2002.

Quarante-neuf dossiers ont été déposés en moyenne par université contre trente en 2002.

On observe cependant de grandes disparités d'un établissement à l'autre, puisque dans treize universités moins de dix dossiers ont été déposés alors que dans huit universités et au CNAM le nombre de dossiers déposés est supérieur à 100. Dans certaines universités, les décisions favorables attribuant tout ou partie d'un diplôme ont été plus fréquentes mais ont moins souvent donné lieu à la délivrance d'un diplôme dans sa totalité. Dans d'autres, au contraire, les décisions favorables ont été plus rares mais le pourcentage de diplômes attribués dans leur totalité est plus élevé.

Seuls six établissements n'ont accordé aucun diplôme dans sa totalité. L'analyse des décisions favorables par rapport aux dossiers déposés demeure toutefois très délicate en raison du décalage dans le temps entre le dépôt de dossier et son examen par un jury qui peut intervenir l'année suivante. De même, le pourcentage de diplômes attribués dans leur totalité porte encore sur un nombre trop modeste de dossiers pour en tirer des conclusions sur des politiques propres à telle université en matière de VAE.

Avec les DESS ou DEA, les licences «classiques» ou professionnelles sont les diplômes les plus demandés. Les bénéficiaires d'une dispense de diplôme pour accéder à une formation dans l'enseignement supérieur suivent une formation en licence «classique» dans 30% des cas. Mais les formations spécialisées progressent, notamment les DESS ou DEA (+ 4,9 points par rapport à 2002) : 28% de ceux qui bénéficient d'une dispense de diplôme préparent un DESS ou un DEA.

Ces diplômes sont également très demandés dans le cadre de l'attribution d'un diplôme par validation des acquis de l'expérience : 22,5% des bénéficiaires de la VAE ont obtenu tout ou partie d'un DESS ou d'un DEA. De même, les licences professionnelles, dont l'offre de formation se développe, se révèlent attractives. 13% des bénéficiaires de la VAE ont obtenu tout ou partie d'une licence professionnelle.

Le DEUG est, en revanche, de moins en moins recherché. La part de cette formation parmi les bénéficiaires d'une validation des acquis professionnels dans le cadre du décret de 1985 diminue de 3.4 points entre 2002 et 2003.

Comme on l'aura noté, VAE et VAP travaillant sur les acquis du passé d'expérience ou de profession des personnes, c'est l'ancienne terminologie française des diplômes qui est encore utilisée ici. Néanmoins, au fur et à mesure que se généralisent en France la mise en place du processus de la Sorbonne-Bologne et la mise en œuvre de la réforme du L-M-D, ce vont

être les nouveaux niveaux de sortie diplômante qui vont être sollicités. On comprend, dans ces conditions que l'ancien DEUG ait fait l'objet de très peu de demandes et que les DEA et DESS se transforment en Masters, soit d'orientation professionnelle (le plus hautement prévisible), soit d'orientation recherche, pour être conformes aux lignes de conduite définies par la France en matière d'enseignement supérieur.

Les formations suivies par les bénéficiaires de la dispense de diplôme (décret 1985) varient selon l'âge : parmi les moins de 30 ans, 37% préparent une licence «classique» alors que ce n'est le cas que de 27% des plus de 30 ans. Ces derniers ont obtenu une dispense pour préparer un DESS ou un DEA dans plus de un cas sur trois (35%). Pour les bénéficiaires de la validation des acquis de l'expérience, les différences selon l'âge pour les diplômes demandés sont moins importantes.

VALIDATION OF PRIOR LEARNING OUTCOMES

PRINCIPLES

The validation of prior learning outcomes is now a legal right, registered in the IXth book of the Labour Law and in the Education Statute Book.

It is an official Act, which acknowledges the results of a professional experience (VAP), or of another type of human experience (VAE), as an authorized part of a diploma in the higher education system. In some cases, this experience can be totally acknowledged and gives right to the whole delivery of a certification and diploma.

This proceedings states on a regular and prescribed apparatus :

1° The ordinance 85-906 (23rd August 1985) authorizes the free access to higher education even if the applicant does not possess the corresponding legal diploma, in as far this applicant is able to validate a professional experience, acquired during a salary or non-salary activity. In some cases, a personal experience — acquired independently of any kind of schooling or learning — can be substituted to a professional experience.

The university checks globally the knowledge, the methods and the skills of the applicant in terms of compatibility and requirements with his own academic aims.

2° The law n° 2003-73, adopted on 17th January 2002 — which is known as *the law for social modernisation* — and the ordinance n° 2002-590, published on 24th April 2002, makes officially possible to deliver part of a diploma or a total diploma to candidates giving proof of a minimum of three years of professional experience related tot the

content of the expected diploma. Moreover, the ordinance n° 2002-529, on 16th April 2002, allows to validate higher education studies followed in France or abroad.

Those two legal devices can be jointly used in view of reducing at most the course of studies.

At last,

- > The ordinance n° 2001-274 and the decree in date on 30th march 2001, establish a special proceedings in the field of engineer studies for validating the professional outcomes of some applicants. The engineer titles is normally delivered after a five year course in a specific school; it is guaranteed in France by the State and the Commission du titre d'ingénieur gives its label to this delivery of a diploma. Applicants that have not been at school in such schools are nevertheless able to get the title of State engineer if they are at least 35 years old and can justify of a five year professional activity as « engineer » in a public or state enterprise

OBJECTIVES

The legal and political mechanism described above is intended:

- 1° To give the workers that have been obliged to enter early the active life a new opportunity of accessing to the diplomas and titles of the higher education system.
- 2° To avoid to learn again already assimilated knowledge for applicants who are starting again studies, so that they can spare time and efforts.
- 3° To better and more efficiently provide to the needs and wants of people, enterprises and society.

- 4° To promote a closer linkage between academic and professional teaching and learning.

As such, this device is a tool.

A TOOL FOR PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ENTERPRISES

The validation of prior learning outcomes acknowledges the formative role of the professional enterprises and it valorises the knowledge and skills induced by work, independently of any kind of traditional education.

The validation of prior learning outcomes is therefore a tool for adapting the management of the human resources to individual competences.

The validation of prior learning outcomes is a way to identify and valorise individual competences in the frame of a more global professional framework.

The validation of prior learning outcomes gives individuals an assistance to follow, promote or reorientate a professional course.

The validation of prior learning outcomes allows gaining time and efficiency in the personal and economic efforts that are necessary when individuals want to valorise in a professional perspective their practical human experience as workers.

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MENESR

Some national Qualification Frameworks in Europe

Four European countries/areas have developed qualifications frameworks (QF) with a methodology based explicitly on competencies and learning outcomes. These are Ireland, Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI) and Denmark. Hungary is in the process of developing a QF, and Sweden has conducted a review of degrees awarded by HEI. The Swedish review is not included in the analysis.

The purpose of this analysis is to identify similarities and differences between the four national qualification frameworks. It will focus on the background and purpose of the frameworks, their scope, the structure and the elements used to build the frameworks such as cycles, levels, credits and descriptors.

Background

In EWNI and in Scotland the drive for developing a framework came from an inquiry into higher education in 1997. In Ireland the development of a qualifications framework was initiated by an act of parliament. And in Hungary and Denmark, the Bologna process has directly inspired the development of QFs.

As mentioned before, the Irish framework is established under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. The Hungarian framework is intended to be included in a new Higher Education Act. The other frameworks do not have a legal basis.

Stakeholders

In all countries/areas educational institutions have been involved in developing the frameworks. In most countries other stakeholders have been involved as well. Stakeholders such as awarding bodies, learners, quality assurance and accreditation

agencies, university associations, social partners and ministries have to different extent been involved.

Purpose

The frameworks state a number of purposes as their *raison d'être*:

- > Information to employers and the general public, e.g. about award structure and graduates' competencies.
- > Guidance to learners, e.g. about pathways and progression in the educational system.
- > Recognition of former learning, e.g. in connection with credit transfer and Life Long Learning.
- > Tool for educational institutions, e.g. in curriculum planning and programme development.
- > International comparability and mobility, e.g. in recognition of qualifications from foreign HEI.
- > Quality assurance, e.g. as points of reference in evaluations.

Scope

The Irish and the Scottish frameworks cover the whole educational sector from school education to Ph.D.-degrees. The other NQFs do not encompass qualifications outside the HE sector. Hungary intends to extend the current system to all qualifications that can be gained across the education system in the country.

