

# **Aligning National against European Qualification Frameworks: The Principles of Self-Certification**

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## **FINAL REPORT**

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## Introduction

Higher education systems have undergone massive structural changes in the last decade. They have been driven by common needs in most European countries. Lots of efforts were put into degree structures. After 2000 a discussion started among the countries participating in the Bologna Process on how to include the emerging structured higher education programmes in a framework and to make them transparent as well as understandable in the countries of the future European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The concrete impetus was given in the Berlin Communiqué (2003). *“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..... First and second cycle degrees should have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs. First cycle degrees should give access, in the sense of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, to second cycle programmes. Second cycle degrees should give access to doctoral studies. Ministers invite the Follow-up Group to explore whether and how shorter higher education may be linked to the first cycle of a qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area.”*

The work resulted in the overarching Framework for Qualifications in the EHEA (QF-EHEA) adopted at the Conference of European Ministers responsible for higher education in Bergen, 19-20 May 2005.

*“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.”* (Bergen Communiqué, 2005)

Between the two ministerial conferences, in the period 2005-2007, the work continued and in the London Communiqué (2007) the ministers reaffirmed their efforts and took them a step further: *“Qualification frameworks are important instruments in achieving comparability and transparency within the EHEA and facilitating the movement of learners within, as well as between, higher education systems. They should also help HEIs to develop modules and study programmes based on learning outcomes and credits, and improve the recognition of qualifications as well as all forms of prior learning..... We note that some initial progress has been made towards the implementation of national qualifications frameworks, but that much more effort is required. We commit ourselves to fully implementing such national qualifications frameworks, certified against the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA, by 2010. Recognising that this is a challenging task, we ask the Council of Europe to support the sharing of experience in the elaboration of national qualifications frameworks. We emphasise that qualification frameworks should be designed so as to encourage greater mobility of students and teachers and improve employability.”*

Since 2005, almost independently of the developments of QF-EHEA under the Bologna Process, the European Commission started work on the European Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF). The proposal for EQF was launched by the European

Commission in September 2006. The recommendation on the European Qualification Framework for lifelong learning was formally adopted by the European Parliament and the Council on 23 April 2008.

Thus the 27 EU countries now have two overarching European qualification frameworks, which are compatible but not identical. The compatibility of existing frameworks at European level was underlined by the Ministers gathered at the Bologna Conference in London: *“We are satisfied that national qualifications frameworks compatible with the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA will also be compatible with the proposal from the European Commission on a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning.....”* (London Communiqué, 2007). Having said this, the Ministers sent a clear signal that at national level one framework for qualifications should be developed which is compatible with both frameworks at European level.

The Tbilisi seminar concentrated on the QF-EHEA, i.e. the background and challenges facing countries establishing national frameworks and starting the self-certification process. Later the discussion concentrated on the challenges of self-certification in the EHEA context and the representative of the European Commission presented the referencing of national qualifications against the EQF. There were more than 100 participants from more than 20 different countries.

The first plenary was devoted to the development of national qualification frameworks, the case studies of Georgia and Ireland, and the common framework of the Netherlands and the Flemish Community of Belgium as well as the Austrian model were introduced. In the afternoon the discussion groups provided a good opportunity for participants to exchange experience and to react to what had been presented in the plenary session. The emphasis of the group discussions were put on the exchange of national experiences and concentrated on what worked under which circumstances.

The discussion continued on the Friday morning. This discussion was intended to help to identify how the Bologna Process could help with self-certification. The participants came from a range of different backgrounds. Some already participated in a self-certification exercise; others were planning the exercise, while some had only recently started working on their national qualifications frameworks. For most participants the self-certification was a new issue and something for the future. The groups sought to identify a set of recommendations based on both discussions.

