

THE IMPACT OF EMERGING QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS ON RECOGNITION

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INTRODUCTION

The Bologna Process is now gathering pace and a number of initiatives associated with it are already transforming higher education in the Europe region. This process is about to be augmented with some further innovations that potentially will have profound effects on recognition. The developments in question are the creation of national qualifications frameworks and the overarching European qualifications framework. The Berlin Communiqué included the following:

‘Ministers underline the importance of consolidating the progress made, and of improving understanding and acceptance of the new qualifications through reinforcing dialogue within institutions and between institutions and employers.

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.’

These simple statements place an emphasis on ‘qualifications’, ‘qualifications frameworks’ and an ‘overarching framework of qualifications’ for the European Higher Education Area. In addition they highlight ‘workload’, ‘level’, ‘learning outcomes’ and ‘profile’. Collectively, the introduction of these new elements will impact on recognition, recognition tools, recognition processes and the transparency of national higher education systems.

It is important to explore the nature of this impact but this is difficult. Any attempt to prophesy the future needs to be treated with some caution. In particular, the outcomes of the forthcoming Copenhagen Seminar 13-14th January 2005, *The Framework for Qualifications and the European Higher Education Area*, will influence the Bergen Communiqué. However, it is not yet clear what will be the reactions of various stakeholders to the proposals made in the background report for the seminar. The final version of the background report, produced under a Bologna-Follow-Up-Group (BFUG) working party will be available shortly.

It is already clear that the working group report will explore *inter alia*: good practice in the development of ‘new style’ national qualifications frameworks; the relationship between national qualifications frameworks and the overarching European framework of qualifications; and the features, impact and potential ‘added value’ of such structures. ‘New style’ output- focused national frameworks that employ ‘*workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile*’ plus credits - are very different to traditional input-focused approaches used to place and explain qualifications.

Furthermore, frameworks provide more explicit and precise information in their qualifications descriptors and their reference to other external reference points. It is these features that will impact most on the recognition field.

It is not coincidence that in the recognition area there is a matching trend towards emphasising the fair recognition of qualifications based on what a person knows and is able to do rather than on the formal procedures that have led to qualifications. Furthermore, in an effort to promote more accurate judgements of qualifications, it is apparent that detailed comparisons of the formal aspects of individual qualifications (curriculum content, status of institution, recommended textbooks, duration/contact hours, access requirements, etc.) give a less accurate basis for evaluation. It is more helpful when qualifications are situated within national qualifications frameworks that are characterised by a clear description of learning outcomes, supplemented by a consideration of level, workload and profile. A strong advantage of qualifications frameworks is that they can, for the purposes of comparison, provide a more accurate basis and explanation of qualifications.

The adoption and encouragement of national qualifications frameworks by Ministers in Berlin represents a radical move to ensure that an effective and practical European Higher Education Area is created. It certainly represents a challenge to all those involved in recognition. Improved recognition can be seen as one of the preconditions for establishing an effective European Higher Education Area.

NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS AND THE OVERARCHING FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

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. Part of this process is a pronounced tendency to create more explicit systems that map and explain the purpose and relationship between different qualifications.

‘New style’ national frameworks of qualifications employ learning outcomes, levels, level indicators and qualification descriptors as explicit reference points. There are various forms of national qualifications frameworks: some include all levels and types of qualifications whilst some separate higher education qualifications from other types of qualifications. Modern national qualification structures invariably involve much more than a simple distinction between two cycles and commonly include a range of qualifications, intermediate awards and levels.

National frameworks of qualifications in higher education can achieve certain things. They can 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. They can 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. They can provide a nationally agreed framework that guides and reflects the agreement of stakeholders. Finally they can provide a context for the design, review, articulation and development of existing and new qualifications. National frameworks of qualifications can also act as drivers of

change and can help to: promote the attainment of qualifications; raise the awareness of citizens and employers in relation to qualifications; support learners and clarify all the educational opportunities available to them; facilitate curriculum change, etc.