There are also differences as to what types of qualifications are included in the frameworks. The Danish and the EWNl-framework include only qualifications leading to a degree or an award. The Irish framework includes all learning achievements from education and training, and the Scottish framework also

aims at recognising outcomes of learning not leading to a degree. The Hungarian framework may provide points of reference for placing qualifications gained through further professional education schemes, but at the current stage only qualifications leading to a degree are taken into account.

Structure

All frameworks are divided into levels, with growing demands to learning outcome at each level. Differences in the frameworks scope and in educational structure influence the number of levels. Frameworks, which include qualifications from schools, VET, FE and HE have more levels than those only including HE. Levels within HE differ from 4 to 6 (see table below).

Table 1, number of levels in national frameworks of qualifications

	Denmark	EWNI	Hungary	Ireland	Scotland
Non-HE levels	0	0	0	5	6
1 st cycle levels	2	3	2	3	4
2 nd cycle levels	1	1	1	1	1
3 rd cycle levels	1	1	1	1	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>12</i>

The Hungarian and the Danish frameworks relate levels to the cycles defined in the Bologna Process (first, second and third cycle). In the Hungarian framework the four levels are related to the three Bologna cycles. The original Danish framework

only operates with two cycles, as the doctoral level had not yet been identified as an independent third cycle when the framework was first developed. For the purpose of table 1, the Danish doctorate level has been placed at the 3rd cycle. As shown in table 1 it is possible to align all frameworks with the Bologna Cycles.

Level descriptors

Most frameworks have identified level descriptors, which describe expected outcomes of qualifications at this level. Some level descriptors function as common denominators for qualifications at the particular level i.e. as minimum standards. Other level descriptors describe a whole range of outcomes and it is not envisaged that every qualification will, or should, have all of the characteristics set out in the level descriptor.

In the Scottish framework each level is described in terms of its characteristic general outcomes under five broad areas: Knowledge and understanding; practice; generic cognitive skills; communication, numeracy and IT skills; and finally autonomy, accountability and working with others.

In the Irish framework, level indicators are also broad descriptors of learning outcomes. The descriptors are a range of standards of knowledge, skill and competence. 8 sub-strands have been defined: Breadth and kind (knowledge); range and selectivity (know-how and skill); context, role, learning to learn, and insight (competence).

The Hungarian framework will apply generic descriptors on the basis of the Dublin descriptors for each level. The descriptors are of two types: learning outcomes and general competencies.

Awards

All five frameworks associate one or more awards with each level in the framework. In general, most awards are associated

with 1st cycle levels, fewer with 2nd cycle levels and one award with the level corresponding to the 3rd cycle. The difference in number of awards, are shown in table 2 below.

Table 2, number of awards in national frameworks of qualifications

	Denmark	EWNI	Hungary	Ireland	Scotland
All awards	8	5	None yet*	15	?
HE awards	8	5	None Yet*	7	?

*Award-types have not yet been identified and described in the ongoing Hungarian process.

Most frameworks contain generic award-type descriptors. These are a combination of learning outcome descriptors and fact and input oriented descriptors, e.g. related to the programme of study. Some frameworks only describe the main qualification at each level and others describe all award types included in the framework.

In Ireland, descriptors have been determined and published for each of the 15 major award-types. In addition to the 8 sub-strands used to define knowledge, skill and competence at each level, award-types are described by title, class of award-type, purpose, level, volume, progression and transfer, and articulation.

In Denmark, the descriptors of learning outcomes are divided in 3 sub-strands of competencies: Intellectual competencies; professional and academic competencies; and practical competencies. In addition to the 3 sub-strands, a competency profile and formal aspects describe each award-type.

The Irish framework has a special feature with four different types (classes) of award-types:

- > Major award-types (principal class of awards);
- > Minor award-types (recognition for learners who achieve a range of learning outcomes, but not the specific combination of learning outcomes required for a major award);
- > Special-purpose award-types (for specific, relatively narrow qualifications, e.g. a Safe Pass certification);
- > Supplemental award-types (for learning which is additional to a previous award).

This detailed structure is supposed to allow for recognition of all learning, including qualifications achieved through experience in the workplace or other non-formal settings.

The other four NQFs only operate with what is called major award-types in the Irish terminology. In Scotland, plans are underway to map the qualifications of other bodies to the framework, e.g. employers' professional and statutory bodies.

Named awards in specific fields of study are not integrated into any of the national qualifications frameworks.

Progression and credits

Only the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework integrates credit transfer values into the QF. The Scottish QF not only describes the level of outcomes, but also describes the volume of these outcomes in terms of credit points. Credits can be used to assist learners to transfer between programmes, but it is the responsibility of the awarding bodies to determine how much credit can be transferred into their programmes.

**From 1st cycle (e.g. Bachelors) to 2nd cycle (e.g. Masters) to doctorates:
the differences / 'step changes' between the
respective Dublin descriptors³⁵.**

[and including 'sort cycle' qualifications within the 1st cycle]

The Dublin Descriptors offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with awards that represent the end of each of a Bologna cycle.

They are not meant to be prescriptive; they do not represent threshold or minimum requirements and they are not exhaustive; similar or equivalent characteristics may be added or substituted.

The Descriptors seek to identify the nature of the whole qualification.

The Descriptors are not subject specific nor are they limited to academic, professional or vocational areas. For particular disciplines the Descriptors should be read within the context and use of language of that discipline. Wherever possible, they should be cross-referenced with any expectations/competencies published by the relevant community of scholars and/or practitioners.

³⁵ See: www.jointquality.org

At completion of the cycle students will have / can demonstrate:

knowledge and understanding ..

[short cycle³⁶ .. *in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks*]

1st cycle.. *[that is] supported by advanced text books [with] some aspects informed by knowledge at the forefront of their field of study ..*

2nd cycle .. *provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing or applying ideas .. often in a research³⁷ context ..*

Doctorates .. *[includes] a systematic understanding of their field of study and mastery of the methods of research* associated with that field ..*

application of knowledge and understanding ..

[short cycle .. *often in occupational context*]

1st cycle .. *[through] devising and sustaining arguments*

³⁶ *Short cycle*: there are some awards that are made to students who have completed a programme of study within the Bologna first cycle, but which do not represent the full extent of this cycle. Such awards may prepare the student for employment, while also providing preparation for, and access to, studies to completion of the first cycle. These awards are referred to as higher education short cycle (within the first cycle). National systems may have various qualifications within the first cycle. This descriptor is intended for a commonly found type and which often approximates to 120 ECTS credits or equivalent.

³⁷ *research*: the term is used in an inclusive way to accommodate the range of activities that support original and innovative work in the whole range of academic, professional and technological fields, including the humanities, and traditional, performing and other arts.

It is not used in any limited or restricted sense, or relating solely to traditional 'scientific method'.

2nd cycle .. *[through] problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts ..*

Doctorates.. *[through the] ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research* with scholarly integrity ..*

[that has] made a contribution that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work some of which merits national or international peer-reviewed publication .

ability to make judgements ..

[short cycle .. to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems]

1st cycle .. *[through] gathering and interpreting relevant data ..*

2nd cycle .. *the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgments with incomplete data ..*

Doctorates.. *[through] critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas..*

ability to communicate ..

[short cycle .. their understanding, skills and activities, with peers, supervisors and clients]

1st cycle .. *information, ideas, problems and solutions ..*

2nd cycle .. *their conclusions and the underpinning knowledge and rationale to specialist and non-specialist audiences ..*

Doctorates.. *with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise ..*

learning skills ..

[short cycle .. to undertake further studies with some autonomy]

>

- 1st cycle .. *needed to study further with a high level of autonomy ..*
- 2nd cycle .. *to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous..*
- Doctorates.. *expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement ..*

Appendix 7

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København/Strasbourg, January 18, 2005

BOLOGNA CONFERENCE ON QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation

København, January 13 – 14, 2005

REPORT BY THE GENERAL RAPPORTEUR

Sjur Bergan

Council of Europe

A PRELIMINARY NOTE

I am reminded of the student newspaper at my home university³⁸, which many years ago presented the typical thank you's and caveats included in academic publications and provided translations into the vernacular. One of these generic statements was "Thanks are due to Smith for assistance and Jones for valuable discussions", which was translated as "Smith did the work and Jones explained to me what it was all about". I will certainly not try to play the role of Jones, but I will seek to adopt an analytical approach that will hopefully clarify the major issues and also outline any points on which there may be important differences of opinion. I also do not pretend to give anything like a complete overview of the presentations and the discussions at this conference, which gathered some 140 participants from 14 countries. Notwithstanding, a set of recommendations from the conference will also be proposed.