**The aim of this report is to analyse the issues raised, try to bring the various ideas together and, on the basis of the presentations and the discussions to identify some of the issues to be taken forward for further consideration in the coming years and, in particular, beyond 2010.** Everybody who is interested can find the presentations, papers, background material, conclusions by the general *rapporteur* and the Recommendations presented at the end of the seminar on the official Bologna web site<sup>1</sup>, under the headline of this seminar<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/BolognaSeminars/>

<sup>2</sup> Direct link <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/BolognaSeminars/Tbilisi2008.htm>

## I. The Overarching Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area

The framework comprises three cycles, including, within national contexts, the possibility of intermediate qualifications, generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences (the so-called Dublin Descriptors), and credit ranges in the first and second cycles. Ministers committed themselves to elaborating national frameworks for qualifications compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA by 2010. Two years later in London (18 May 2007) Ministers committed themselves to fully implementing national qualification frameworks by 2010, including the self-certification process.

The framework for qualifications for the EHEA is supposed to

1. Bring more transparency into the EHEA. This is why the already existing transparency devices (the ECTS credits and the Diploma Supplement) have a role to play in the QF-EHEA. However, the common procedures for recognition across borders have to be simplified. The qualification<sup>3</sup> gained at any higher education institution in EHEA has to be understandable. This would be much more difficult without a harmonised architecture of degree programmes (3-cycle programmes) and without the system based on frameworks for qualifications. This methodology, however, can function successfully only if used in common agreement and in a consistent way by all Bologna countries.
2. Such a system should make recognition of qualifications easier. Recognition will be based on a common understanding of learning outcomes and competencies which the students obtain. In this way the outcome methodology would ensure recognition for further study purposes (academic recognition) as well as the recognition for employment purposes (the so-called professional recognition, whether *de facto* (for most kinds of employment) or *de jure* (for regulated professions)).
3. More transparency in foreign qualifications and their increased readability could make student mobility easier. Consequently it can contribute to more competitiveness of the qualification holder on the labour market – domestic as well as international.
4. So-called “*joint degree*” programmes (i.e. programmes prepared in co-operation between several higher education institutions from several countries based on common curricula) have become an important new element in student mobility in EHEA. Similarly “*double degree*” programmes can be prepared in co-operation between two institutions from two different countries. In the European context joint/double degrees still face many obstacles during preparatory work as well when recognition of qualifications is sought by graduates. The obstacles are mainly legal, but they are also based on a lack of transparency and knowledge about the foreign programmes. Also in this case it is supposed that the national qualifications frameworks together with the QF-EHEA will contribute to making the recognition procedure easier/smooth.

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<sup>3</sup> According to the CoE/UNESCO Convention No. 165: Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region, Lisbon 1997 (so called Lisbon Recognition Convention) the higher education qualification means any degree, diploma or other certificate issued by a competent authority attesting the successful completion of a higher education programme.

5. In the previous period the higher education institutions have normally concentrated their efforts on fresh secondary school graduates, nowadays they have to respond to the requirements of mature applicants, mainly people already in employment. They look for supplementary qualifications and/or a widening of their qualifications. The former are usually called "*second chance students*"; the latter "*continuing education students/participants*". Compared to school leavers these groups require different conditions; having totally different aspirations, expectations, and abilities. In reality these aspects have not been developed to any degree in most European countries so far. The challenge for the future lies along *flexible learning paths*. They should be based on designs for degree programmes and/or courses or modules, methodologies, and means of delivery which could make higher education accessible to mature learners. Not less important is the issue of how to solve the problem of recognition of prior learning (informal and non-formal) for study as well professional purposes. The methodology and qualification frameworks based on *learning outcomes* – national as well as European - can contribute to making recognition of prior learning possible nationally as well in EHEA.

## II. European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LLL)

The core of the framework consists of 8 qualification levels described through learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competence). EU Member States have been invited to relate their national qualification levels to the references established by the EQF-LLL. Following the Recommendation adopted by the European Parliament and the Council, a process of implementation has been started in 2008. EQF-LLL relates to all education and training awards in Europe thus including also those covered by the QF-EHEA. The countries that decide to go ahead with the EQF-LLL were asked to do this in two stages. The first stage – referring national qualification levels to the EQF-LLL – should be completed by 2010. The second – introducing a reference to the EQF-LLL in all new certificates – should be completed by 2012.