It is quite properly a matter of national autonomy and concern what the framework is designed to achieve. It is up to national authorities to decide priorities, the number of levels in any national systems and the content and purpose of their qualifications. Qualifications are owned by national systems. 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.

The overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area would be in reality a framework of frameworks – an articulation mechanism between national frameworks. Any overarching European framework would have to have distinctive objectives over and above those of national frameworks. It should assist in the identification of points of articulation between national frameworks and serve as a point of reference for those developing or reviewing national frameworks of qualification. It would need to express how the qualifications systems of the various states are related to each other, especially where these national systems have themselves been incorporated into formal national frameworks. It would need to offer 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. The framework for qualifications of the EHEA should not replace national frameworks but augment them by providing a series of reference points whereby they can demonstrate their mutual compatibility.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS AND CURRENT RECOGNITION TOOLS AND PRACTICES

International transparency is at the heart of the Bologna Declaration's call for a system of easily readable and comparable degrees. Many other devices, such as the Lisbon Convention, Diploma Supplement, ECTS, NARICs and ENICs have a role to play in this objective. Yet without a simplifying architecture for mutual understanding, such as a framework, it will be difficult to ensure that qualifications can be easily read and compared across borders. Moreover, the relatively rapid success in the introduction of the two-cycle model through much of the European Higher Education Area has in some ways already served to underline that a comparable structure of awards is not in itself sufficient for genuine comparability and transparency. If qualifications are just labelled as 'Bachelor' or 'Master' this provides no common approach to standards or type, indeed it can mask fundamental differences and bring the whole approach into disrepute. This realisation was the basis of 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 European Higher Education Area. A variety of purposes are associated with the international recognition of qualifications including

employment, access to further qualifications, prior exemption from parts of studies, access to continuing education, enhancing mobility, etc. 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 these purposes.

The international mobility of learners 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. 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.

It is clear that qualifications frameworks are being promoted in order to have a beneficial effect on transparency, recognition and mobility. They are likely to have an impact on existing recognition tools and practices. If they do not, the very rationale for their existence is undermined. A useful way to identify their precise potential benefits is to explore them in terms of a number of key questions associated with their use:

1. How will or might 'new style' qualifications frameworks improve recognition?

They can improve recognition by providing a detailed context within which national qualifications exist. Qualifications expressed in terms of learning outcomes can be understood more readily as they show what the learner can do after gaining the award. This clarifies our understanding of other European qualifications and helps in any evaluation process. New style qualifications frameworks also have the benefit of clear external reference points such as levels, generic qualification descriptors, workload and profile. These output-focused tools help place the qualification in a clear national context that aids the internal quality assurance regime. The international use of common approaches (not common curricula) and methodologies to express our qualifications makes national education systems themselves more easily readable and comparable. This helps to build confidence and what has been called 'zones of mutual trust'. Fair recognition should be enhanced.

2. What sort of links exists between credential evaluation, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance and what is their significance?

A direct connection exists between credential evaluation, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance. The development and use of explicit criteria and processes that are open to external scrutiny are a natural corollary of output-focused qualifications frameworks. External reference points form a useful part of any system that is based on autonomous, yet accountable, higher education institutions. Effective and open quality assurance helps to develop a firm basis for mutual trust between different national systems. There is likely to be increasing international interest in the comparability between national systems, their

qualifications and the process and results of their mechanisms to ensure quality. Good credential evaluation is predicated on effective quality assurance processes and instruments. Therefore, the ethos and approach to credential evaluation should reflect the good practice principles embodied in any national approach to qualification frameworks and quality assurance.

