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QUALIFICATION STRUCTURES IN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Final version

INTRODUCTION

Franz Schubert is reputed often to have asked about people he did not know well: “*Kann er was?*”. In discussing higher education qualifications, we have moved a step further and would tend to invert this basic question: “*Was kann er?*”

Unfortunately, the pun is lost in the English translation, but it may be worth emphasizing the shift from a concern with whether a person knows *anything* to a concern with *what* he knows and can do. It may also be worth underlining that today, we would not restrict ourselves to the masculine personal pronoun.

My task as Rapporteur to this conference on Qualification Structures in European Higher Education could be seen simply as providing a synopsis of our discussions during this day and a half. However, I will not simply push the replay button, and I have my reasons. Firstly, the background report by Professor Stephen Adam is both as comprehensive and as readable as those who know him well have come to expect, and I would not be able to do him justice by attempting to produce an “executive summary”, all the more so as Stephen has provided such a summary himself.

Secondly, the other presentations as well as the discussions have been rich and stand on their own merit, and the reports from the discussion groups give an overview of the main points in these. So, I am also indebted to Seán Ó Foghlú’s presentation on the way ahead; to Julia Gonzalez, Nick Harris and Andrejs Rauhvargers for their introductions on curriculum planning, quality assurance and recognition, respectively; to the panel of “end users”: Bastian Baumann on behalf of the students, Stina Vrang Elias on behalf of the employers, Maria Sticchi Damiani on behalf of the institutions and Peter van der Hijden, speaking for the European Commission; and not least to the rapporteurs of the discussion groups: Maria Sticchi Damiani, Dorthe Kristoffersen and Helle Otte. The latter played a particularly important role in helping me elaborate a set of recommendations that were submitted to and adopted by the participants at the end of the conference. These recommendations are reproduced in a separate document and will be submitted to the Bologna Follow Up Group as well as to the Berlin Higher Education Summit.

Allow me, therefore, to choose a different strategy. Allow me, rather than reproducing extensively from what has been said during this conference, to offer my own reflections on the discussions. It goes without saying that such an approach is as indebted to Stephen Adam’s background report, the other presentations and the discussions as a more traditional approach would have been.

I also hope I can take this more analytical approach without practicing what I have come to call Sir Humphrey’s Theory of Minutes. Those of you familiar with the British TV series *Yes, Minister* and, after Jim Hacker’s principled fight against the Euro-sausage, *Yes, Prime Minister*, may remember the scheming senior civil servant Sir Humphrey lecturing his apprentice Bernard on how to write meeting reports. Minutes, according to Sir Humphrey, are not there to show what *happened* in a meeting, but what *should* have happened.

This, however, is not my intention. Rather, I will attempt to combine an analysis of what has been discussed at this seminar with some thoughts on what needs to be discussed in the time to come.

One additional point may be in order by way of introduction. In the same way as qualifications is used as a generic term covering a whole range of outcomes of higher education programs¹, I would much prefer to use generic terms also when describing qualification structures or frameworks. This point was also strongly made by Maria Sticchi Damiani. Therefore, unless referring to activities organized and named by others, such as the Helsinki seminar on Bachelor degrees, I will refer to first and second tier systems or first tier and second degrees rather than “Bachelor” and “Master’s”. This, incidentally, is in keeping with the principles of the Diploma Supplement, and the reason is that by translating the name of a qualification, one also gives a hint of the recognition of that qualification. A Russian *bakalavr* may well be recognized on the same level as an Irish Bachelor, but that decision is for a competent recognition authority to make and not for a translator.

QUALIFICATION STRUCTURES AND INITIATIVES

The Bologna structure

The København seminar focuses on qualification structures, a topic that is of course at the heart of the Bologna Process. As Director General Jens Peter Jacobsen of the Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation said in his opening remarks: We are here at this seminar to develop the Bologna Process. One of the stated goals of the European Higher Education Area is to establish a qualification structure consisting of a first degree of at least three years’ duration (today, we would probably have said of at least 180 ECTS credits), of a second degree and of a doctoral degree. The Bologna Ministers also explicitly said that the first degree should be relevant to the labor market. Since this is at least an implicit goal of both the second degree and the doctoral degree, we may safely assume that all parts of the “Bologna” degree structure should be relevant to the labor market as well as serve as a basis for further studies (with the exception, of course, of the doctoral degree, which will not lead to a further formal qualification, but which will nonetheless serve as the basis for further development of real competence through research).