Thus at higher education level it was necessary to align the two qualification frameworks at European level. Both frameworks have their own descriptors, and they are not identical, however, to a large extent compatible. The relationship between the two frameworks at European level could be exemplified by the following table.

EQF Level	Cycle of QF-EHEA
1	-
2	-
3	-
4	
5	<b>First cycle</b> <i>„Short cycle/Intermediate qualification“ within the first cycle (in national frameworks)</i> 120 ECTS
6	<b>First cycle</b> 180-240 ECTS
7	<b>Second cycle</b> 60-180 ECTS usually 90 – 120 ECTS, of which at least 60 ECTS

	credits should be at second cycle level
8	<b>Third cycle</b> 3-4 standard years

The EQF level 5 is linked to the Dublin descriptor for Short Cycle Qualification/ Intermediate Qualification according to the Bergen Communiqué<sup>4</sup>. As stated above, the Ministers agreed in London in May 2007 that at national level one framework for qualifications should be developed and should be compatible to both frameworks at European level.

### III. National Framework of Qualifications for Higher Education

The countries identified two basic categories of reasons to establish national qualifications frameworks. It is very clear that using all the advantages which the European "meta frameworks" offer will be possible only if there are national frameworks for qualifications. The first package of reasons why national frameworks are useful and needed was defined mainly by the international impact. The QF-EHEA is supposed to bring more transparency to European higher education but only if it is complemented with national frameworks and the relation between the national and European levels have been clearly defined, described and validated in a reliable, internationally recognised way. The success and acceptance depend on trust and confidence among all Bologna countries (EU countries in the case of the EQF-LLL) as well as all stakeholders. For this reason the national framework for qualifications has to fulfil a number of criteria and each of the participating countries has to seek verification of the compatibility of its national framework for qualifications with the overarching QF-EHEA. The participants identified the following main benefits: easier recognition, removing obstacles to mobility of students, minimising the lack of knowledge about partner higher education systems and qualifications awarded. Further, they agreed that the credibility of national frameworks will grow if they are connected to a national system of quality assurance. And if this is the case in all countries and the systems are based on the European Standards and Guidelines the overall quality of EHEA should be improved.

In addition to the above mentioned advantages in terms of international comparison and mobility, the creation of national frameworks for qualifications can influence in a positive way the national educational systems in general and the tertiary/higher education sector in particular. This was also clearly stated in the presentations.

- The national framework for qualifications will make existing qualifications easily understandable for students, parents, employers, and academic staff and will clearly define differences between particular levels in the national system.
- It allows for more levels than 3 QF-EHEA cycles but the levels have to be clearly linked to the European ones
- It describes the interrelation between qualifications that exist in any given country and contribute to greater transferability (permeability) in the system.
- Support of lifelong learning - clearly defined learning outcomes of degree programmes as well as their components (modules) will open new possibilities for recognition of

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<sup>4</sup> "We adopt the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA, comprising three cycles (including, within national contexts, the possibility of intermediate qualifications), ....." (Bergen Communiqué, 20 May 2005)

prior learning and, thus, “flexible learning” paths can be established leading to generally accepted, credible qualifications.

- In general study offers can be better diversified as it will be clear/transparent who is doing what.
- The relationship between degree programmes and professions can be better highlighted.
- In EHEA the methodology based on learning outcomes and ECTS can also help evaluations of how successfully the restructalisation of studies in two cycles has been realised. But also how **effectively** the restructalisation was done. Are there not similar learning outcomes in different degree programmes? Could the modular structure be better used? And there are probably many other questions. Involvement of stakeholders (mainly employers and alumni) can help to identify how the programmes serve labour market needs. All these aspects can point towards both innovations of the existing degree programmes as well as more appropriately designing new ones. In parallel improvements to the methodology of quality assessment of degree programmes (modules) could be achieved. Thus this methodology can assist higher education institutions in planning education processes and supporting quality assurance systems as well as quality enhancement (internal as well as external).

