

# **BFUG Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks**

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## **Interim Report of Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks**

**October 2006**

**Part I – Role of the Working Group**

**Part II – Bologna Framework and the European Qualifications Framework**

**Part III – Support for the Development of National Frameworks of Qualifications**

**Part IV – Verification of the Compatibility of National Frameworks to the Bologna Framework –  
Outline of Pilot Verifications and Lessons Learned**

**Part V - Conclusion**

# **BFUG Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks**

## **Part I – Role of the Working Group**

### **Bergen Communiqué**

On 20 May in Bergen Ministers responsible for higher educations within the European Higher Educations Area (EHEA) agreed:

*We adopt the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA, comprising three cycles (including, within national contexts, the possibility of intermediate qualifications), generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges in the first and second cycles.*

*We commit ourselves to elaborating national frameworks for qualifications compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA by 2010, and to having started work on this by 2007.*

*We ask the Follow-up Group to report on the implementation and further development of the overarching framework.*

*We underline the importance of ensuring complementarity between the overarching framework for the EHEA and the proposed broader framework for qualifications for lifelong learning encompassing general education as well as vocational education and training as now being developed within the European Union as well as among participating countries. We ask the European Commission fully to consult all parties to the Bologna Process as work progresses.*

*We charge the Follow-up Group with continuing and widening the stocktaking process ..... and to continue in the fields of the degree system, .....*

*In particular, we shall look for progress in:*

- .....
- *implementation of the national frameworks for qualifications;*

### **The Working Group**

In its meeting in Manchester on 12-13 October BFUG approved the establishment of a working group to consider and report on the implementation and further development of the overarching framework.

Members of the Working Group were BFUG-representatives from the following countries:

1. Denmark (N-Europe), chair (cont.)
2. Netherlands (NW-Europe, subst. Ireland)
3. Russia (NE-Europe, subst. Latvia) (non EU)
4. Hungary (Central Europe, cont.)
5. Spain (SW-Europe, subst. France)
6. Macedonia/FYROM (SE-Europe, new seat) (non EU)
  
7. Chair of the WG on Stocktaking
8. Bologna Presidency (UK-AT-FI-GER)

The Working Group could draw on expertise and commission research, as it feels appropriate.

## **BFUG Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks**

BFUG asked the Working Group to

1. consider what further development of the framework may be required, particularly the linkage between national frameworks and the EHEA-framework; the Working Group may invite member countries to participate in pilot projects of self-certification of national frameworks; it may conduct a survey on how credit ranges and credits are defined in national legislation.
2. support the Working Group on Stocktaking in the stocktaking exercise of implementation of national frameworks.
3. monitor the development of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning with the aim of ensuring complementarity between that framework and the EHEA framework and advise BFUG on the matter.
4. provide assistance to member countries working to introduce national frameworks.

The Working Group has had meetings in November 2005 and in February, September 2006 and will have its final meeting in December 2006.

It has conducted four regional workshops on developing (June and September 2006) and commissioned two pilot projects on verification on the compatibility of National Qualifications Frameworks. The Council of Europe has generously supported the participation of representatives from new member-countries in the workshops.

It has asked the European Commission to bring the question on how credit ranges and credits are defined in national legislation to the ECTS-counsellors.

The Group has submitted progress reports to BFUG and the Board and will submit a final report of its findings to the London Conference through BFUG.

# **BFUG Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks**

## **Part II – Bologna Framework and the European Qualifications Framework**

For time being it seems that two qualifications frameworks processes is going on in Europe: One within the Bologna Process for higher education in the 45 Bologna member-countries and another one proposed by the European Commission for lifelong learning in the EU-member-states. The questions discussed in the Working Group and elsewhere were whether this situation is satisfactory as regards transparency and whether there is complementarity between the two frameworks.

The Bologna frameworks consist of national qualification frameworks for each member-country linked together by an overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA. This was adopted in Bergen in 2005 and at the same time agreed that work on national qualifications frameworks should having started by 2007 to be completed by 2010.

The implementation of the Bologna Framework for Qualifications will thus continue and progress in the development of national qualifications frameworks will be part of the stocktaking exercise.

The European Commission proposal for a recommendation on the establishment of a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning issued in September 2006 is based on a European Commission consultation paper that was discussed intensively in the EU-member states and at a conference in Budapest in February 2006.

