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BOLOGNA FOLLOW UP GROUP
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BOLOGNA WORK PROGRAM 2007 – 2009

THE SHARING OF EXPERIENCE IN THE ELABORATION OF NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

Directorate General IV: Education, Culture and Heritage, Youth and Sport
(Directorate of School, Out-of-School and Higher Education/Higher Education and Research
Division)

INTRODUCTION

The present document has been written at the request of the Bologna Board, which met in Lisboa on August 30 – 31, 2007. It aims to outline the Council of Europe's plans for coordinating the sharing of experience in the elaboration of national qualifications frameworks, in accordance with the mandate given to the Council of Europe through the London Communiqué, and to identify topics for consideration by the BFUG at its meeting on October 2 – 3.

As a part of this proposal, the document will raise the question of whether a coordination group should be appointed for this purpose. Draft terms of reference for such a group will be found in the Appendix.

THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE'S MANDATE

The overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA was adopted by Ministers in Bergen in 2005, and the development of national qualifications frameworks is within the competence and responsibility of the competent national authorities. It is recalled that Ministers committed to launching this work by 2007 and to complete it by 2010.

The role of the Council of Europe is therefore to facilitate the sharing of experience so that the competent national authorities can benefit from relevant experience from other countries to the extent that the national authorities see fit to do so. The Council's role is emphatically *not* to elaborate national frameworks or to give directives to the competent national authorities. On the contrary, the Council of Europe sees its role as that of a facilitator. Competent national authorities are free to make use of its services but there is no obligation to do so. This is in keeping with the London Communiqué:

We note that some initial progress has been made towards the implementation of national qualifications frameworks, but that much more effort is required. We commit ourselves to fully implementing such national qualifications frameworks, certified against the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA, by 2010. Recognising that this is a challenging task, we ask the Council of Europe to support the sharing of experience in the elaboration of national qualifications frameworks. We emphasise that qualification frameworks should be designed so as to encourage greater mobility of students and teachers and improve employability.

As a part of this responsibility, the Council of Europe proposes to facilitate the sharing of experience also in the self certification of national frameworks, and it is recalled that self certification reports will be published on the ENIC-NARIC web site¹.

¹ See <http://www.enic-naric.net/index.aspx?s=n&r=ena&d=qf>

MAIN TYPES OF ACTIVITIES

It is proposed that the Council of Europe's role in this regard focus on:

- (i) the organization of European conferences, aimed at all members and consultative members of the Bologna Process;
- (ii) regional conferences;
- (iii) work with individual countries;
- (iv) the relationship between qualifications frameworks and the further development of recognition policies and practice, in the context of the ENIC and NARIC Networks.

European conferences

We consider that there is a need for European events that will consider specific aspects of the development of qualifications frameworks. These events will also provide countries with an opportunity to raise issues concerning their own national frameworks and to compare their own experience with that of other countries. Thus, European fora will give countries an opportunity to draw on the experience of other countries outside of their immediate region that may face similar issues, and they will also give the BFUG at least an impressionistic overview of overall progress in the development of national frameworks compatible with the overarching EHEA framework.

The first European conference will be held on October 11 – 12, 2007 at Council Headquarters in Strasbourg and is aimed at those responsible for developing national qualifications frameworks in each of the members of the Bologna Process as well as representatives of the European Commission and consultative members. Invitations were sent out at the end of August through BFUG delegations as well as through delegations to the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research (CDESR).

The frequency of European meetings should be considered as work on national frameworks develops. Such meetings could also focus on specific topics in the development of qualifications frameworks; learning outcomes would be one pertinent example. The Czech Republic, Georgia and the United Kingdom (Scotland) have indicated that they are willing to host such meetings; the latter has also put forward a series of possible topics including:

- Stakeholder engagement;
- Components of qualifications frameworks (level, volume, credit, crediting rating and Recognition of Prior Learning);
- Developing learning outcome-based qualifications;
- The self certification process;

- Linkages between the Higher Education Framework and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework;
- Quality enhancement (including student participation);
- The strategic purposes of qualifications frameworks.

While the European conferences should be a part of the Bologna work program for 2007 – 2009, it is suggested that some flexibility be allowed in deciding what topics should be addressed through such conferences at what time. Tentatively, one or two conferences could be foreseen for 2008 and, depending on developments, one in early 2009.