During the discussion the question of how many layers of descriptors we would want in national qualifications frameworks appeared. Do we need something in between the national descriptors and learning outcomes of degree programmes (modules)? The national descriptors obviously have to be very general as they should be able to accommodate specificities in all disciplines. Their main task is to describe differences between different levels of qualifications and link the national system to the EHEA. The learning outcomes of degree programmes and their modules have to be elaborated by higher education institutions within a framework of national descriptors. It is strongly recommended to work together with all stakeholders, in particular employers, quality assurance experts and students. Nevertheless there are numerous and well mapped initiatives at European level, carried out by professional associations (e.g. in chemistry, in engineering, in veterinary sciences, in arts and in many other disciplines), there are projects carried out by the higher education institutions themselves (the best known is the “Tuning” project<sup>5</sup>), there are EU directives on regulated professions, etc. Should these initiatives remain outside the system of qualification frameworks or should they be somehow included, e.g. if the sectoral approach is developed at national level, thus assisting the institutions in outlining more limited frameworks within which they can define the profiles of their graduates as well as learning outcomes? The participants were slightly in favour of the latter approach.

In several countries it was obvious that there are still relations and possible synergies are still lacking between the higher education and vocational sectors. A dialogue between the two sectors has been recommended since the very beginning together with collaboration between groups of educators from both sectors and employers and other stakeholders.

It is not enough, however, to include only the list of qualifications. It is equally important to describe admission demands and qualifications required as well as progression requirements including different possibilities of how to move through the system.

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<sup>5</sup> Tuning Educational Structures in Europe <http://tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/>



The existing transparency instruments are an organic part of the national qualification frameworks. One of the criteria for self-certification (see Appendix 2) stresses that the national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes, however, it also continues to state that the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS compatible credits. In a similar way the importance of Diploma Supplement was highlighted. The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, should be referenced in all Diploma Supplements as well as the completion of the self-certification process. The Diploma Supplement is also the place where clear links between national frameworks and the European framework should be described.

Next to all the expected positives a clear warning was presented – do not overestimate the possibilities of qualifications frameworks and do not expect too much. They are instruments and what is decisive is whether we know which system of higher (tertiary) education we want to create and how the European and national ones could talk together.

#### IV. National frameworks and QF-EHEA

National framework	QF-EHEA
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• closest to the operational reality; it allows for descriptions of all specificities within the national system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provides the broad structure within which national qualification frameworks will be developed and allows diversity within these limits</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• owned by the national system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• facilitates movement between systems</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ultimately determines which qualifications learners will earn</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ensures compatibility among different national frameworks for qualifications – serves as a “translation tool”</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• describes the qualifications within a given education system and how they interlink</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• presents a common face of “Bologna/EHEA qualifications” to the rest of the world</li> </ul>

The table above shows how the national frameworks for qualifications and QF-EHEA create the system. National frameworks for qualifications are the responsibility of competent national authorities. They allow for descriptions of all specificities of particular national systems and are owned by the national systems. It is very important that in any given national qualifications framework all academic awards (diplomas, certificates) are granted by higher education institutions or other institutions which have degree awarding competence. It is also necessary that the admission and progression requirements are described as well as possible vertical paths through national systems. To improve the understanding of the systems it is definitely an advantage to have next to the national framework itself also contextual information which could include a description of the full higher education system, the organisation of quality assurance, the systems of credits established if they are different from ECTS and their compatibility with ECTS, etc.

The QF-EHEA provides the “outer” limits within which the diversity should be accommodated and offers a common methodology which allows that the QF-EHEA can serve as a translation tool. A national framework for qualifications allows for diversity; however this diversity has to be described in an internationally understandable way using the commonly developed and understood methodology, and all national qualifications at all levels must be linked to the levels of the QF-EHEA. In their discussion the participants hesitated to say if it could be possible to transmit/ translate the relatively rich language of a national framework for qualifications of country X into much more ‘lean’ European one. And what happens if the translation continues from the “European qualifications framework language” into the again much richer national qualification framework language of country Y?