That is, however, about as much as the documents of the Bologna Process so far say about the qualification structure, and that is one reason why I believe the København seminar is an important contribution to the elaboration of the European Higher Education Area. We have a skeleton of a Bologna qualification structure, and I believe what we already have has the potential to be helpful because it provides the beginning of a framework within which we can locate higher education qualifications from various European countries. However, like Stephen Adam, who spoke of this framework as something of an empty shell, I also believe that this qualification structure needs to be developed further for the European Higher Education Area to

¹ Cf. Article I.1 of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention, which defines a higher education qualification as “Any degree, diploma or other certificate issued by a competent authority attesting the successful completion of a higher education programme”.

become a reality, and that the main contribution of the København seminar to the Bologna Process will be to launch a debate on how this could be done as well as to make some proposals. Hopefully, some will emerge at the end of this report. To quote the Danish Qualifications Framework: “Locating the degrees in the context of the terms used in the Bologna Declaration only provides limited additional value unless supplemented with a description of the individual degrees”².

In developing a qualification structure for the European Higher Education Area, it will be helpful to take account of developments at various levels in Europe, and Stephen Adam’s report provides an excellent overview of a good number of initiatives and developments.

These come in several categories, and I will list them briefly for reference and recapitulation. The first set concerns international attempts at describing qualifications.

Joint Quality Initiative

The *Joint Quality Initiative* (JQI) is an informal network for quality assurance and the accreditation of first and second tier degrees, and it has elaborated what has come to be known as the Dublin Descriptors as well as the Amsterdam Consensus. The JQI, consisting of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain (specifically represented by Catalunya), Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, has sought to establish generic descriptions for first and second degrees.

Bologna seminars

Two official Bologna seminars, both held in Helsinki in February 2001 and March 2003, respectively, have attempted to describe first and second degrees³. These descriptions include workload expressed in terms of ECTS credits and level, and they underline the need to provide a description of the orientation and profile of the qualification in the accompanying Diploma Supplement. The consideration of second degrees was much helped by a recent EUA study⁴.

A Bologna seminar on recognition issues in the Bologna Process, organized by the Council of Europe and the Portuguese authorities in April 2002 addressed a set of recommendations to various actors in higher education, including to the Berlin Summit to be held in September 2003. In particular, this seminar emphasized the importance of moving toward recognizing qualifications on the basis of learning outcomes and competences rather than on the formal characteristics of the study programs leading to the qualification, such as length of study. The seminar also

² Towards a Danish “Qualifications Framework” for higher education (final report of January 15, 2003), p. 13.

³ The two seminars were referred to as being on Bachelor and Master’s degrees, respectively.

⁴ Andrejs Rauhvargers and Christian Tauch: *Survey on Masters Degrees and Joint Degrees in Europe* (Bruxelles 2002: European University Association).

underlined the role of the ENIC and NARIC Networks⁵ in this respect, recommended that all countries party to the Bologna Process ratify the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention and underlined the importance of providing adequate and relevant information on qualifications.

Another Bologna seminar, focusing on credit transfer and accumulation and organized by the European University Association and the Swiss authorities in October 2002, emphasized the importance of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) as a credit *transfer* system and also its potential as a credit *accumulation* system.

The Tuning Project

The Tuning Project, coordinated by the universities of Deusto and Groningen and financed by the European Commission, has sought to establish learning outcomes at first and second degree level in a number of academic disciplines⁶. A particularly interesting feature of the Tuning Project, presented at the conference by Julia Gonzalez, is that it drew a distinction between generic and subject specific competences. The former include the capacity for analysis and synthesis, the capacity to learn, problem solving, capacity for applying knowledge in practice, concern for quality and information management skills. The Tuning Project is important because it is, to my knowledge, the first attempt to establish learning outcomes on such a wide basis, and also because it shows how difficult this is. However, the inherent difficulty in establishing learning outcomes should be taken as an encouragement to undertake further work, and not as an indication that it may not be worth the effort, because this undertaking is crucial to the definition of a qualification structure as well as to the recognition of the qualifications that emanate from this structure.

Transnational European Evaluation Project

Last, but not least, the Transnational European Evaluation Project (TEEP), which was launched in 2002 and is currently under way and coordinated by the European Network of Quality Assurance (ENQA), seeks to develop a European methodology for the use of common criteria for quality assurance. In this, it builds on initiatives like the Tuning Project and the descriptors for first and second degrees developed by the Joint Quality Initiative.

QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

At national level, some attempts have been made to define qualification frameworks, and Stephen Adam refers extensively to the Danish, Irish, United Kingdom⁷ and Scottish frameworks. It may be worth making the point that all higher education

⁵ <http://www.enic-naric.net>

⁶ Business, education science, geology, history, mathematics; “synergy groups” have been established in physics, chemistry, languages, humanitarian development, law, medicine, mechanical engineering and veterinary science.

⁷ In this context, covering England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

systems have a qualifications framework. What distinguishes the frameworks surveyed for this conference, however, is that they have gone a good step beyond the traditional frameworks in emphasizing not only input factors and formal characteristics but also output factors such as learning outcomes, and that they are explicit about some elements that have traditionally been assumed or understood.