The report, then, will not enable readers who were unable to attend the conference to know all that happened there. It is, however, hoped that it will present the main outcomes of the conference in such a way that these readers will get a good understanding of the main issues, that they will want to explore the background documents and maybe that they will even regret not being present³⁹.

³⁸ *Universitas*, the student newspaper at the University of Oslo.

³⁹ Two editorial notes may also be in order. The present report adopts the US standard, as the variety with which the Rapporteur feels most comfortable. It is, of course, a personal choice and not a value judgment, any more than the choice of any other variety of English would be. Quotes are given in their original spelling. Secondly, in the belief that proper names translate no better than the names of individual qualifications, all place names are given in their original form.

WHY WE ARE HERE

Like so many things in modern life, this all began with a conference. Nearly two years ago, on March 27 – 28, 2003, many actors in the Bologna Process gathered in København for a conference on Qualifications Structures in Europe.

That conference was, of course, not the first mention of the concept of qualifications frameworks⁴⁰. As Stephen Adam's excellent background report for that conference showed, qualifications frameworks were already operational in Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom. In the latter case, there were even two separate frameworks: one for Scotland and one for England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

For many participants, however, the “first København conference” was their introduction to qualifications frameworks, and it set a lot in motion. It must certainly have convinced many participants that qualifications frameworks are a fruitful concept, because within a year of the conference, other countries like Germany, Hungary and Finland had set out to establish their own national qualifications frameworks. Indeed, European higher education gained a new acronym, as QF became almost as commonly referred to as QA, often on the assumption that neither requires further explanation.

Secondly, the “first København conference” set things moving at the level of the European Higher Education Area. The recommendations from the conference were well received by the Bologna Follow Up Group, and they gave rise to the following statement by Ministers in the Berlin Communiqué:

⁴⁰ This report will use the term “qualifications framework”. Some of the participants in the conference expressed a preference for the term “framework of qualifications”, whereas others, including the present author, believe there is no real difference between the two terms and prefer the shorter version.

“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”.

In other words, the Ministers committed to two distinct but interlinked tasks: to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area and to set up frameworks in each of their own countries.

Their first commitment is the main reason why we again find ourselves in København to discuss qualifications frameworks. As René Bugge Bertramsen reminded us in his opening remarks, delivered on behalf of the Danish Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation, Helge Sander, this conference also fulfills a promise made at the Berlin Conference in 2003. At this meeting, which was a great step forward in giving the Bologna Process more focused content, the Danish Minister promised his colleagues that Denmark would, to use the Minister’s words, “offer a special effort to bring forward developments in the

theory and practice of qualifications frameworks”. The present conference and the report elaborated under the leadership of Mogens Berg certainly fulfill the promise the Danish Minister made to his colleagues.

The Bologna Follow Up Group, which is the faithful interpreter and executor of the Ministerial will, appointed a working group to elaborate a proposal for an overarching framework of qualifications. The group was chaired by Mogens Berg of the Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, who presented the report as the main document for this conference. This gets us into the heart of the matter.

While underlining the fundamental importance of the “first København conference”, it is also important to emphasize that the development of qualifications frameworks is entirely in line with and contributes to the realization of several of the action lines of the Bologna Process, and that it also builds on the outcomes of a number of other “Bologna seminars” held before and after the March 2003 conference. These include:

- > the two Helsinki seminars on Bachelor and Masters degrees, organized by the Finnish authorities in 2001 and 2003, respectively;
- > the seminar on recognition issues in the Bologna Process, organized by the Council of Europe and the Portuguese authorities in Lisboa in 2002;
- > the seminar on ECTS- a Challenge for Institutions, organized by the European University Association and the Swiss authorities in Zürich in 2002;
- > the seminar on Recognition and Credit Systems in the Context of Lifelong Learning, organized by the Czech authorities in Praha in 2003;
- > the two seminars on joint degrees, organized by the Swedish authorities in Stockholm in 2002 and 2004, as well

as the seminar on integrated programs organized by the Italian authorities in Mantova in 2003;

- > the seminar on learning outcomes, organized in Edinburgh in 2004;
- > the Russian seminar on “Bachelor’s Degree: What Is It?”, organized in Sankt Peterburg in November 2004;
- > the seminar on Improving the Recognition System of Degrees and Periods of Studies, organized by the Latvian authorities and the Council of Europe in Rīga in 2004;
- > the seminar on the Public Responsibility for Higher Education and Research, organized by the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in 2004.

It is further important to acknowledge the contribution of a series of other conferences and initiatives, including the Joint Quality Initiative and TUNING, as well as of the countries that have already elaborated a national qualifications framework or that are in the process of doing so.

ON FRAMEWORKS AND FRAMEWORK

One cannot easily discuss an overarching framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area without reference to national frameworks, and it is worth making the point here. National frameworks are in many ways those closest to the operational reality, and they are “owned” by the national systems responsible for them. They are the frameworks that will ultimately determine what qualifications learners will earn and how they will move between the different qualifications within a system. Incidentally, I deliberately use the term “move” rather than “progress” since the latter tends to be associated with “upward movement” only. Within a qualifications framework, however, learners may increase their competence by earning

another qualification at the same level or even at a lower level as well as by earning one at a higher level.

The Working Group defines a national framework of qualifications (higher education) as follows:

The single description, at national level or level of an education system, which is internationally understood and through which all qualifications and other learning achievements in higher education may be described and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between higher education qualifications⁴¹.

National frameworks therefore describe the qualifications within a given education system and how they interlink. As described in the report by the working party and mentioned already at the “first København conference”, they will include considerations of:

- > Learning outcomes, including competences
- > Level
- > Workload and credits
- > Profile
- > Quality and quality assurance

The overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area may be less immediately operational for

⁴¹ Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks: *Report on a Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* (December 2004), chapter 2.1., p. 14. References in this report will be to the “seminar version” of the report, which contains paragraph numbers. A version without paragraph numbers has also been published.

most learners than the national frameworks, but it is not less important. It is the second layer in what Mogens Berg in his presentation of the Report of the Working Group described as a two-tier architecture. This is the framework that will facilitate movement not only between different qualifications within a single system, but also between systems⁴². As Per Nyborg, Head of the Bologna Secretariat, pointed out in the plenary discussion, students will not move from a national education system to a European one, but between national systems. Not least, the overarching framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area is likely to be the “face” of “Bologna qualifications” to the rest of the world. This aspect was, alas, somewhat underdeveloped at the conference, as it is in the Bologna Process in general.

At this point, it may be worth quoting the definition of the framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area given by the Working Group:

An overarching framework that makes transparent the relationship between European national higher education frameworks of qualifications and the qualifications they contain. It is an articulation mechanism between national frameworks⁴³.

Not least, the overarching EHEA framework provides the broad structure within which future “new style” national qualifications frameworks will be built up⁴⁴. It is, of course, perfectly possible

⁴² On the recognition of qualifications and the impact of qualifications frameworks on recognition, see Stephen Adam’s report from the Bologna seminar on Improving the Recognition System of Degrees and periods of Studies, organized by the Latvian authorities and the Council of Europe in Rīga on December 3 – 4, 2004, cf. <http://www.aic.lv/rigaseminar/>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, chapter 2.1., p. 14.

⁴⁴ It appears that at least the existing “new style” frameworks that have been published so far would not need to be amended as a consequence of the overarching framework.

to elaborate a national framework that makes no reference to credits, uses years of study as the only reference to workload, is vague on learning outcomes and stipulates one long university degrees that requires ten years of study, five of which are spent in self-study. It would, however, be a far cry from the EHEA framework, and any country establishing such a framework would be unlikely to be accepted into the “Bologna family”.

It is equally possible to design a less caricatured qualifications framework that is still vague on learning outcomes, that still expresses workload in terms of years of study rather than credits, and that stipulates five years of study for a first degree. That, until quite recently, was indeed the dominant model in what is to become the European Higher Education Area, even if the term “qualifications framework” was rarely if ever used to describe such a construct. It is, however, no more in line with “Bologna policies” than the caricature we outlined in the preceding paragraph.

The working group makes the point that the overarching framework is descriptive rather than prescriptive, and this is to a large extent true. The EHEA framework will not oblige countries - or rather education systems - to follow a certain set model.