Regional conferences

Regional conferences are likely to be a suitable format for following up the development of national qualifications frameworks. Such smaller conferences will give countries in the same region an opportunity to work more intensively on issues of mutual concern and may also serve to strengthen regional cooperation. It will be recalled that the former Bologna working group on qualifications frameworks organized four regional conferences in June – September 2006, with some support from the Council of Europe. The number of countries involved and the geographical region covered by each conference should be assessed pragmatically.

In addition to regional conferences in the proper sense of the word, there may also be a case for organizing topical conferences specifically aimed at countries that share similar problems or that are at the same stage in the development of their frameworks, regardless of whether these countries are in the same geographical region or not. As an example, when a number of countries reach the stage where they launch the self certification procedure, it may be useful to organize a conference specifically for these countries.

The Council of Europe could lend organizational support, identify experts and, at least in some cases, cover expenses for experts and, in exceptional cases, some participants. However – as for other activities of the Bologna Process – member countries would need to cover a substantial part of the costs for their own participation as well as for conferences organized in their own country. Again, it should be underlined that countries should of course not only feel free to but also be encouraged to organize regional conferences at their own initiative.

Work with individual countries

The development of national qualifications frameworks will be given a prominent place in the Council's work with individual countries. This is already the case, but this aspect will be further strengthened, even if this should not imply that other topics, like quality assurance, should not be addressed. The topics for work with specific countries should still be subject to the needs of individual countries.

It should be underlined that while the Council has focused its assistance on the organization of national conferences in countries that acceded to the Bologna Process in 2003 or 2005, the coordination of the sharing of experience in the elaboration of national qualifications frameworks will in principle extend to all members of the Bologna Process who would wish to avail themselves of this assistance, subject to capacity and the availability of experts. The Council of Europe's role will mainly comprise the identification of experts representing a range of experience; in a few cases it may also be possible to cover travel and subsistence costs for a limited number of experts. Even before the BFUG meeting, the Council of Europe will have organized two national conferences on qualifications frameworks in the current work period: in Azerbaijan in June and in Turkey in September 2007. We will aim to meet as many requests for assistance in this area as possible but again it should be underlined that countries may prefer to organize their own conferences and draw on their own international contacts. This is, for example, the case of the Netherlands, which will organize a national conference in late October.

The Council of Europe will also seek to build up an overview of experts who may be available to offer advice to countries who would wish to receive assistance in the development of their national framework.

One topic the BFUG may wish to consider is whether even those countries that organize national or regional activities without the assistance of the Council of Europe should be encouraged to provide brief information on their activities. The purpose of this would be double: to give an impression of the overall volume of activities but above all provide all countries of the Bologna Process with updated information on relevant issues and examples of good practice. The information may for example be organized through links to relevant web site with a brief summary in English where the web site uses another language, and the information may be coordinated and made available either by the Bologna Secretariat on the Bologna web site or by the Council of Europe through the Council's higher education web page.

Qualifications frameworks and recognition policy

Qualifications frameworks will be highly relevant for recognition policies and practice. The development of qualifications frameworks will be an item on the agenda of the annual meetings of the ENIC and NARIC Networks, as was indeed the case in 2006 and 2007. While ENICs/NARICs will most likely play an important role in the development of national frameworks of their respective countries, this work does of course not fall within the sole remit of ENICs and NARICs.

National qualifications frameworks emphasizing learning outcomes and developed within the overarching EHEA framework should facilitate recognition. The Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention stipulates that foreign qualifications be recognized unless the competent recognition authority can demonstrate a substantial difference between the

qualification for which recognition is sought and the similar qualification in the host country. Increasingly, the issue of substantial differences will have to be phrased in terms of qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes. The ENIC and NARIC Networks are currently engaged in a large scale exploration of this key concept of the Convention with a view to developing a better common understanding of policy and practice. The ENIC and NARIC Networks are also organizing a session on this topic at the 2007 meeting of the European Association for International Education (Trondheim, September 12 – 15).

COORDINATION GROUP

As will be seen, fulfilling the mandate given by Ministers in London requires the organization of a range of activities, in addition to activities organized by countries on their own initiative. This raises the question of whether a coordination group for qualifications frameworks is needed and, if so, how it should be constituted.

The purpose of such a group will be to assist the Council of Europe in coordinating the sharing of experience, to allow a number of countries and consultative members a formal role in providing advice on this and to ensure the involvement of countries at different stages of the development of their national frameworks. A coordination group could also facilitate the sharing of experience between activities within the EHEA framework and those within the European Qualifications Framework, once this has been adopted. This of course requires that the European Commission be a member of and contribute to the coordination group.