There is perhaps no agreed definition of a qualifications framework, but it is worth bearing in mind what Stephen Adam says in his report:

*A national qualifications framework is simply a systematic description of an education system's qualifications where all learning achievements are measured and related to each other. A European qualifications framework would amount to an agreement about a common structure or architecture within which different national qualifications could be located. It is essential to stress that this should not entail the creation of identical qualifications in terms of delivery, content or approach.*⁸

Stephen Adam goes on to outline some of the possible functions of a qualifications framework, which include:

- make explicit the purposes of qualifications;
- raise the awareness of citizens/employers about qualifications;
- improve access and social inclusion;
- delineate points of access and overlap;
- facilitate recognition and mobility;
- identify alternative routes;
- position qualifications in relation to one another;
- show routes for progression as well as barriers⁹.

Not all qualifications frameworks will fulfill all of these functions, but Stephen Adam's list is still a very useful guide.

The aims stipulated for the Scottish framework are also worth quoting:

“The general aims of the SCQF are to:

- *help people of all ages and circumstances to access appropriate education and training over their lifetime to fulfill their personal, social and economic potential*
- *enable employers, learners and the public in general to understand the full range of Scottish qualifications, how the qualifications relate*

⁸ Stephen Adam: *Qualifications Structures in European Higher Education: To Consider Alternative Approaches for Clarifying the Cycles and Levels in European Higher Education Qualifications*, section 1.2.

⁹ This list is taken from Stephen Adam's Power Point presentation at the seminar.

to each other, and how different types of qualifications can contribute to improving the skills of the workforce.

The SCQF will provide a national vocabulary for describing learning opportunities and make the relationships between qualifications clearer. It will also clarify entry and exit points, and routes for progression within and across education and training sectors and increase the opportunities for credit transfer. In these ways it will assist learners to plan their progress and minimise duplication of learning.¹⁰

Thus, a qualifications framework is concerned with describing each qualification as well as with how the various qualifications interrelate and how students can progress from one qualification to another. Qualifications frameworks, at least the ones covered by Stephen Adam's reports, are not concerned with higher education alone, rather they cover the whole range of qualifications, both theoretically and practically oriented, from beginning level to research qualifications.

The common point of the qualifications frameworks covered by the report is that they seek to define levels in terms of learning outcomes and competencies. As Stephen Adam says about the Irish framework: "The approach is to build from the bottom up in terms of how outcomes should be expressed in awards". The concrete make up of the national qualifications frameworks vary, thus the Irish framework distinguishes between 10 levels and the Scottish 12. The frameworks tend to emphasize operational skills, in the broad sense of what one can do with a given qualification, rather than the attitudes or values the qualifications convey, but it is worth noting that the Danish framework explicitly mentions "democratic competence" as a general goal at all levels and also stipulates "responsibility in relation to own research (research ethics)"¹¹ as a goal for doctoral qualifications.

SOME REFLECTIONS

Clearly, the developments, initiatives and frameworks described by Stephen Adam and discussed at this conference are very valuable, and their importance is not limited to the framework within which they were designed. On this basis, then, I would like to take this opportunity to offer some reflections on where we are and where we might go from here.

A qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area?

The starting point for my reflections is two seemingly contradictory tendencies at work today. On the one hand, there is a tendency to define study programs in more flexible ways, so that students may combine elements and disciplines in ways that suit them, whether out of personal interest, to improve employment opportunities or for

¹⁰ An Introduction to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (September 2001), Executive summary, p. vii

¹¹ Towards a Danish "Qualifications Framework" for higher education (final report of January 15, 2003), pp. 14 and 26, respectively.

other reasons. This is positive in that it allows individuals to tailor make their studies and thus increase their relevance. However, this development also presents a formidable challenge, and this is the other tendency: this individualization of study programs may easily lead to confusion, and confusion may easily lead to lack of recognition of the qualification. Therefore, we have to develop systems that allow us to describe this diverse reality within an understandable framework - in fact, within a clear qualifications framework or structure. What the Danish Qualifications Framework says about the needs of employers for an “academic system that is simple, with as few levels as possible, and coherent, so similarities and differences clearly stand out” is undoubtedly true, and I believe this need is not limited to employers.

Therefore, establishing a transparent qualifications framework or structure should be a high priority for national education authorities, but saying this begs a question that is also raised by Stephen Adam: what is the relationship between national qualifications frameworks and a similar framework for the European Higher Education Area?

Again, allow me to make a point about terminology that is considerably more than a digression from the main line of argument: I prefer to refer to a qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) rather than a “European” framework for at least two reasons. Firstly, the adjective “European” has become imprecise through overuse and is now applied to a variety of geographical and political constellations far short of its real meaning¹², and it is also used as a very imprecise quality label to describe any number of networks, diplomas and products. As one small illustration, it may be recalled that in the 1780s, the quality of Ottoman produced gunpowder had declined so dramatically that gunpowder was imported from abroad. New factories were built to relaunch Ottoman gunpowder production, and the aim was to reach what was commonly referred to as “European standards”¹³, which in this context were neither a law nor an ISO type industry standard, but simply an aspiration for high or at least improved quality.