Nevertheless, as was argued by Jürgen Kohler in the plenary debate, a framework cannot be entirely devoid of norms. The overarching framework sketches the broad outlines within which an informed observer would reasonably expect to find all the national frameworks of the 40 or more members of the European Higher Education Area. In a sense, it draws the broad outlines of qualifications frameworks within the EHEA, while allowing for considerable variations within those outlines, with flexible learning paths and various entry and exit points, something that was also underlined by Nina Arnhold in the stakeholders debate on behalf of the EUA. It also includes the use of common tools, techniques and methodologies for describing qualifications, levels and learning outcomes.

The EHEA framework, therefore, will not tell Ministers exactly what to do, but it will tell them quite a lot about what *not* to do. Diversity is one of the great strengths of Europe, and one of the key functions of the overarching framework of the EHEA is to make sense of that diversity.

It may also be worth bearing in mind the recommendation of one of the working groups to the effect that at whatever level, frameworks should be as simple as possible to fulfill their purposes.

WHY QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS?

Another question that will probably pop up in many people's minds is "what is all the fuss about"? Needless to say, it will often be phrased in much more academic terms, and it will probably often be implied that qualifications frameworks add more in terms of bureaucracy than in terms of knowledge. Academics, after all, know best the requirements of their own disciplines.

This is undoubtedly true, but academics also know that the value of knowledge is considerably enhanced if it is analyzed and given explanatory force through a coherent framework.

A qualifications framework helps in the analysis, presentation and understanding of what constitutes a qualification. This is important, because it helps shift the focus from procedures to content. In this, it supports a movement that has been underway for some time, and it provides an invaluable tool. Qualifications frameworks are perhaps a logical consequence of a number of developments. One of these is mass education, which has not only dramatically increased participation in education and higher education but also considerably broadened the scope and purpose of higher education. Another is the rapid development of knowledge and hence the rapid outdated of knowledge. If higher education was ever a once in a lifetime experience, this

time is past. Other developments include globalization, the very creation of the EHEA, and the increasing understanding of the need for precision concerning the nature and function of qualifications.

Qualifications frameworks, then, provide the tools that make it easier for people to earn qualifications in a variety of ways, at different ages, and often in alternation between work and study – as learners become earners and *vice versa* - and to have these qualifications recognized for what they are worth. To hark back to the Bologna seminar on Recognition and Credit Systems in the Context of Lifelong Learning held in Praha in June 2003, qualifications frameworks provide the tools for taking account of the different learning paths that may all lead to similar qualifications. For higher education to further social cohesion it is important that qualifications be recognized regardless of the learning paths through which they have been earned. As Seámus Puirseil phrased it in the plenary discussion, our task is not to guard the gates of access, but to test what people have when they leave.

Qualifications frameworks are, ultimately, an expression and systematization of the aims and purposes of higher education, or at least of what higher education seeks to convey to those individuals who benefit from it. They should become a fundamental part of the structures of the European Higher Education Area, but higher education does not live from structures alone. As the Working Group reminds us⁴⁵, a successful qualifications framework should encompass and contribute to the four main purposes of higher education:

- > Preparation for the labour market;
- > Preparation for life as active citizens in a democratic society;

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, chapter 1.2, p. 11

- > Personal development;
- > The development and maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base.

René Bugge Bertramsen, in his opening remarks on behalf of the Danish Minister, particularly underlined the importance of qualifications frameworks in preparing students for employment; in bridging the world of higher education and the world of work. As René Bugge Bertramsen rightly said, a study program should no longer just be a collection of academic disciplines but rather a coherent program leading to an agreed purpose for the program and the qualification it confers. The planning process should start with defining the purpose of the program before it enters into the details of disciplines. To use the words of the Danish Director General, if graduates do not know what they can do when they leave higher education, they will have problems presenting themselves to employers. He also underlined the importance of the other purposes of higher education.

Germain Dondelinger, Chair of the Bologna Follow Up group, in his opening remarks also underlined the need to take adequate account of dimensions like personal development and the social dimension of higher education in addition to the employment aspects. On behalf of ESIB, Bastian Baumann strongly underlined that qualifications frameworks are not just about employment, and he in particular underlined the role of higher education in promoting social cohesion. This was further echoed by Roland Vermeesch, speaking in the stakeholder panel on behalf of EURASHE, who emphasized the goal of creating an open, inclusive EHEA.

In the stakeholder panel, Helle Otte of the Danish ENIC/NARIC speaking on behalf of the ENIC and NARIC Networks, emphasized that new needs for recognition have already developed, and that they focus in large part on recognition for the non-regulated part of the labor market. The

focus on outcomes rather than procedures is particularly important in this respect, and, as Helle Otte also reminded us, these principles are already embodied in the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention as well as in the EU Directives on professional recognition, which state as their basic rule that foreign qualifications should be recognized unless the competent recognition authority can demonstrate a basic difference between the qualification for which recognition is sought and similar qualifications in their own country.

Yet, it may also be worth emphasizing that even though qualifications frameworks should greatly facilitate the recognition of qualifications within the European Higher Education Area, such recognition is unlikely to be automatic. Someone will still have to ascertain that the qualification actually fits into the framework where it is claimed that it fits in.

NATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

As was already underlined at the “first København conference”, all education systems have qualifications frameworks; otherwise they would not be able to function or at least to certify the achievements of their learners. However, most education systems have not been explicit about their frameworks, and to the extent that they have, they have tended to:

- > describe individual qualifications in isolation rather than within a coherent system, including the interaction between qualifications;
- > conceive of movement from one qualification to another overwhelmingly as progress from a lower to a higher level with little consideration of possibilities for movement between qualifications at similar level;

>

- > and, perhaps most importantly, characterize qualifications more in terms of procedures and formal requirements than in terms of outcomes.

What will be described as qualifications frameworks in this report – and what is sometimes referred to as “new style qualifications frameworks” – represent a significant shift in focus. They:

- > describe individual qualifications *as well as* the interaction and articulation between them;
- > describe possibilities for movement among qualifications in all directions – upward, sideways or even downward – and recognize that a qualification may be obtained in more ways than one through different learning paths;
- > focus on outcomes and describe what a learner may be expected to know, understand and be able to do with a given qualification;
- > recognize that qualifications are complex and encompass subject specific as well as generic skills and competences or, in the words of the TUNING project: “knowing and understanding”, “knowing how to act” and “knowing how to be”;
- > have implications for the relationship between institutions and public authorities in that institutions will take on increased autonomy as well as increased responsibilities, whereas the role of the Ministry will also change with the use of external reference points and independent external and internal quality assurance arrangements;
- > have implications for recognition, in that considerations of “substantial differences”, in the words of the Lisboa Recognition Convention, should refer to qualifications frameworks and in particular to learning outcomes and

achievements rather than to education structures and procedures.

To quote the report of the Working Group again:

Such frameworks employ clear external reference points (learning outcomes, subject reference points/benchmark statements, levels/cycle descriptors, workload, qualifications descriptors, etc.) and provide a context for qualifications that are themselves expressed with greater clarity and precision with regard to their nature, function and skills that they certify⁴⁶.

And further:

The award of a qualification indicates that the student has completed a range of studies to a given standard and/or indicates a level of achievement by an individual who is deemed fit to perform a particular role, set of tasks or job⁴⁷.

As referred to above, national qualifications frameworks consist of a number of elements. These are described in detail in the report of the working group, and I will therefore only give a brief summary here.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, chapter 2.3., p. 17.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, chapter 2.4., p. 18.

Learning outcomes

Learning outcomes have been defined as

*statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a period of learning*⁴⁸.

In referring to this definition, the working group makes the point – as did the background report for the Edinburgh seminar on Learning Outcomes, from which the definition is taken – that the use of the verb “do” in the definition underlines the aspect of competence or ability rather than the way in which this ability is demonstrated. Nevertheless, it is also important that learning outcomes, once and in whatever way achieved, must be described and attested in such a way that they may be considered for recognition. A clear description of learning outcomes is particularly important in recognizing prior and/or non-formal learning.

Germain Dondelinger in his introductory remarks rightly said that he was looking forward to a conference that would focus on “sense and meaning rather than structure”. It may, however, be worth noting that in spite of the emphasis the Working Group has put on assessing outcomes rather than procedures, Christoph Anz of UNICE, speaking on behalf of European employers, still found that the report focuses too much on the type of institutions at which qualifications are earned and too little on the competences of learners. He also felt that there was insufficient emphasis on the practice-oriented parts of higher education. On behalf of EURASHE, Roland Vermeesch, on the other hand, welcomed what he saw as a paradigm shift from a

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, chapter 2.4.1, p. 18. This definition is, however, taken from the United Kingdom “Using Learning Outcomes” background report for the Bologna seminar on Learning Outcomes (Edinburgh, July 1 – 2, 2004), section 1.2.

focus on education systems to individual learners. Helle Otte, for her part, emphasized that qualifications frameworks described in terms of learning outcomes should greatly facilitate the recognition of transnational education and prior learning.