It is the over all opinion of the Working Group that the two frameworks can co-exist as they have different purposes and uses a different methodology.

The first reason for that is that the new set of level descriptors are much more simple than the previous ones in the consultation document. It makes them more general compared to the more specific Bologna cycle-descriptor for higher education. The descriptors in the EQF/LLL are not higher education descriptors but generic descriptors that can be used to describe all types of learning.

The second reason is that a reference to the Bologna descriptors is now an integrated part of the EQF/LLL. It is agreed that the levels of learning at the three cycles of the Bologna Framework are broadly comparable with the relevant level of the EQF/LLL: The EQF-descriptors for the upper levels are general for all kinds of qualifications but for HE-qualifications there is a reference to the descriptors used in the Bologna framework.

## BFUG Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks

### Part III – Support for the Development of National Frameworks of Qualifications

For the purpose of assisting the Stocktaking Group in monitoring the progress of establishing national qualifications frameworks the Working Group developed the following “step-ladder” from start of work to certification of a national framework.

*Establishing National Qualifications Frameworks for Higher Education in Bologna Member States*  
Steps/stages:

1	Decision to start	Taken by the national body responsible for higher education (minister?)
2	Setting the agenda: The purpose of our NQF	WG-Report nr. 1 (section 2.3)
3	Organising the process	Identifying stakeholders; setting up a committee/WG
4	Design	Profile Level structure Level descriptors (learning outcomes) Credit ranges
5	Consultation	National discussion and acceptance of design by stakeholders
6	Approval	According to national tradition by Minister/Government/legislation
7	Administrative set-up	Division of tasks of implementation between HEI, QAA and other bodies
8	Implementation at institutional/programme level	Reformulation of individual study programmes to learning outcome based approach
9	Inclusion of qualifications in the NQF	Accreditation or similar (cfr. Berlin Communiqué)
10	Self-certification of compatibility with the EHEA framework (Alignment to Bologna cycles etc.)	WG Report nr. 1 Pilot projects

The “step-ladder” also served as a basis for organising the four workshops on national qualifications frameworks that was the main instrument in the Working Group’s attempt to assist member-countries working to introduce national frameworks. The purpose of the workshops was to give the participants possibilities to share experiences and discuss problems and questions concerning frameworks.

The four workshops was located as follows:

30 June in The Hague (for NW-Europe)

4 September in Budapest (for Central and NE-Europe)

11-12 September in Athens (for SE-Europe)

18-19 September in Madrid/Alcala (for SW-Europe)

Ca. 100 persons representing 32 Bologna countries attended the workshops.

# **BFUG Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks**

## **Part IV – Verification of the Compatibility of National Frameworks to the Bologna Framework – Outline of Pilot Verifications and Lessons Learned**

### **Summary of Completion of Work in Scotland and Ireland**

While the exercise is nominally referred to as a pilot one, it is still the completion of the formal process of alignment for both Ireland and Scotland

Both Scotland and Ireland have Frameworks in place already and these are now being aligned. This is not the case for most of the other countries in the Bologna process which will be developing frameworks and aligning them. It is possible that these processes may be undertaken separately but it is also very likely that the processes will be undertaken in a combined way.

For both Scotland and Ireland, there have already been extensive consensus-building exercises in the development of their Frameworks.

Both Scotland and Ireland have already been working together for a number of years. Thus, there has been a process underway for building trust between Scotland and Ireland for a number of years.

### **Lessons learned from Process and Procedures**

There are different processes in place in both Scotland and Ireland. Both processes for verification involve stakeholders in a different way.

The Frameworks themselves are different: the Irish Framework has a statutory basis while the Scottish Framework is not based on a statutory basis.

In both cases there are Frameworks in place for all qualifications, not just higher education qualifications.

Both Ireland and the UK have some international qualifications recognition agreements, for example, with China.

It is important, in aligning Frameworks to the Bologna Framework, that countries with which the country whose Framework is being aligned have qualification recognition agreements be aware of the developments. Furthermore, countries with a tradition of having award holders move to other (perhaps neighbouring) countries may also wish to discuss any alignment process with those countries.