Secondly, the name given to a qualifications framework also indicates the authority with which this framework has been established. In the case of national education systems, this authority is clear, and it is safe to refer to a Danish, Irish, United Kingdom or Scottish qualifications framework. The authority is less clear at supranational level, but if the European Higher Education Area is to become a reality, some kind of agreement on a qualification structure or framework as well as on its relationship to the frameworks of individual higher education systems is needed. An EHEA reference will therefore hopefully make sense, whereas an imprecise reference to “European” will not, I am afraid.

One could, of course, see the EHEA framework as a synthesis or a lowest common denominator of the frameworks of its constituent higher education systems. However, a more proactive approach would seem preferable. As Jens Peter Jacobsen said, we need to do more than develop some 30 different national frameworks. Even if some “Bologna” countries have established well-conceived national qualifications

¹² See, for example, the European Commission’s Communication on the role of universities in the Europe of knowledge, which defines “Europe as a whole” as the countries of the European Union, “the other Western European countries” and the candidate countries, cf. section 3.2 of the Communication.

¹³ Philip Mansel: *Constantinople - City of the World's Desire 1453 - 1924* (London 1997: Penguin), p. 254.

frameworks of the kind described in Stephen Adam's report, most have not, and this would be an opportunity to outline an EHEA qualifications framework before most countries start elaborating their own. While this work should of course draw on the experience of those that have a qualifications framework, work on an EHEA framework could be very helpful to the majority of countries that have yet to establish their own frameworks. What Julia Gonzalez said about the Tuning Project being an experience of joint learning could hopefully also be applied to the development of a qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area. At the same time, this would provide an opportunity to develop a common understanding of the key concepts and parameters of a qualifications framework that should also serve as a basis for qualifications frameworks of the higher education systems that make up the European Higher Education Area. Peter van der Hijden in his introductory remarks referred to the need to bring together the various national experiences and experiences in different European context, ranging from the Tuning Project and ENQA to the ENIC and NARIC Networks and the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention.

Of course, many issues remain to be addressed, and these include what we should aim at. Nick Harris defined this clearly by asking whether a qualifications framework for the EHEA should aim at information or regulation, and whether it should describe "typical" qualifications or define the absolute minimum standards or threshold. He may well have answered his own question by hinting that an EHEA framework might have to address all of these aspects. Certainly, one should be careful not to be too directive at the level of EHEA, as national authorities in cooperation higher education institutions, students and other stakeholders should have a key role in defining qualifications frameworks for their own systems. The goal should not be to arrive at identical frameworks, and the reasons for this also includes one mentioned specifically by Stephen Adam: qualifications frameworks are also about the ways in which we define and transmit our culture. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine an EHEA framework totally devoid of prescriptive elements. Again, I think of an EHEA framework as an image of Europe: a unique balance of unity and diversity, where considerable variety is found within a recognizable overarching frameworks. Cars, buses and trucks come in many different shapes, sizes and colors, but it helps if they all drive on the same side of the road. If the cars drive on the right, the trucks on the left and the buses in the shade, the system will quickly reveal its limitations.

Workload, level, quality, learning outcomes and profile

Qualifications are generally described in terms of their workload and level, as is indicated by the frequent reference to Bachelor and Master's degrees or, for that matter, to one and two tier higher education systems, as well as to the number of years of study required. Luckily, the latter is now increasingly being replaced by a reference to the number of (ECTS) credits required, so that we are no more likely to speak about a qualification requiring 180 ECTS credits than one requiring three years of study. Level is, of course, one important parameter in describing qualifications, and it is a prominent feature of the frameworks described in Stephen Adam's report. Thus, the Danish framework, at least in its English version, refers to Bachelor, Candidate, Master and PhD levels at higher education level, whereas the Irish and Scottish frameworks outline 10 and 12 levels. Workload is also an important

parameter, and it is particularly interesting to see that some qualifications frameworks combine these two requirements, so that any given qualification is described in terms of both workload and level. To take just one examples, a Scottish Master's degree is described as being of level 11 in the Scottish Qualifications Framework, and it consists of at least 180 SCOTCAT points of which a minimum of 150 should be at level 11.

While level is an indispensable part of the description of a qualification, it is not sufficient. If it were, what the Bologna Declaration has to say about a two-tier system might have been enough to establish an EHEA framework. Whether you were to describe your own qualifications framework or to recognize a qualification from a foreign framework, it would be difficult to do so without referring to quality. This is, in fact, an area in which developments have been quite rapid, in that we have moved from implicit assumptions of quality in education systems that have essentially been state run to explicit provision for quality assurance in more diverse systems. As late as 1997, when the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention was adopted, there was still discussion of whether a formal quality assurance system was necessary or not, but today, the discussion focuses on what such a system should look like.