How this will work in the future is very difficult to judge now. In any case it will depend on how we succeed in the 46 countries of the Bologna Process, with so many different cultures and in spite of harmonised architecture with differentiated qualification systems, in implementing the commonly agreed methodology. How consistent the countries themselves will be and how honestly they will implement their national qualification frameworks as well as elaborate the national self-certification report. A well elaborated report could be an extremely useful transparency instrument and, as one of the presentations put it, “*the visiting card to the EHEA*”.

In Europe, as described above, there are two frameworks for qualifications – QF-EHEA and EQF-LLL. However, it is crucial to fulfil the decision of the “Bologna” Ministers. That at the higher education (tertiary) level the national frameworks for qualifications are designed in a way that they are coherent not only with the chosen framework but automatically with the second one as well.

## **V. Verification**

The strengths and attractiveness of European higher education lie in the cultural richness and diversity of the participating countries, as well as in the programme and institutional diversity within EHEA. This is an advantage for students in Europe and helps make the EHEA competitive with other parts of the world and also attractive to them. However, if the development is not coordinated, work on transparency and readability of the EHEA is underestimated, Europe will not continue to be attractive to European students and even less to those from other continents. In spite of the fact that the majority of EHEA countries have ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention<sup>6</sup>, recognition still remains one of the major challenges in EHEA<sup>7</sup>. Without fair recognition we cannot achieve smoother mobility. Students cannot expect that recognition gained in one country can be transferred to other EHEA countries. In this respect the QF-EHEA (EQF) should serve as the translation tool, as described above. To give credibility to the self-certification process it is not enough that a country carries out the process itself without using a commonly agreed methodology, with clearly defined steps and criteria, and with international external examiners involved in the verification process. The verification of national frameworks for qualifications is a challenge for each of the national higher education systems. The procedures outlined give credibility to systems and thereby also improve recognition of qualifications for academic as well as professional purposes. The participation of international experts is also a good opportunity for

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<sup>6</sup> CoE/UNESCO Convention No. 165: Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region, Lisbon 1997

<sup>7</sup> See the Report to the Bologna Follow up Group on the analysis of the 2007 National action plans for recognition

national authorities to be confronted with difficult and possibly also unpleasant questions which should be asked anyway, but become part of a fruitful exercise within a system of trust.

The discussion in the conference working groups clearly underlined the necessity of coordination at European level. The participants called for an agreed pool of experts and stressed that it is crucial that they share the same criteria and procedures. And, of course, it is important that self-certification reports are published and easily accessible for all stakeholders in EHEA and beyond.

EU Member States that will decide on the implementation of EQF should undergo the **referencing of national qualifications levels to the EQF** as agreed recently.<sup>8</sup> If we look at both sets of procedures and criteria we can see again lots of compatibility. The table in Appendix 4 shows how both frameworks could “talk to each other”.

The procedure can equally serve the students and employers. For the higher education institutions it is important that the national framework, and any alignment to the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements where also the completion of the self-certification process should be noted. The stakeholders will, however, use this tool only if they trust and understand it and if the information is well known. That is why it is so important that there are clear links to quality assurance systems and that the information is provided to the ENIC and NARIC centres. Stakeholders (higher education institutions, students, accreditation and quality assurance bodies, employers and last, but not least, governments) have to be involved in the creation of the national framework for qualifications, as well as in the self-certification process, to feel responsibility and ownership and to understand the role of the national frameworks for qualifications for the development of EHEA.