The Council of Europe could serve as the Secretariat and organizer – and possibly chair - of such a group, which could be constituted by the BFUG, by the Council of Europe or by both jointly. Since the coordination of the sharing of experience in the development of national qualifications frameworks will be carried out under the authority of the BFUG (acting on behalf of Ministers between Ministerial conferences), it is suggested that a coordination or advisory group for this work be established by the BFUG and that the Council of Europe be asked to chair and serve the group.

As for other activities in the Bologna Process, countries serving on the group would be expected to cover the expenses of their representative on the group. If the decision to establish such a group is taken by the BFUG in early October, a first meeting could be held in late 2007 or early 2008. It should be held at a time that would allow the group to take account of the outcomes of the meeting organized in Strasbourg on October 11 – 12.

It is important that the Council's work in coordinating the sharing of experience in the development of national qualifications frameworks be coordinated with the Commission's work on implementing the EQF once this has been adopted, and that those responsible for the development of national framework not be given the impression that they have to make a choice between the two overarching frameworks.

This also implies that if a coordination group is established within the Bologna Process, both the Council of Europe and the European Commission should play an important role in the group. In addition, the group should comprise a number of country representatives and some consultative members. The group should, however, not be too large: preferably it should not have more than 10 – 15 members. Inevitably, since there is great interest in the topic, it may be difficult to find a place for all members and consultative members that may wish to be a part of the coordination group, and it will be important that its membership reflect the variety within the European Higher Education Area. At the same time, the coordination group should be made up of individuals with strong commitment to the work to be undertaken.

A tentative composition could be as follows:

- 1 representative of the Council of Europe (Chair and Secretariat)
- 1 representative of the European Commission
- 1 representative of the Bologna working group on qualifications frameworks 2003 – 2007
- 1 representative of a country that has completed the self certification process (at the time of writing, this would mean Ireland or United Kingdom (Scotland))
- 3 - 4 representatives of Bologna member states at various stages of the development of their qualifications frameworks (other than those having completed the self certification), with some regard also to geographical representation
- 2 - 3 representatives of consultative members
- 1 representative of the ENIC and NARIC Networks or of the Lisboa Recognition Convention Committee
- 1 representative of the Bologna Secretariat

This would give a group of 11 - 13 members. In addition, the Council of Europe would reserve the right to include a second Secretariat member or an expert as secretary to the group. The group should also be able to invite a limited number of experts to attend specific meetings on an *ad hoc* basis. It is suggested that the group be appointed to serve until the first meeting of the BFUG following the 2009 Ministerial conference.

Suggested terms of reference for the coordination group will be found in the Appendix.

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

It is suggested that the BFUG in particular:

- (1) consider whether the kinds of action outlined in this document are reasonable, and whether the balance between them is reasonable;

- (2) give its general assent to the action outlined but accepts that the exact number of European and regional events, as well as the precise topics and timing of these, will need to be adjusted in the course of the period covered by the work program in the light of the development of national frameworks and the experience gained;
- (3) consider whether members and consultative members should be encouraged to provide information on related events they organize at their own initiative and, if so, how this information should be provided and shared;
- (4) consider whether a coordination group is needed to oversee the sharing of experience in the development of national qualifications framework;
- (5) as appropriate, consider and adopt the terms of reference for this coordination group, as they appear in Appendix.

APPENDIX

BOLOGNA COORDINATION GROUP FOR QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

DRAFT TERMS OF REFERENCE

Source of terms of reference

Bologna Follow Up Group, pursuant to the London Communiqué, paragraph 2.8.

Period of validity

October 3, 2007 – September 30, 2009²

Purpose

The Bologna Coordination Group for Qualifications Frameworks is established under the authority of the Bologna Follow Up Group to assist and advice the Council of Europe in coordinating the sharing of experience in the development of national qualifications frameworks compatible with the Overarching Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area³.

Tasks

The Bologna Coordination Group for Qualifications Frameworks shall advice the Council of Europe in fulfilling the mandate given to the Council of Europe by Ministers in paragraph 2.8 of the London Communiqué:

We note that some initial progress has been made towards the implementation of national qualifications frameworks, but that much more effort is required. We commit ourselves to fully implementing such national qualifications frameworks, certified against the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA, by 2010. Recognising that this is a challenging task, we ask the Council of Europe to support the sharing of experience in the elaboration of national qualifications frameworks. We emphasise that qualification frameworks should be designed so as to

² The logic of the dates is that the terms of reference will be submitted for adoption to the BFUG at its first meeting after the London conference on October 2 – 3, and that the first meeting of the BFUG following the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve conference (April 28 – 29, 2009, i.e. two weeks earlier than the London conference) could be held by the end of September 2009.