For good reason, quality assurance is one of the action lines of the Bologna Process. Provision for quality assurance is a part of the public responsibility for the higher education framework¹⁴, which implies that public authorities are responsible for defining and establishing this provision, but they do not have to carry it out themselves. So as to avoid misunderstandings, I would also like to make it clear that I consider quality assurance to be a part of national higher education systems, and that I am not in favor of any kind of European quality assurance agency. However, I believe criteria and procedures for quality assurance should be agreed through a European network. As Nick Harris said, there should be an overarching Code of Good Practice for the management of quality and standards.

As several speakers mentioned, there is an increasing emphasis on learning outcomes or, to put it crudely, on what you can do with a qualification rather than on how it has been earned. This is a challenge, and a project like Tuning has shown both how important this is and how difficult it is. Still, challenges are there to be met and not to be run away from, and defining learning outcomes in such a way that they can be an important factor in describing qualifications frameworks is a challenge to all major stakeholders in higher education in Europe and another reason for them to intensify their dialogue and cooperation.

Thus, we see that workload, level and quality are all given due consideration and that we at least bring up learning outcomes quite frequently in discussion, even if these considerations are not always explicitly placed in the context of a qualification structure or framework. A fifth factor is given far less consideration, and I am referring to the profile of a qualification. There are, of course, limits to what a national qualifications framework – and probably more so for a framework for the

¹⁴ A thorough discussion of the public responsibility for higher education will be found in the proceedings of the Bologna seminar on the Social Dimension of Higher Education, organized by the Greek Ministry of Education in Athenai on February 19 – 20, 2003. The proceedings are under publication.

European Higher Education Area – can say about the profile of qualifications, since these may differ considerably from one academic discipline to another, since some of the requirements may be highly specific to one discipline and since national traditions may also vary. However, the ways in which you can combine credits to give your qualification an appropriate profile is crucial in making sure, to use Nick Harris’ phrase, that a degree is something more than the sum of its component courses.

Nevertheless, there is implicit agreement on some important points. While a first degree may be specified as being of 180 or 240 ECTS credits of the appropriate level, there is also an unstated agreement that there should be some kind of coherence to the qualification. Students who earned 10 credits in history, 10 in each of two foreign languages, 10 in mathematics and so on with no further concentration in any area may have had a taste of higher education, but they would hardly have earned a higher education degree even if the total amount of credits thus earned were to add up to 180 or more. In practice, such an eclectic menu would at least be discouraged by higher education institutions, but it may be useful to give some thought to whether a qualifications framework for the EHEA should not give some indication as to profile and concentration. In particular at first degree level, traditions may vary considerably from one country to another, so that it may be difficult to reach firm agreement, but at the very least, the issue deserves to be explored. At second degree and doctoral degree level, it may be easier to reach agreement, and maybe one should start here.

However, even if agreement on the details may be difficult, it may also be worth pointing out that discussions are likely to focus on the right balance between specialization or concentration on the one hand and a broader orientation on the other, and not on the principle of either. Essentially, three types of courses are all seen as legitimate within a given study program:

- (i) those that contribute directly to the student’s specialization or main area of competence;
- (ii) those that are in other academic areas but that underpin this specialization;
- (iii) those that are in distinct academic areas and do not contribute to or underpin the student’s specialization, but that give his or her qualification an added dimension by broadening the student’s horizon or by providing a basic competence in a second academic area.

Admittedly, these may seem like abstract speculations, so let us take an example, at the risk of falling into some of the many pits such an exercise seems to offer.

A student whose academic specialty is history should probably earn a considerable part of his or her credits from history courses, the level of which should be appropriate to the level of the qualification. However, such a student would most likely also need some knowledge of relevant areas – we may perhaps call these “supporting disciplines”¹⁵. According to the student’s specialization within the quite broad discipline of history, these “supporting disciplines” could be economics,

¹⁵ May I be forgiven for calquing this term on the one my native language, at least in a previous system, used to describe such disciplines: *støttefag* or *redskapsfag*.

statistics, a foreign language or a whole range of other disciplines, and the courses may not necessarily be of the same level as the qualification the student is working toward. A history student at second degree level may well need a basic introduction to statistics, but there should also be a limit on how many introductory courses in “supporting disciplines” may count toward the degree. Finally, the same student may wish to broaden his or her horizon or add a second area of competence by taking a number of credits not related to the relevant specialization within history. That credits outside of a student’s academic specialization are important to his or her overall competence on the labor market was strongly emphasized by Stina Vrang Elias.

The distinction between “supporting disciplines” and non-related credits may sometimes be difficult to draw and may depend on the precise specialization the student chooses, in our case within the field of history. This freedom to choose some credits that do not seem immediately “relevant” from the strict point of view of the main discipline is also important in avoiding that the boundaries of academic disciplines be “fossilized” and to encourage a measure of transdisciplinarity. A student of Latin American history can hardly do without Spanish and Portuguese, while for a student of economic history, Spanish and Portuguese may provide an added qualification and broaden his or her horizon. The example also illustrates the limits of a qualifications framework: it should stipulate the main outlines and principles but it should not attempt to regulate all details.