3. *What sort of impact will qualifications frameworks have on the work of the ENIC - NARIC networks and on credential evaluators within institutions?*

The NARIC and ENIC networks exist to cooperate and improve academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study. They can be assisted by qualifications frameworks in their provision of authoritative advice and information concerning recognition. They will be able to easily interpret the new systems that share similar methodological assumptions and are linked to the overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area. The main users of ENIC and NARICs are higher education institutions, students and their advisers, parents, teachers and prospective employers. The existence of qualifications frameworks should enhance the quality of their advice and allow the clear explanation of the basis of decisions. This is particularly important for the application of the Council of Europe-UNESCO joint *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European region*, Lisbon 1997 (Lisbon convention). This binds countries that have ratified the convention to: make recognition decisions on the basis of appropriate information on the qualifications for which recognition is sought (Article 111.2); put a duty on institutions to provide relevant information to holders of their qualifications (Article 111.3); demonstrate substantial differences in the case of refusal (Article V1); provide a description of higher education programmes (Article V111.2); put the responsibility to demonstrate that an application does not fulfil the relevant requirements on the body making the assessment (Article 111.2), etc. It is clear that this good practice approach is often not followed by the Lisbon signatories. The use of qualifications frameworks should make it much easier for institutions to comply with all the articles in the convention.

Credential evaluators in higher education institutions should similarly benefit. In particular they are already receiving increasing numbers of Diploma Supplements. These supplements will be able to place qualifications in transparent national qualifications frameworks as well as the overarching European systems. Furthermore, this approach can help take some of the load off the ENIC-NARIC networks and free their resources to deal with specialist recognition issues.

4. *What might be the impact of qualifications frameworks on recognition of specific issues?*

There are a number of recognition questions and issues that arise with the development of the Bologna process. It is useful to explore some of these to see how the advent of qualifications frameworks might impact on them.

Qualifications frameworks will probably have an effect on the end qualifications associated with the Bologna cycles. The development of national 'levels' and European 'cycle' descriptors should ensure that qualifications are in the

appropriate place. Level descriptors guide the curriculum designer and the learner. Qualifications descriptors should also help the correct placing of qualifications within frameworks. The placing of qualifications in frameworks has to be justified in terms of explicit reference points and not on custom and practice. The case of intermediate qualifications may be problematic in that the three broad generic European higher education cycles descriptors (developed from the Dublin descriptors) will provide little guidance. The introduction of a first cycle intermediate 'short-cycle' descriptor may well help but it will be for the appropriate national authorities to place their intermediate awards within their own national frameworks - which can be as complex as they think fit.

A further complication that will inevitably arise is the treatment of qualifications from the non-Bologna world. The assessment of these should be guided by the good practice already developed in Europe and embodied in the Lisbon Convention. Furthermore, the existence of a domestic and Bologna region qualifications framework will provide reference points against which such qualifications can be assessed. A linked concern is the approach taken towards transnational education qualifications. This topic cannot be adequately treated here. It is often regarded as such a problematic area that is best ignored. Transnational (borderless education) education (including corporate, for-profit, not-for-profit, franchises and branch campuses) is a growing phenomenon and the advent of new education providers poses significant challenges to traditional patterns of education and the authorities responsible for them. Many countries continue to display a schizophrenic and negative attitude towards imported education whilst heavily promoting the exportation of their own. Transnational education should never be regarded *per se* as an inherently negative or positive phenomenon - rather it is a 'fact of life' that cannot be 'un-invented' or abolished. It touches many dimensions of the current European educational debate engendered by the Bologna declaration, including matters of recognition, transparency, accreditation, cultural and academic autonomy, convergence and divergence. The competition it represents can sharpen our domestic education provisions and consequently the quality of educational exports, which in turn, can promote our distinctive European cultures worldwide. It can also lead to a dumbing-down of qualifications as competitive forces can reduce standards to the lowest common denominator.