The issue of the engagement of international experts in the process is important. In particular, it is helpful to note the purpose for engaging the international experts in the process in terms of their expertise, credibility and the way in which they add an external dimension. It is considered by both Irish and Scottish representatives that the areas of expertise of the experts across international recognition, international accreditation and international standard setting as well as their having differing experiences is very helpful. It is felt by both countries that the engagement of the international experts in the processes has been very helpful to date.

### **Lessons Learned from Criteria**

There were not any particular issues arising for Ireland and Scotland in relation to the designation of the body with responsibility for the Framework in each country. However, this could be an issue for other countries?

## **BFUG Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks**

The second criterion was considered probably to be the most important. This refers directly to cycle descriptors and does not refer to the associated progression issues which are referred to in the Bologna Process. There is a difference between qualifications per se based on learning outcomes and the linked issue of programmes of higher education. It was noted that in both countries there were not detailed prescriptions on the nature of programmes but rather there may be typically understood arrangements and that these are set out in relation to credit, for example.

A key issue in relating awards to national frameworks in the first instance is one of best-fit and that this also applied to relating national frameworks to international frameworks. Both countries have experience of relating qualifications to national frameworks and there can be a pressure from holders and users of particular qualifications to seek to see them included in their national frameworks at the highest level possible.

The issue of legacy awards (awards that will no longer be made but which are important as there will continue to be many holders of such awards) and the need to include these in national frameworks and to also relate these to the Bologna Framework is important.

There had been a detailed analysis with solid pieces of work undertaken in both countries.

In both countries that are particular issues with the Ordinary Bachelor Degree. These have related but different traditions in both countries. In Scotland this is not an intermediate qualification and it is not generally a stepping stone to the main degree.

In relation to accessing second cycle programmes with the Ordinary Bachelor Degree generally, while it is not typical in either jurisdiction, it is not ruled out and there can be access with some work experience to Masters programmes.

In both countries, the Honours Bachelor Degree provides admission in certain cases to the third cycle.

Both countries have intermediate qualifications and these intermediate qualifications are in place at both the first and second cycles. While some of the intermediate qualifications are in common between the two countries, they are not all the same across the two countries and reflect differences in the systems in the two countries.

It is possible that changes in alignment may be put in place if Frameworks are reviewed at national level and there needs to be a regard to this.

There are typical credit arrangements in terms of award-types and links to learning outcomes put in place for both Frameworks. Indeed, the outcomes approach in both Frameworks avoids the rigidity of determining typical programmes and focusing only on progression routes.

In relation to the third criterion, in Scotland the credit arrangements were in place in advance of the ECTS system and are now compatible with this. The Scottish arrangements also include credit in vocational education and training.

In relation to the fourth criterion, procedures for inclusion of qualifications could mean procedures for the inclusion of individual awards against the types of qualifications in the Framework or indeed the development of new types of qualifications. The criterion refers to the location in the Framework of awards and the validation of programmes linking to these awards.

In relation to criterion 5, quality assurance arrangements may change. This may relate both to the approaches to quality assurance and indeed to the agency structures.

## **BFUG Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks**

In order for there to be absolute clarity about whether all of the arrangements in the Bologna Process have been implemented in quality assurance, there need to have been reviews in place in relation to the European quality standards. It was not appropriate that this be required in the verification process and noted that this has indeed been addressed by the working group. The key issue for both countries is that there is a cross-reference between the quality assurance systems and the Frameworks. Indeed, such a cross-referencing would demonstrate that there is an interdependence between the Frameworks and quality assurance at the three relevant levels – the level of the programme, institutional level and national level.

### **Recommendations on Clarification of Procedures and Criteria**

Following the completion of the pilot projects and the analysis of these, the working group will need to consider whether there is a need to add to or clarify the existing procedures and criteria for use by other countries in verifying the alignment of their National Frameworks with the Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA.

### **Part V - Conclusion**

For the Working Group the two principal questions to be answered in the final report are:

Are the guidelines for the development of national frameworks in the first report of the working group sufficient?

How can countries be supported in the development of national frameworks after 2007?

Are the criteria and procedure for alignment sufficient enough to secure trust and make more efficient the recognition of foreign qualifications within EHEA.

# **BFUG Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks**

## **Annexes (in the final report)**

1. Terms of reference of the Working Group
2. Members of the Working Group
3. Programmes and participation lists from the workshops
4. Reports of pilots projects