We have, then, examples of national qualifications frameworks that make explicit stipulations concerning workload and level, that operate within higher education systems with adequate provision for quality assurance and that increasingly seek to define learning outcomes. Could we take this as a model also for an EHEA qualifications framework and add considerations on the profile of qualifications? This will not be easy, but it is a challenge to which I believe we should rise. Expressing this in clear and simple terms will not be less of a challenge. As Stina Vrang Elias said: “Industry needs something much simpler than you have ever imagined”. While those of us in higher education may be forgiven for questioning whether reality can be made quite that simple, or indeed if employers are not in actual fact guided by a slightly more complex view of reality, the injunction to avoid undue complexity is well taken and should be translated into practice.

Stina Vrang Elias’ comment also points to the importance of involving a broad range of stakeholders in the elaboration of qualifications frameworks, whether at national level or for the European Higher Education Area. These include the social partners, and higher education institutions should play a very important role. The same is true of students, and I was amazed that in the very broad range of stakeholders contributing to the Scottish framework, unless I have misread the information, students seem to be absent. I also believe that no national framework should be elaborated without reference to relevant developments elsewhere.

What do we measure?

The national frameworks covered by Stephen Adam’s report are mainly focused on measurable skills and competencies, and this is by no way an unnatural bias, both because what is measurable is more easily described in terms of a framework and

because one of the main purposes of education is to develop and convey skills useful to the labor market. Nevertheless, a qualifications framework based exclusively on such skills and competencies would miss some important dimensions that distinguish education from training and, in a more profound sense, makes human existence worth the effort. It is therefore important to note that the qualifications frameworks surveyed include references to intellectual competencies¹⁶; generic cognitive skills, such as evaluation and critical analysis¹⁷ or critically evaluate new concepts and evidence¹⁸. As already mentioned, the Danish framework is also explicit about developing values and attitudes, even if it assumes that this factor is present to the same degree at all levels of the framework and therefore does not specify or describe the degree of attainment at each level.

Developing qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area could be a welcome opportunity to think more systematically about the purpose of higher education, since the qualification framework should presumably be defined with reference to these objectives. I believe higher education has at least four fundamental objectives:

- (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.

This point was also made by Bastian Baumann, even if his list differed slightly from mine.

Ideally, a qualifications framework should take account of all these elements, even if I realize that developing adequate descriptors will be a tall order. However, I believe the Bologna Process would be well advised to pay greater attention to its vision for higher education, both in terms of a qualifications framework and in the broader discussion leading us toward 2010.

The range of qualifications

All the national frameworks surveyed for the København conference are comprehensive in that they span the full range of qualifications from basic education¹⁹ to doctoral degrees. This is, in my view, highly commendable, and I would encourage other countries to do the same. In his presentation, Seán Ó Foghlú outlined a number of other initiatives that ago in the direction of defining competencies and qualifications in other areas of education, such as the København Declaration for vocational education and training, European lifelong learning policies, EU policies

¹⁶ The Danish framework

¹⁷ The Scottish framework

¹⁸ The UK framework

¹⁹ In the case of the Scottish framework, there is explicit mention of a level describing outcomes for learners with severe and profound learning difficulties.

and Directives on recognition for professional purposes²⁰ and the OECD frameworks of qualifications review. He also emphasized the need for links to schooling.

These initiatives and links are important, and when the time comes to start work on a qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area, they should be taken into consideration as concerns content as well as methodology. For example, the extended use of working groups with clearly defined areas of work used in some of the other context may, as emphasized by both Seán Ó Foghlú and Peter van der Hijden, be a good model for work on an EHEA framework.

The question is, however, whether close structural links to other sectors of education or a comprehensive qualifications framework are a realistic goal for a framework above the national level, at least in the near future. With some regret, I would think, as Nick Harris also said in his presentation, that we would do better to focus on elaborating a qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area that would focus on higher education qualifications, but preferably also including considerations on qualifications giving access to higher education. If we stick to the terms of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention, such a framework would be for “qualifications concerning higher education”.

One specific issue is whether an EHEA framework should include qualifications situated between entry level and the first degree, something akin to the UK Foundation Degree or the Danish Vocational Academy Degree (AK). Strictly speaking, these qualifications are not covered by current Bologna policies, but they are a reality in many systems. Should not the EHEA framework take account of this reality? I believe that if it does not, we will have a weakened and less useful framework.