Inaction towards transnational education on the behalf of European providers (exporters), students, regulators, receiving countries (importers), and international organisations would harm the development of the European Higher Education Area. Transnational education certainly raises a number of difficult questions in particular - how should public authorities fairly treat these new forms of education? The creation of qualifications frameworks can help create an effective approach to transnational education. They provide clear reference points against which transnational education programmes can be measured and given recognition within national systems. The 2001 UNESCO/Council of Europe *Code of Good Practice for the Provision of Transnational Education* would be strengthened by the precision qualifications frameworks bring to national qualifications which transnational providers are required to emulate. They can help establish standards and aid the effectiveness of domestic quality assurance

systems, thus rogue educational providers can be identified and the public warned.

Finally, qualifications frameworks can impact on the recognition of qualifications earned through lifelong learning. The impact depends on the policy and structures adopted by individual countries. Some countries are developing integrated qualifications framework that encompass all learning from the cradle to the grave (e.g. the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework – SCQF). Within such systems the recognition of lifelong learning presents fewer problems. In the area of higher education many nations are developing approaches that recognise formal, non-formal and informal learning. Processes for the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) are used to recognise learning wherever it took place and give access or exemption to prospective students on this basis. Qualifications frameworks that employ output-focused tools, particularly learning outcomes, facilitate the recognition of such examples of lifelong learning. The European Commission have just established an expert group to assist them in the creation of a European Union blueprint qualifications framework that would encompass lifelong learning. This would link higher education and Vocational Education and Training (VET). Such a development has obvious implications for EU states and directly links qualifications frameworks and lifelong learning.

THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO RECOGNITION FROM QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

The potential benefits can be summarised as follows. Qualifications frameworks:

- improve the transparency of qualifications, make credential evaluation easier (for HEI 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 APEL 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 Lisbon recognition convention and the code for transitional education providers;
- ease the pressure of work on the ENIC-NARIC network;
- make ECTS based on learning outcomes and levels more effective;
- allow HEIs and credential evaluators to move away from imprecise 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 student learning. Move from input measurements to output/outcome measurements.

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES:

Despite the optimistic picture presented above, qualifications frameworks will not work as a universal panacea solving all recognition problems. It must be stressed that the way forward is not simple or problem-free. Few countries have ‘new style’ qualifications frameworks and the exact nature of recommendations from the Copenhagen seminar, are difficult to predict. In any case Ministers in Bergen will have the final say.

The Bologna Process will lead to greater mobility and more recognition problems. There are unresolved issues associated with the status of different length Bachelor and Master qualification. ECTS has a major role to play in national and European qualification frameworks but it must be linked to levels and module and courses would need to be expressed in terms of learning outcomes. This is generally not the case at the moment.

The creation and acceptance of qualifications frameworks and the overarching framework for the European Higher Education Area cannot be achieved in a short time scale as both need the acceptance and active involvement of national and European stakeholders. Furthermore, the whole edifice depends on the creation and acceptance of effective national quality assurance arrangements buttressed by autonomous higher education institutions that are accountable and responsible.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:

The introduction of qualifications frameworks represents a challenge and opportunities to improve recognition. In theory, they have the potential to improve the clarity, accuracy and fairness of the recognition process. They can provide reference points against which clear decisions can be made. Increased transparency between national systems can lead to more trust and confidence. However, it will also provide real evidence of major differences in outcomes that may cause 'zones of distrust'. This is not necessarily a negative point as substantial differences between qualifications need to be acknowledged. There are a number of long standing recognition problems that appear to defy resolution, frameworks and their associated methodological tools may help. The application of the Lisbon recognition convention should be made more effective. Qualifications frameworks could help to support a more constructive approach towards transnational education providers.

Recognition will remain an area where decisions are made by autonomous higher education institutions and other appropriate authorities. Qualifications frameworks and the framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area should be welcomed for the illumination they can provide to combat some of the academic prejudice that exists between different higher education institutions and national education systems. Prejudice based on facts and information is preferable to prejudice based on custom and ignorance.

RECOMMENDATION:

An intensive national and international dialogue should be encouraged to share good practice associated with the introduction of qualifications frameworks and their impact on recognition processes and issues.