The self-certification process includes a set of criteria and procedures for verification for compatibility of the national framework with the QF-EHEA. The experiences of countries in the Bologna Process differ significantly. Some have already successfully finished the self-certification (Scotland and Ireland), some are very well advanced and about to finalise their process (U.K. – the framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland). Other countries and education systems have started preparations (the Netherlands and the Flemish Community of Belgium), some are only planning the exercise (Austria), and for others again it is a completely new issue. The experience gained so far from the Scottish and Irish reports has proved that the criteria to be met in the self-certification process have to be taken into consideration from the early stage of the development of national frameworks for qualifications. The creation of national frameworks for qualifications was defined in 10 steps developed by the Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks in 2003-2005 and 2005-2007; see the extract from their Reports from 2005 and 2007 in the Appendix 1. One of them was since the very beginning the **self-certification against QF-EHEA**.<sup>9</sup> The last step, establishing the national web page, was suggested by the Coordination Group for Qualification Frameworks established by the BFUG after London conference of Ministers, in 2007. This step is numbered 11; however, the web page should be designed from the early

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<sup>8</sup> See „Criteria and procedures to reference national qualifications levels to the EQF, Annex to the note 14499 of 6 November 2008”.

<sup>9</sup> See “A framework for Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area”, the background report submitted by the Bologna working group to the Bergen Conference and adopted at this conference in 2005 (under the Bologna process)

stage of development of the national framework. It is crucial that the same 11 steps are followed in all countries, the sequence of the steps, however, can differ in different countries.

### V.1. Lessons learnt so far

It was emphasised at the conference that attention has to be paid to **communication**. All relevant stakeholders should be involved as soon as possible and all should see the particular added value for themselves. The least appropriate argument is to establish a national qualification framework because the Bologna Process and/or European Union require this.

The **frameworks cannot be static**. They are dynamic instruments serving the development of the (higher) education systems. Therefore it is important to create a dynamic framework which provides the basis for further improvements and developments.

Both self-certifications reports available up to now verified the national frameworks for qualifications through all the criteria and procedures from the 2007 report. It was recommended that the **formats as well contents of the existing reports could serve as examples of good practice** for additional countries. Their content can be summarised as follows:

1) Summary in which the main purpose and message of the report is expressed.

2) Contextual information

- Description of the higher education systems
- Admission requirements to all levels
- Progression in the system – which paths are open and which are “blind”.
- How the quality assurance is maintained. Which are the bodies responsible for quality assurance and how do they operate? Are the procedures and the bodies trustful, i.e. are they in line with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance as adopted by the Ministers in Bergen,
- Are there systems of credits other than ECTS? How they are created and are they compatible with ECTS? How can the credits be recalculated as ECTS credits?

3) Verification of the self-certification criteria – both the Irish and Scottish processes have used the set introduced in the Report of the Working Group on Qualification Frameworks to the Ministerial Conference in Bergen in 2005<sup>10</sup>.

4) Verification of the self-certification procedures – again both Ireland and Scotland have used the set introduced in the Report of the Working Group on Qualification Frameworks to the Ministerial Conference in Bergen in 2005.

5) Conclusion(s)

6) Both reports also included Appendices

- Full text of national descriptors

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main\\_doc/050218\\_QF\\_EHEA.pdf](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf)

- Comparison of the Dublin descriptors with the award-type descriptors in the National Framework of Qualifications
- Analysis of non-outcomes issues which are relevant to verifying the compatibility of the Irish Framework with the Bologna Framework
- Glossary

7) Copy of a certifying letter was also included.

Several times **the warning emerged that the rush to meet the deadline could harm the whole system**. It is important not to lose time. However, the procedures cannot be implemented only “pro forma”, they need discussions with stakeholders and common work which leads to an understanding, and not least, to a feeling of ownership of the qualifications framework. When developing national qualification frameworks the international development before and during the whole process should always be taken into account. The whole process is thus quite complex and the two countries which have successfully completed the self-certification procedure have been working on the national frameworks for almost a decade. Both countries stressed that this exercise is not finished and the framework has to develop together with the system.