Another issue, raised by Stephen Adam, concerns the place and role of what in shorthand is called “lifelong learning qualifications”. These will be the topic of a Bologna seminar to be organized by the Czech authorities in Praha on June 5 – 7, so it may be premature to address this issue in detail, but Stephen Adam is right in pointing out that some of these qualifications belong in a framework of higher education qualifications. However, I think we also need to ask whether the shorthand is really correct rather than misleading. The term “lifelong learning qualifications” would seem to indicate that we are talking about a separate set of qualifications for those who come to higher education late in life or through alternative routes, and I am not at all sure that this is the right approach. Rather, I would prefer to think in terms of alternative learning paths that more often than not lead to the same qualifications earned by those following more classical learning paths.

What use for higher education institutions?

Even though the Bologna Process was launched by Ministers responsible for higher education, the European Higher Education Area cannot become a reality without the active contributions of higher education institutions, students and staff, the large

²⁰ Meaning, in general, qualifications giving access to regulated professions, typical examples of which are medicine, dentistry, and architecture.

majority of whom have to identify with the goals for the Area. An important question is therefore what use institutions can make of a national qualifications framework as well as one for the EHEA.

A qualifications framework should guide and be of help to institutions in designing their higher education programs and curricula. Admittedly, a qualifications framework could be seen as a restraint, but only if it is overly detailed and directive. It should lay down certain ground rules to be followed, but its main function should be that of providing guidance and assistance – along with improved acceptance of the study programs outside of the institution. It should also be emphasized that within the overall rules of the qualifications framework, the individual institution will have considerable freedom in the design of its programs.

By stipulating broad requirements as to the workload, level, quality and profile of qualifications, the framework will offer basic guidance that must, however, be implemented at institutional level. Within these basic outlines, a framework will also offer institutions for creative curriculum development and creative ways of complementing competence in a core area with competence in other academic fields that will strengthen students' position on the labor market as well as contribute to their personal development. While a strong competence in a given field will continue to be of paramount importance, academic disciplines are no longer separated by impenetrable walls. Rather, interdisciplinary approaches add new dimensions to academic programs, and the qualifications frameworks must make such approaches possible.

Quality assurance and the qualifications framework

As we have already seen, quality is an important element in the make-up of a qualification. Making provision for quality assurance is increasingly seen as one of the basic responsibilities of public authorities for higher education, and this is an important development in attitudes in European higher education over the past 5 years or so. Public authorities may choose to carry out quality assurance themselves or leave this task to others, but the responsibility for the framework for quality assurance will and should remain with public authorities.

It may also be worth underlining that, in my view, quality assurance is the responsibility of the individual higher education system and thus, in the majority of cases, a national responsibility. There should be European cooperation, and cooperation within the EHEA, as concerns methodology, criteria and procedures, and there should be transparency about the results of the quality assurance exercise, but I am not in favor of a European quality assurance agency, nor even one for the EHEA.

Hence, it is important that quality assurance agencies 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 its quality goals in such a way as to be of relevance to quality assessment.

Recognition

A qualifications framework would be an important contribution to facilitating the recognition of qualifications within the European Higher Education Area. As Bente Kristensen, speaking on behalf of the Danish Rectors' Conference, said in her introductory remarks: a more systematically defined degree system will facilitate recognition. I also very much agree with the point made by Andrejs Rauhvargers underlining that with the Bologna Process, recognition has developed from being a technical issue for specialists to one of the main concerns of higher education policy in Europe. However, it is important not to create expectations about "automatic recognition", as recognition depends on the purpose of the application and as, even in seemingly obvious cases, a minimum of assessment is needed. Recognition, as Andrejs Rauhvargers pointed out, is about assessing a foreign qualification with a view to finding a correct place and path in another country's education or employment system. A qualifications framework for the EHEA will greatly facilitate the evaluation, but the evaluation will still have to be done.

An EHEA framework would allow us to relate the variety of higher education qualifications within the Area to a commonly understood qualifications framework, and this would be a significant step forward. In particular, it should facilitate the most basic form of recognition: that ascribing a level within one's own higher education system to a foreign qualification, and for many purposes, including many kinds of recognition for the labor market, this would be sufficient. For example, in several countries, candidates for employment in the civil service need a higher education degree at either first or second level, but the specialization and profile of the qualification may in many cases not be important. I believe that our goal should be to elaborate an EHEA qualifications framework where any first degree within the Area is recognized as a first degree within any other part of the Area, and the same should of course be true for second degrees and doctoral degrees. Thus, we would have "EHEA degrees", in the sense of easier recognition, if not in the sense of a common education system.

For other purposes, however, recognition is somewhat more complex and must take account of factors other than level, e.g. profile. Even these more complex cases, however, would be much helped by an EHEA framework, and they should otherwise follow the provisions of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention, which all states party to the Bologna Process should be invited to ratify as soon as possible. I am, incidentally, pleased to note that our host country, Denmark, deposited its instrument of ratification on March 20, 2003²¹. The ENIC and NARIC Networks should be invited to contribute to a debate on a qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area as well as give consideration to how such a framework could simplify the recognition of qualifications within the framework.

²¹ An updated overview of ratifications and signatures may be found at <http://conventions.coe.int>, search for ETS 165.