Level

The report defines levels as

representing a series of sequential steps (a developmental continuum), expressed in terms of a range of generic outcomes, against which typical qualifications can be positioned⁴⁹.

There is little uniformity among even the limited number of existing “new style” frameworks in the number and description of levels, as each national framework uses its own system of levels. However, national frameworks may also relate their levels to what the report of the Working Group refers to as typical or generic types of qualifications, which will facilitate comparison between national frameworks.

For higher education, it may be expected that the three cycles outlined in the overarching framework of the EHEA – with the inclusion of short cycle higher education within the first cycle where such education exists - will become the generic qualification descriptors to which national frameworks will relate. It is important that the description of all national qualifications be explicit about

- > the further qualification(s) to which that particular qualification gives access;
- > the relationship of the qualification in question to the three main levels of the overarching framework.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, chapter 2.4.2, p. 121

As Mogens Berg rightly pointed out in his presentation, not all national qualifications will correspond to the completion of all of the generic cycles. Where they do not, it is particularly important that the competent national authorities describe what graduates can do with this qualification, how they can move within the national qualifications framework and how the qualification relates to the generic cycles.

In other words, the description of a first degree within a national framework should explicitly state that this is a first degree, as well as whether it gives access to a program leading to a second level qualification and whether this access is given to all second degree programs or only to certain strands. This is important for all national frameworks, but it is particularly important where a country has several qualifications at or within the same level, e.g. several different second degrees, or degrees situated between the generic levels, e.g. a degree situated between the first and the second degree.

Credits and workload

The shift away from considering the rather imprecise concept “years of study” or even “time of study” as the basic unit for measuring learning has been underway for quite some time and is, if not completed, at least well advanced. This is fully acknowledged in the report, which considers workload as the relevant element and defines this as

a quantitative measure of all learning activities that may be feasibly required for the achievement of the learning outcomes (e.g. lectures, seminars, practical work, private study, information retrieval, research, examinations)⁵⁰.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, chapter 2.4.3, p. 23.

Workload is now most commonly expressed in terms of credits, which is, in the words of the report,

*a quantified means of expressing the volume of learning based on the achievement of learning outcomes and their associated workload*⁵¹.

Time is of course not absent from considerations of workload, in that the definition of workload and credits rests on an assumption of the amount of work an average full time student will be able to do in an academic year. However, a credit system takes account of the fact that students work at unequal speed and intensity, and that different learners will complete a similar workload in different time.

The report recognizes that the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is the only widely accepted system for credit transfer within the EHEA, and that the ECTS is now developing into a credit transfer *and* accumulation system of potential use to many more than the mobile student. As underlined in the discussion, the ECTS is entering a period of rapid evolution in which institutions will have to express courses and modules in terms of levels and learning outcomes.

Profile

The Working Group defines profile as

*either the specific (subject) field(s) of learning of a qualification or the broader aggregation of clusters of qualifications or programmes from different fields that share a common emphasis or purpose (e.g. an applied vocational as opposed to more theoretical academic studies)*⁵².

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, chapter 2.4.3, p. 22.

⁵² *Ibid.*, chapter 2.1, p. 14.

The profile of a qualification will often be a consideration in assessing it for the purpose of access to further study as well as for employment. For instance, while a given qualification may be given recognition as a second degree, there may be additional, more specific requirements as to the profile of a qualification for access to a specific doctoral program, for example in history or mathematics. Likewise, an employer looking to hire a linguist is unlikely to hire someone with a doctoral qualification in organic chemistry. Not least, to really qualify as a higher education degree, a qualification must have a minimum of depth – an eclectic selection of 10 credits from each of a variety of subject areas will not qualify.

Therefore, profile may be an important consideration also in the elaboration of national qualifications framework. This is indeed the case in some national frameworks, whereas it is absent from others. In either case, it is important to take account of the fact that academic disciplines may be defined somewhat differently in different countries as well as over time, and that the boundaries between disciplines are less than crystal clear. In many cases, a learner's attractiveness in the labor market as well as his or her personal development may be enhanced by combining a concentration within one field with lesser learning achievements in other fields, such as a degree with a concentration in economics supplemented by a working knowledge of one or more foreign languages and an introductory course in ecology.

The issue of quality and quality assurance in the context of qualifications frameworks is considered separately, please see “Qualifications frameworks and quality”, below.

THE OVERARCHING FRAMEWORK

The overarching framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area will have much in common with

national frameworks. Like national frameworks it will describe – at least in broad terms – typical higher education qualifications and the articulation between them, and it will focus on outcomes rather than procedures.

In the same way that national frameworks are the building blocks of individual education systems, the overarching framework will be one of the most important factors in establishing a coherent European Higher Education Area by 2010. As Nina Arnhold of the EUA reminded us in the stakeholder debate, the overarching framework builds on existing elements and patterns, but it also allows for significant new developments. She referred to the preliminary results of Trends IV, which show that European universities are implementing the Bologna Process, even if their practice and also the speed with which they implement the Bologna policies show significant variations.

This function also determines some of the distinctive features of the overarching framework. In the words of the report by the Working Group:

The framework for the EHEA derives its distinctive purposes from the objectives expressed through the Bologna Process. The most directly relevant of these objectives are international transparency, recognition and mobility.

and further:

An overarching European framework has some distinctive objectives, which differ from those of national frameworks. As a meta-framework, it is intended to assist in the identification of points of articulation between national frameworks. It also

*serves as a point of reference for those developing national frameworks of qualification[s]*⁵³.

The overarching framework will have the same components as national frameworks, with one exception: while acknowledging that the concept of profile may be important in national frameworks, the Working Group does not propose to include a description of profile in the overarching framework. For the other elements that make up a qualifications framework, the description will be less detailed for the overarching framework. The national and overarching frameworks will, however, have different functions, and the responsibility for quality assurance and qualifications will remain at national level. As Nina Arnhold very usefully reminded us on behalf of the EUA, any qualifications framework will ultimately have to be implemented by individual higher education institutions.

Two points of terminology should also be clarified. The term “level”, as used above, is most commonly used in the context of national frameworks. However, since the term “cycle” has been used both in the Bologna Declaration and subsequently in discussions within the Bologna Process, the working group uses this term for the overarching framework. One could also see “cycle” as describing a structure and “level” as describing the content of that structure. Secondly, while terms like “bachelor” and “masters” are commonly used also in the international discussion, the Working Group makes the point that the overarching framework should avoid terms that are specific to some – but far from all – national frameworks, and it therefore suggests that generic terms be used in the overarching framework.

⁵³ Both quotations *ibid.*, chapter 3.1, p. 29.

While much discussion within the Bologna Process has come to focus on three cycles⁵⁴ – which is also one of the three areas identified for the stock taking process prior to the Bergen Conference of Ministers in 2005 – an overarching qualifications framework requires a more detailed consideration, and the working group suggests that the Dublin Descriptors developed by the Joint Quality Initiative be used. The discussion at the conference showed broad support for this solution, and some participants reported that these had been successfully implemented in their countries. These, in the words of the report,

*offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with qualifications that represent the end of each Bologna cycle. They are not meant to be descriptive; they do not represent threshold or minimum requirements and they are not exhaustive; similar or equivalent characteristics may be added or substituted. The descriptors seek to identify the nature of the whole qualification*⁵⁵.

In view of the importance, in many countries, of short higher education qualifications, the Working Group asked the Joint Quality Initiative to develop a similar Dublin Descriptor for short higher education, which it suggests be included in the overarching framework, within the first cycle.

A complete overview of the descriptors for each cycle within the overarching framework is provided in chapter 3 of the report by the Working Group. At the risk of oversimplification, it may be summarized as follows:

⁵⁴ As of the Berlin Conference in 2003 with the inclusion of doctoral qualifications; the emphasis in the Bologna Declaration was on the first and second cycles which, strictly speaking, are the focus of the current stock taking.

⁵⁵ The report of the working group, chapter 3.3, p. 33.