³ The wording of this and the following sections seeks to reflect the provisions of the London Communiqué, in which the task of “supporting the sharing of experience” is given to the Council of Europe, the overall responsibility of the BFUG for overseeing the Bologna Process between Ministerial conferences and the role of the Coordination Group.

encourage greater mobility of students and teachers and improve employability.

In particular, the Coordination Group shall act as a forum for debate on qualifications frameworks and give advice on:

- activities designed to promote the sharing of experience in the development of national qualifications frameworks within the European Higher Education Area or at regional level within the EHEA;
- specific issues relating to the development of national qualifications frameworks, their purposes, relationship to credits, qualifications, learning outcomes and curriculum reform, as well as issues of content, methodology and procedure, as appropriate;
- experts that might assist countries in the development of their national frameworks, in cases where countries request such assistance. In so doing, the Coordination Group shall seek to ensure that experts represent a variety of backgrounds and experience;
- methodology and procedures for the self-certification of completed national frameworks and help identify experts who might participate in self-certification exercises where countries ask for assistance in identifying suitable foreign experts for this purpose;
- the publication of self-certification reports;
- cooperation with the European Commission with a view to ensuring that national qualifications frameworks compatible with the overarching framework for the EHEA are also compatible with the European Qualifications Framework;
- public information designed to promote the elaboration of national qualifications frameworks;
- activities and material designed to ensure compatibility between the overarching EHEA framework and the EQF;
- the relationship between the development of qualifications frameworks and other key policy areas within the Bologna Process, in particular as concerns the recognition of qualifications.

The Coordination Group shall also assist the Bologna Secretariat and the Stocktaking Group in gaining an overview of the state of developments of national qualifications frameworks in time for the 2009 stocktaking exercise.

Reporting

Through the Council of Europe, the Coordination group shall report to the Bologna Follow Up Group and Board as appropriate. It shall submit updated reports on its

activities in time for the meetings of the Bologna Follow Up group to be held in autumn 2008 and early 2009⁴.

Composition

The Bologna Coordination Group for Qualifications Frameworks shall be composed as follows:

1 member representing the Council of Europe (Chair)⁵

1 member representing the European Commission

1 member representing the Bologna working group on qualifications frameworks 2003 – 2007

1 member representing a country that has completed the self certification process

3 - 4⁶ members representing Bologna member states at various stages of the development of their qualifications frameworks (other than those having completed the self certification), with some regard also to geographical representation

2 - 3⁷ members representing consultative members

1 member representing the ENIC and NARIC Networks or the Lisboa Recognition Convention Committee

1 member representing the Bologna Secretariat

The terms of office of the members of the Coordination Group shall be those of the terms of reference of the Group. Should a member of the Coordination Group wish to resign from the group, the Bologna Follow Up Group shall appoint a new member at its earliest opportunity⁸. The BFUG may delegate this appointment to the Bologna Board.

⁴ The logic behind this provision is that this is when there will be significant elements to report, and to ensure that the BFUG has updated information in time for the preparation of the draft Leuven Communiqué.

⁵ In the final version of the terms of reference, the names of members should be specified, see also the provision for replacing members, below.

⁶ The BFUG should decide on one of the suggested alternatives and the decision should be reflected in the final version of the terms of reference.

⁷ The BFUG should decide on one of the suggested alternatives and the decision should be reflected in the final version of the terms of reference.

⁸ The logic behind this provision is that the BFUG should have an opportunity to assess whether the resignation of a member is due to personal circumstances (e.g. a change in the official position of the member) or whether it rather reflects a lack of involvement of the member or consultative member that the person represents. The BFUG will therefore have an opportunity to assess whether the same member or consultative member shall continue to be represented in the group or whether a change is warranted.

The Coordination Group may draw on experts for specific aspects of its work.

Secretariat

The Council of Europe shall provide the Secretariat for the Coordination Group

Meetings and financial provisions

The Coordination Group shall meet at the initiative of the Chair or when five members request a meeting. It shall seek to meet at least two times a year.

The Coordination Group shall in principle make its recommendations by common consent. Where this is not possible, the Chair shall seek to identify recommendations that win the support possible in the group. No recommendation shall be made unless it has the support of at least half of the members of the group. No recommendation shall be made unless at least two thirds of the members of the Group are present and voting

Members and consultative members shall cover the expenses of their own participation in the Coordination Group.