However, as was emphasized by Bastian Baumann as well as by several participants in the debates, an overarching qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area should not only facilitate recognition within the EHEA; it should also facilitate the process of recognition of qualifications emanating from higher education systems that are a part of the Area and other parts of the world, and *vice versa*. Therefore, a qualifications framework for the EHEA is also important for what is commonly referred to as the external dimension of Bologna.

Recognition is also much helped by what we have come to refer to as transparency instruments, above all the Diploma Supplement and the European Credit Transfer System. These instruments describe a qualification in terms of the system within which it is issued. National qualifications framework will be valuable elements in describing qualifications, but an EHEA framework would be an even more important guide in that we would then be able to relate all qualifications issued within any system of the European Higher Education Area to a commonly understood framework. When we will have progressed on the development of an EHEA framework, 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.

Mobility

Increased academic mobility both within the European Higher Education Area and between the Area and the rest of the world is another key goal of the Bologna Process, and an EHEA qualifications framework would be an important contribution to this goal.

So far, I have not drawn any clear distinction between the terms framework and structure, and I am not aware that any meaningful distinction actually exists. Reverting to the concept of structure does, however, allow me to make what I think is a valid point. Essentially, structures come in two varieties: those that are closed and would tend to lock people in and those that are open and help people move. An EHEA qualifications framework must be an open structure that helps mobility - it must be a bridge and not a fortress. A qualifications framework should be an essential part of the infrastructure of the European Higher Education Area and help students and graduates move between its constituent systems.

Therefore, qualifications frameworks have to be constructed in such a way that some of the elements of the construction can be foreign made and still be immediately usable in the structure. This is a principle of major organized exchange programs such as ERASMUS, NORDPLUS or CEEPUS, but we also know that there are a number of problems with the recognition of study periods taken abroad.

Another example is joint degrees²², which is a potentially powerful instrument in encouraging academic mobility, but which also suffer from recognition problems, to the extent that we are now preparing a draft Recommendation on the recognition of

²² See Andrejs Rauhvargers' article in Andrejs Rauhvargers and Christian Tauch: *Survey on Masters Degrees and Joint Degrees in Europe* (Bruxelles 2002: European University Association).

joint degrees to be submitted to the Lisboa Recognition Convention Committee. Since qualifications frameworks lay down the ground rules for how qualifications may be made up, it is worth asking whether they should not explicitly allow for joint degrees or 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.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I admit that some of the preceding paragraphs have been complex and that they may have tried to express in too compressed a form what I consider as important considerations in the construction of the European Higher Education Area. The reader will therefore be forgiven for letting escape a sigh of relief when seeing the subtitle of this final part of the report.

I have sought to outline some key elements and proposals for further action, and these are admittedly relatively ambitious. Much remains to be done, and much remains unclear. Even the vision for the European Higher Education Area to be established in 2010 is not completely clear. Maybe we can take comfort in Seán Ó Foghlú's comparison with the Peace Process of Northern Ireland, where some lack of clarity was necessary to bring all concerned parties on board, and where the initial years of the Peace Process relied on space for the different sides to have their own interpretation. However, ultimately, these interpretations must to a large extent converge.

The idea of setting up a European Higher Education Area in little more than a decade is in itself an ambitious undertaking and cannot be realized without ambitious proposals. To those who worry that we may be describing a Utopia, I would be tempted to borrow my answer from the Spanish philosopher Fernando Savater: in that case, there is little reason to worry. The dangerous Utopias are not those that remain Utopia, but those that may actually materialize²³. Granted, Savater is describing 1984 and the like, but the point may be worth keeping in mind even for a less dramatic field such as higher education, all the more so as, even if the damage caused by a bad education may not be immediate, it may be devastating.

In my view, the answer has to be that the European Higher Education Area is not Utopia, but reality in the making, and it depends on our clarifying and agreeing on concepts and priorities in a range of higher education policy areas. If we want the Bologna Process to end up in a European Higher Education Area by 2010, we have to be more explicit about its goals as well as about its structure, and an EHEA qualifications framework will be an important contribution to in this sense. It is worth bearing in mind Peter van der Hijden's two conditions for a qualifications framework to be useful:

- (i) it must in fact be what it claims to be: a framework – nothing less, but also nothing more;
- (ii) it must be well known and accepted.

²³ Fernando Savater: *El contenido de la felicidad* (Madrid 2002: Aguilar), pp. 50 – 53.

I would go as far as to say that an overarching qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area is a *conditio sine qua non* to the setting up of a European Higher Education Area that is broad in terms of geography and firm in terms of the implementation of higher education policies, that addresses the whole range of purposes of higher education, that is useful to the labor market, society in a broader sense and the individual, and that ultimately furthers education as defined by Ambrose Bierce:

Education, n. That which discloses to the wise and disguises from the foolish their lack of understanding²⁴.

²⁴ Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*