The overarching framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area will consist of three cycles, for which the association of credits with qualifications are offered as guidelines for national frameworks:

- > first cycle (higher education) qualifications, typically including or represented by 180 – 240 ECTS credits;
- > within the first cycle, short cycle higher education qualifications typically including or represented by approximately 120 ECTS credits (but see the paragraph below for the discussion around this proposal);
- > second cycle (higher education) qualifications, typically including or represented by 90 – 120 ECTS credits beyond the first cycle, with a minimum of 60 credits at the level of the second cycle;
- > third cycle (higher education) qualifications. No proposal has been made for associating credits with third cycle qualifications, but proposals for a description of such qualifications – in terms of credits or otherwise – may be made by the Bologna seminar on “Doctoral Programmes for the European Knowledge Society”, to be organized by the Austrian and German authorities and the European University Association in Salzburg on February 3 – 5, 2005. In the stakeholder panel, Christoph Anz stated that ECTS credits should be assigned to the third cycle as well as to other learning achievements, and one of the discussion groups made the same point.

The discussions showed broad overall agreement with these genetic cycles. While all discussions underlined the need to endorse the concept of shorter higher education programs, there were, however, discussions of whether the short cycle within the first cycle should indeed be termed a “cycle”. The Working Group may wish to consider the issue of terminology in this sense. The main argument in favour of referring to short cycle higher education is perhaps that short higher education

qualifications will enable their holder either to enter the labour market with a valued qualification or to continue their education, whereas the main argument against is that referring to a short cycle within the first cycle could cloud the view of an overall EHEA structure consisting of three main cycles. Whatever solution is in the end preferred, we must not lose sight of the fact that the conference strongly supported the reality of short higher education as an option chosen by at least 2 million students in Europe and one that corresponds to the needs of learners as well as of employers.

Some participants also felt that the description of the second cycle proposed by the Working Group goes beyond the recommendation of the Helsinki seminar on Masters' Degrees. While that recommendation may be open to some interpretation, the majority of conference participants seemed to be comfortable with the proposal by the Working Group.

In summarizing the proposal for an overarching framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area, it would be difficult to improve upon Mogens Berg's elegant summary in his presentation:

- > the EHEA framework should consist of three main cycles, with additional provision for a short cycle – or short higher education - within the first cycle;
- > the Dublin Descriptors are adopted as the cycle descriptors;
- > there are guidelines for the range of ECTS credits associated with the completion of each cycle,
- > responsibility for the maintenance and development of the framework rests with the Bologna Follow Up Group.

QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS AND QUALITY

To become a reality, the European Higher Education Area will need national qualifications frameworks that articulate well with each other within an overarching framework as outlined in the report by the Working Group. In addition to structures that are sufficiently coherent to be compatible, the EHEA will also require that all parties trust each other's qualifications. Not least for this reason, quality and quality assurance are key elements of national qualifications frameworks as well as of the overarching framework for the EHEA. The need for transparent and reliable quality assurance was also emphasized by Christoh Anz in the stakeholder panel.

The Working Group has not gone into great detail as concerns quality assurance, in large part because another working group made up of representatives of the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the EUA, EURASHE and ESIB are elaborating a proposal for "an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance, [and] ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies."⁵⁶ This work is being carried out in parallel to the report of the working group, and the final report by ENQA and partners is expected in late February.

It therefore seems premature to go into great detail on the quality assurance component of qualifications frameworks, but on the other hand, it is important to clearly make the point that there must be such a component. An education system that would not have provision for transparent external quality assurance, as well as provision for internal quality development and assurance at its higher education institutions, would most

⁵⁶ Berlin Communiqué

likely face severe problems in having its qualifications framework valued by other partners within the EHEA.

The Working Group makes it clear that provisions for quality assurance will differ at national level and implies that this situation is likely to continue also after the Ministerial conference in Bergen. Nevertheless, it makes the point that, in the context of building trust in a qualifications framework, provision for some form of external quality assurance seems especially important. In the words of the report:

All systems include an element of “externality”, whether by external inspectors or by academic peers. There is also a general trend towards increasing the input of students and other stakeholders within quality assurance.

And further:

“Externality” is increasingly recognized as an essential part of quality assurance, and so it should be within the development and application of new national qualifications frameworks. For such frameworks to be of benefit to stakeholders, including intending and current students, and their employers, the frameworks need to be expressed in terms that are understandable and relevant. These may not always sit comfortably with the precise and detailed languages often used or thought to be necessary for regulation⁵⁷.

In the discussion, the point was made that national frameworks as well as the overarching framework of the EHEA will have implications for how quality assurance is carried out as well as for the tools it uses.

⁵⁷ Both quotes from the report of the Working Group, chapter 2.5, pp. 24 – 25.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FRAMEWORK?

At first sight, determining responsibility for a qualifications framework should not be difficult. If a qualifications framework is an essential element of an education system, it would seem obvious that responsibility for the framework rests with the public authority responsible for the education system in question. This is certainly true in a legal sense, and it is also true as concerns the ultimate *de facto* responsibility.

However, reality is often more complex than what can be expressed in a single sentence, and qualifications frameworks are no exception. In particular, four issues need to be addressed:

- > What is the involvement of stakeholders in developing and maintaining qualifications frameworks?
- > How are qualifications frameworks adopted or implemented?
- > In the absence of a “European education system” and hence of public authority responsible for it, how is the overarching framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area adopted, developed and maintained?
- > Who decides whether a given national framework is compatible with the policies of the EHEA (i.e. with the overarching framework), and how?

Stakeholders

Answering the first question requires clarifying who the main stakeholders in higher education are. Mogens Berg referred to stakeholders in his presentation of the report, and some of them were represented in the stakeholder panel at this conference: the students (or, in more general terms, the learners), the higher education institutions, the employers and those who work with

recognition and quality assurance issues on a professional basis. In addition, stakeholders include employees and those who seek employment as well as their organizations, higher education staff, professional organizations and community and voluntary organizations. Not least – and the point is worth making – the stakeholders include public authorities, and in particular those responsible for education.

Mogens Berg also made the very valid point that the responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national qualifications framework should be clearly determined and published. Of course, some stakeholders may be “more equal than others”, and views on who these are will of course differ. It is hardly surprising that Bastian Baumann in the stakeholders’ panel made the point that ESIB supports qualifications frameworks as long as they are student centred. That, however, is not “just” a student view – it is at the core of the work on qualifications frameworks.

Qualifications frameworks, then, should be elaborated in cooperation between at least the most important groups of stakeholders, and this seems to be a lesson from all the different national frameworks that have been developed so far. This requires a measure of consensus building as well as a balance between a top down approach and a bottom up approach. Exactly which stakeholders will be involved in what way, and what is seen as the proper balance of top down and bottom up will vary from one country to another, on the background of cultural, educational and civic traditions as well as the current involvement of different stakeholders in the education system. However, no successful qualifications framework has been elaborated by one group in isolation or been implemented only by decree.

Adoption/implementation

The second question, then, is how a qualifications framework, once elaborated, is actually put into practice. Again, practice varies from one country to another. In some systems, a legally binding decision by a competent authority – Ministry or even the national assembly – may be required, whereas in others, such as the two frameworks of the United Kingdom, the qualifications framework has no legal status but is efficiently implemented by the main stakeholders.

Whatever the form and legal status of the individual national framework, it may also be worth bearing in mind the words of Christian Thune, speaking on behalf of ENQA in the stakeholder debate: realism is at least as important as excessive idealism and enthusiasm in implementing qualifications frameworks.

Adopting and implementing the EHEA framework

The third question has to do with the nature of the European Higher Education Area, which is based on close cooperation and interaction between the member states and their higher education systems. Currently there are 40 member states, but a further five⁵⁸ have applied for accession, and these applications will be decided by the Ministers in Bergen. There is no provision for one common education system, and there is no authority that can enforce a common qualifications framework. As described in the report by the Working Group and discussed at the conference, the overarching framework will provide guidance for the elaboration of national frameworks and will not constitute a legally binding framework nor be a regulatory instrument. Nevertheless, the overarching framework will need

⁵⁸ Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

to be validated and maintained, and at some time in the future, it may need to be revised.

If it is to be effective, the overarching framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area must be accepted by the parties to the Bologna Process, and they must take ownership of the framework. Therefore, the Working Group suggests that the framework be adopted by the Ministers in Bergen and the Ministers take responsibility for maintaining and – as needed – updating the framework. As a practical measure, the Working Group suggests that the Ministers delegate this task to the Bologna Follow Up Group and to whatever structure might replace it once the EHEA is in place. As needed, the Bologna Follow Up Group might wish to associate other stakeholders with the process of building, maintaining and updating the framework.

At this stage, it may be useful to keep in mind what Helle Otte said in the stakeholder panel: paradise is not created out of conference reports and Ministerial communiqués. Nor can qualifications frameworks be all things to all people or, as Bastian Baumann formulated it, *“eierlegende Wollmilchsau”* – an egg laying pig that produces wool and milk. Like conventions and laws, qualifications frameworks are only as their implementation. This conference is an important milestone, but the end goal is that what we have discussed here is actually put into practice.

Validating national frameworks as “EHEA compatible”

Even if the EHEA framework is not regulatory or binding, it does outline what is required for national frameworks to be considered as falling within the broad policies of the European Higher Education Area. It therefore seems necessary to establish a way to verify whether individual national frameworks are in fact compatible with the overarching framework. The Working Group proposes that this be done

through self-certification by the country concerned rather than by peer review or a European body or agency, for which there is no mandate and that does not seem necessary⁵⁹. Since the effective acceptance of national frameworks within the EHEA will require mutual trust, it is, however, essential that:

- > the self-certification be transparent and that it address the criteria proposed by the Working Group;
- > that the self-certification and the evidence supporting it be public, and that an easily accessible public listing of the countries that have confirmed that they have completed the self-certification process be maintained. The Working Group suggests this be done by the ENIC and NARIC Networks;
- > the self-certification be completed by the time the EHEA is to be established, i.e. by 2010;
- > that adequate links be established to provisions for quality assurance, to the Council of Europe/UNESCO (Lisboa) Recognition Convention and EU Directives on professional recognition and to transparency instruments for recognition, such as the Diploma Supplement, ECTS, Europass, the ENIC and NARIC Networks and individual recognition centers.

In general, there was agreement on the principle of self-certification. However, several participants expressed doubts as to whether the process as outlined in the report was sufficient and would want to see this strengthened with regards to criteria, procedures and the link to quality assurance. Thus, in the plenary discussion, Jan S. Levy, Vice Chair for the Bologna a Follow Up Group, also raised the issue of a possible link to quality assurance, through a requirement that the self certification rest on an accepted quality assurance system in the country

⁵⁹ Report by the Working Group, para. 4.2, pp. 39 – 40.

in question. Not surprisingly, Christian Thune echoed this view in the stakeholders' panel on behalf of ENQA. He also hinted that self-certification would require a level of trust within the EHEA that may in some cases be excessively optimistic. One of the working groups made many of the same points, and in particular underlined the need to involve foreign experts in the elaboration and implementation of national qualifications frameworks, to include an element of peer review already in the development of frameworks, to describe learning outcomes at module and unit level as well as at generic level and to reflect further on the link between quality assurance and qualifications frameworks.

Ministers in Bergen could therefore ask the Bologna Follow Up Group to submit a proposal for criteria and procedures for a self-certification system for national qualifications frameworks where quality assurance is included in time for the Ministerial meeting in 2007. The Working Group, meeting after the conference to assess whether further work on the report is required in the light of the outcomes of the conference, felt, however, that postponing the decision on the self-certification for another two years would be unfortunate and resolved to elaborate a more detailed proposal for inclusion in the final version of the report. This model should, in keeping with the recommendations of the conference, contain further considerations of criteria and procedures for a self-certification system for national qualifications frameworks where quality assurance is included. The Working Group is aware that this must be done by mid-February, and that, were there to be no agreement in the Bologna Follow Up Group on the proposal put forward, continued work would require a new mandate by Ministers in Bergen.

One working group suggested that the transparency instruments be reviewed to verify whether they are compatible with the development of qualifications frameworks.

THE EHEA FRAMEWORK AND OTHER FRAMEWORKS

The Bologna Process encompasses all kinds of higher education, as does the mandate of the Working Group. It is, however, clear that, on the one hand, the need for transparent qualifications frameworks extends to all parts of the education system and, on the other hand, that it would be highly unfortunate and counterproductive if each part of the education system – at national or European level – would develop their own qualifications frameworks in isolation and without taking adequate account of each others' concerns.

One issue is of course that of entrance qualifications to higher education, but as Mogens Berg pointed out, the current labour market as well as other developments challenge the traditional boundaries of education, as well as those between education and the world of work. The issue of whether entrance qualifications should be a part of the overarching framework for the EHEA was, incidentally, one on which participants expressed quite divergent views, ranging from those who very strongly in favour of including entrance qualifications in this framework to those who were vehemently opposed. On behalf of the employers, Christoph Anz also emphasized the need to develop a common credit system – and, presumably, by extension a common qualifications framework – for higher education and vocational education and training.

The national frameworks that have been developed so far may serve as examples of good practice, since they encompass all parts of the education system of the country concerned. As an example, the Scottish framework comprises 12 levels from achievements by learners with severe learning disabilities through the various parts of primary and secondary education, vocational education and training and the first and second higher education degrees to doctoral qualifications. National frameworks will also reflect the different priorities of countries and will be designed accordingly. As is the case of national

legislation, national frameworks may also be of different complexity because of different national traditions as to how much needs to be explicitly regulated and what can be assumed on the basis of shorter, more general provisions⁶⁰. The wider context has also been underlined by the Ministers of the Bologna Process, who in the Praha and Berlin Communiqués emphasized the important contribution of higher education in making lifelong learning a reality⁶¹.

At European level, cooperation has, it would seem, advanced further in higher education than in other parts of the education system, and the geographical context is resolutely pan-European in that the Bologna Process currently encompasses 40 countries, whereas cooperation within vocational education and training (VET) is more closely tied to the EU/EEA framework⁶². One of the working groups noted the need to broaden understanding of all ongoing processes, and it also suggested the proposed overarching framework for qualifications of the EHEA is an excellent starting point that should be taken into account in a broader context.

David Coyne reminded us that the European Union has placed lifelong learning squarely on the political agenda through its Lisboa Strategy (Education and Training 2010), and it has launched the København Process comprising vocational education and training. In particular, the Commission has recently established an expert group on a European Framework

⁶⁰ Three higher education laws adopted in Western European countries between 1995 and 2001 encompass between 5 and 13 chapters, whereas in two recent draft laws from South East Europe, provisions for staff alone ran to 26 and 27 paragraphs respectively. See Sjur Bergan: "A Tale of Two Cultures in Higher Education Policies: the Rule of Law or a Excess of Legalism?" *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Volume 8, Issue 2, Summer 2004.

⁶¹ The wording is from the Berlin Communiqué, but similar wording is found in the Praha Communiqué.

⁶² These developments are covered by Chapter 5 of the Report by the Working Group.

for Qualifications (EQF), with a mandate to build on the Bologna Process for higher education and the København Process for VET. The most developed mandate, however, comes from the recent EU Ministerial meeting in Maastricht, where Ministers gave a mandate for developing a European Qualifications Framework. The mandate is remarkably similar to the mandate given to the BFUG Working Group, except for the specific reference to higher education. David Coyne also underlined the need for cross-reference between the various processes.

The reasons for the need for cross-reference is found in the very rationale for an overall framework, as presented by David Coyne: a single coherent framework is best for the users – learners and employers - and this was well illustrated by the discussion at the conference as to whether access qualifications should be apart of the overarching EHEA framework. Another reason is that it is impossible to say where advanced vocational education and training ends and higher education begins.

In fulfilling the mandate given by the EU Ministers in Maastricht, David Coyne envisaged a framework that covers all levels of education and training through 7 or 8 levels ranging from learning normally acquired through basic education and emphasizing general knowledge and skills to doctoral qualifications. The framework should focus on competences rather than structures. One could even question whether the term “qualifications framework” is the appropriate term, or whether “competence framework” would not be more suitable.

A European Qualifications Framework will and should change the way we look at learners’ qualifications. In many ways, an EQF will do this in the same ways as the EHEA framework: by enabling learners to navigate between qualifications and systems, by providing links to quality assurance, by facilitating recognition in general and recognition of prior and experiential learning in particular. Not least, it will help providers describe and situate their programs, in particular outside of the classic

higher education programs. In this sense, a qualifications framework may for example help higher education institutions design programs that are particularly adapted to their role in the region in which they are located. David Coyne, however, made an important additional point: an EQF framework will hopefully also help develop a culture of evaluation and quality in all sectors of education, in the way we have come to take it for granted in higher education.

The decision by EU Ministers in Maastricht includes a mandate to elaborate a VET credit system, and David Coyne strongly emphasized that this should not be a separate credit system. One overarching qualifications framework would require one credit system: two separate systems would be one too many. There are still tensions between various traditions, so there is need for further consultation. One issue is the relationship between competences and notional learning time, while recognizing that the notion of competence must be expressed through proxies that can be measured. Another issue is the link between levels and credits, which has already been raised by the Helsinki definition of a second cycle (“Masters”) qualification.

David Coyne outlined a timetable in which the Commission will present two recommendations to the European Parliament and Council in spring 2006, one of which will address the EQF and the other credit systems. To arrive there, the Commission will aim to present consultation documents in spring 2005, hopefully in April or May, to be followed by a substantive consultation period of 6 months, until October/November 2005. This consultation will include an active effort to seek advice from a wide variety of actors and stakeholders within the EU as well as beyond. The consultation is important also in reducing the time required for the political co-decision process involving the European Parliament and Council.

The initiative to create coherence between the various parts of the education system and between overarching qualifications frameworks at European level is laudable and necessary. It is

nonetheless important to underline, as was done in the plenary discussion, that this work must be carried out in full transparency, and that it must involve all members of the Bologna Process. This is an obvious requirement for the higher education part of the framework, but it is also important for other parts of a future overarching European Qualifications Framework to the extent that these other parts feed into and interact with higher education.

As noted, the considerable disagreement on whether it would be appropriate to include a description of qualifications giving access to higher education in the overarching framework for qualifications of the EHEA could possibly best be resolved within the context of a broader framework encompassing all or at least more kinds of education, as this is done within national frameworks. This further underscores the need to involve all parties to the Bologna Process in the development of such a broader framework. As David Coyne said in response to comments from the plenary, while the legal basis of the Bologna, København and Lisboa Processes are different, they all rest on the political will of the countries involved.

FINAL THOUGHTS

My first “final thought” is to echo the thanks expressed by Germain Dondelinger, as Chair of the Bologna Follow Up Group, to the Danish authorities for hosting this important seminar and to Mogens Berg in particular for all the excellent work he has both done and inspired to develop the concept of qualifications framework and win acceptance for it at European level.

Qualifications frameworks constitute a cornerstone of higher education policies in Europe, whether at national level or in the European Higher Education Area. They are an important concern of structural reform, and their impact is far reaching: by shifting the focus from procedures to learning achievements,

qualifications frameworks have the potential to become building blocks in enhancing the social dimension of higher education. This aspect was particularly emphasized by ESIB, but it is the concern of all, and the social dimension will be the topic of a Bologna seminar to be organized by the French authorities in Paris at the end of January 2005.

We now have a proposal for an overarching framework, the conference supported this proposal and hopefully the Ministers will adopt it. Some countries have elaborated national frameworks, and many more will do so in the next few years. This is very positive, and it is in fact an amazing development in such a short time. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that once a framework is in place, it must be implemented. I would like to echo several working groups that underlined the need for cooperation in the implementation of frameworks: cooperation among stakeholders at both national and European level, and also cooperation between countries. Those countries that feel a need for advice or even participation by foreign experts in the elaboration and implementation of their own frameworks should be assured of the support of their fellow EHEA partners, and this could be done through the appropriate international institutions, organizations and bodies.

By opening new learning paths and facilitating the recognition of non-traditional qualifications, frameworks will help opening higher education opportunities for new learners who may never have seen such possibilities before. If Europe is, in the words of the EU Lisboa Strategy, to become the world's most competitive economy by 2010, we can afford to do no less. If, in keeping with Europe's humanist tradition and social concern, even if these have at times at times been honored only in the breaking, we are also to see beyond the economic dimension, we also can afford to do no less.

France has over the past decade or two developed a very strong tradition of musicals, and one of my favourites is *Notre Dame de Paris*, based on the Victor Hugo classic from 1831. In many

ways, this musical is about qualifications frameworks and recognition, even if one might suspect the public is not always aware of the fact. But just take a closer look: *Notre Dame de Paris* is about structures and frameworks, represented by the cathedral that still draws thousands and thousands of visitors even centuries after its construction. It is about recognizing the non-traditional, represented by Quasimodo the Hunchback and Esmeralda the Gypsy. It is about rejecting dogmatism and formalism, represented by Frolon. It is about making an old cultural gem more attractive to new audiences, represented by those who prefer listening to the melodic modern version to reading the original text as well as by those who move between the two as if they were components of a single, coherent framework. It is about the European dimension, represented by the composer Richard Coccinante, who is French but obviously has Italian roots. Not least, it is about the “external dimension”, represented by the singer Garou, who is now one of the main stars of the French-speaking world - and who hails from Québec.

The last point underscores the fact that qualifications frameworks and their focus on learning achievements are vital to making “Bologna qualifications” recognized in other parts of the world – what is, for want of a better word, commonly referred to as the “external dimension”⁶³. If all the rest of the world retains of “Bologna” is that “Europe” is reducing the “bachelor” degree from 4 to 3 years, European students will have serious problems by the time the EHEA is established. These problems can only be avoided if we succeed in conveying both the contents and the methodology of our qualifications frameworks - and if we apply the same methodology of

⁶³ The “external dimension” of the Bologna Process was the topic of a major conference organized by the Academic Cooperation Organization in Hamburg on October 18 – 19, 2004, cf. <http://www.aca-secretariat.be/08events/Hamburg/HamburgConferenceOverview.htm>. A publication on the basis of the conference is forthcoming.

recognizing learning achievements rather than procedures when assessing qualifications from other parts of the world.

Like Europe itself, the overarching framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area balances diversity and unity. The aim is to make it flexible and diverse enough to be interesting, yet sufficiently coherent to be comprehensible. Our aspiration for the European Higher Education Area and its qualifications frameworks can perhaps best be expressed by a slogan borrowed from our US friends, which they in turn express in a language borrowed from “old Europe”:

e pluribus unum.

Out of many, one.

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Appendix 8

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The framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area

	Outcomes	ECTS Credits
Short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) Qualification	<i>Qualifications that signify completion of the higher education short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) are awarded to students who:</i> > have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education⁶⁴ and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks; such knowledge provides an underpinning for a field of work or vocation, personal development, and further studies to complete the first cycle; > can apply their knowledge and understanding in occupational contexts; > have the ability to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems; > can communicate about their understanding, skills and activities, with peers, supervisors and clients; > have the learning skills to undertake further studies with some autonomy.	approximately 120 ECTS credits

⁶⁴ General secondary education also includes vocational education with a sufficiently general component.

First cycle qualification	<i>Qualifications that signify completion of the first cycle are awarded to students who:</i> > have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education²⁷, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study; > can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional⁶⁵ approach to their work or vocation, and have competences⁶⁶ typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study; > have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues;	typically include 180-240 ECTS credits
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⁶⁵ The word ‘**professional**’ is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense, relating to those attributes relevant to undertaking work or a vocation and that involves the application of some aspects of advanced learning. It is not used with regard to those specific requirements relating to regulated professions. The latter may be identified with the profile / specification.

⁶⁶ The word ‘**competence**’ is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense, allowing for gradation of abilities or skills. It is not used in the narrower sense identified solely on the basis of a ‘yes/no’ assessment.

	> can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences; > have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.	
Second cycle qualification	<i>Qualifications that signify completion of the second cycle are awarded to students who:</i> > have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with the first cycle, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research⁶⁷ context;	normally carry 90-120 ECTS credits - the minimum requirements should amount to 60 ECTS credits at the second cycle level

⁶⁷ The word ‘**research**’ is used to cover a wide variety of activities, with the context often related to a field of study; the term is used here to represent a careful study or investigation based on a systematic understanding and critical awareness of knowledge. The word is used in an inclusive way to accommodate the range of activities that support original and innovative work in the whole range of academic, professional and technological fields, including the humanities, and traditional, performing, and other creative arts. It is not used in any limited or restricted sense, or relating solely to a traditional ‘scientific method’.

	> can apply their knowledge and understanding, and problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study; > have the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements; > can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously; > have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.	
Third cycle qualification	<i>Qualifications that signify completion of the third cycle are awarded to students who:</i> > have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field;	Not specified

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	> have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity; > have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication; > are capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas; > can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise; > can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge based society.	
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A Framework for Qualifications of The European Higher Education Area

This report concerns the elaboration of qualifications frameworks as called for by ministers in the Berlin Communiqué; it makes recommendations and proposals for an overarching **Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)**, and offers advice on good practice in the elaboration of national qualifications frameworks for higher education qualifications.

The report includes six chapters that cover:

The context – higher education qualifications in Europe

National frameworks of qualifications in higher education

The framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area

Linking frameworks of qualifications in higher education

Frameworks for higher education and for other educational areas

Conclusions



Education and Culture

Socrates

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