**National particularities and difficult issues should be described in the self-certification report in an open way.** It is better to state honestly that there are still difficult issues, blind paths in the system, etc. Ireland gave an example of limited progression from some first cycle awards (ordinary bachelors) to existing second cycle programmes. The fact that the relationships between the two types of first cycle degrees are (generally) understood domestically did not suffice in terms of international transparency and required detailed explanation in the report. Similarly the difficulties in distinguishing between academic and professional degrees appeared. The Bologna Declaration stated that the qualifications of the first cycle, of minimum three years, give access to the second cycle as well as to the labour market; in the Berlin Communiqué we can find a similar concept, i.e. qualifications of the first cycle embedded in the frameworks “*should give access, in the sense of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, to second cycle programmes*” and second cycle degrees “*should give access to doctoral studies*”. Neither of these is fully implemented and when preparing qualification frameworks it should be reviewed, improved or at least fairly described.

To work with neighbouring countries or those with similar history and systems of higher education proved very helpful. On this basis successful regional co-operation was established (e.g., between the Netherlands and the Flemish Community of Belgium or among the countries of South East Europe). In parallel it was considered as very important and stressed many times by the speakers as well as by discussion groups that there is no model that fits all. And it is very dangerous and counter-productive to import foreign practices if they are not relevant in the national context. The groups tried to identify issues that were seen as difficult, shared experiences of how these issues were resolved and possibly why they were not to show that different solutions work under different circumstances and are not simply transferable. This analytical approach – “what fits” and “when” is the only method which can be used in the European context. In this case, **co-operation among countries with similarities in legislation, similarities of systems and/or regional co-operation, where appropriate, could be of good help.**

## **V.2. Challenges to national as well as European frameworks**

The Irish experience showed how difficult it is to establish an understanding among stakeholders at national level, and how important it is to be sure all the time that all actors understand the issues in the same way. **The suggestion to develop a glossary** was presented. Some time was devoted to the question whether all countries have the same access to information and it was strongly recommended to insure that **“discrepancies” among countries in information flows are avoided.**

Most of the participants appreciated the work of the previous working groups as well as the existing Coordination Group established by the BFUG after the ministerial gathering in London and recommended that the BFUG prolong its mandate. During the presentations as well the discussions the participants stressed several times that **qualifications frameworks are one of the cornerstones of the EHEA**, and that the BFUG **should maintain the frameworks on the agenda.** In addition the participants stressed how important the **maintenance of European coordination** is to benefit from the possibilities of the emerging system of European and national frameworks. It could be helpful to the exchange of experience if an international network which will be able to build on the informal contacts, personal contacts and mutual trust could be established and maintained. They expressed their hope that the emerging network of national qualifications framework correspondents could be developed further. Similarly they appreciated the idea of further elaboration of the central web page, accessible through the Bologna web site, which could align various national web pages with information both in the national language(s) and in English. This platform could serve to exchange experiences in the full Bologna context.

Many **questions remained unanswered.** One of them concerned the place of the pre-Bologna qualifications in the national frameworks. Another referred to the level to which details should be described. If we highlight our differences too much can we then still serve aim of transparency or not? And moreover, could we perhaps harm recognition even further? Do we know how to work with learning outcomes and how to relate the ECTS credits to them?

Another set of **questions challenged the self-certification itself.** How can the most difficult issues be brought out? Should the countries not stick to protection of their own systems? And how should we deal with the disagreements during the self-certification process? They can occur at all levels – even between the stakeholders, institutions and authorities at national level. This could be solved by involvement of the stakeholders from the very beginning of the self-certification procedure and provide them with a feeling of “ownership” of the framework as well as of the report. But what about discrepancies among international experts? Or between the international and national evaluation? Who is to play the arbiter? And how shall we deal with the national reports which are assessed as ‘not credible’? Last but not least there were the questions which were driven by the differences in the national settings – in legal bases, understanding of learning outcomes, or differences arising from more formalistic or more content-based attitudes towards the whole exercise. This, of course, led to a question of how to accommodate 48 different national frameworks, all under national responsibility, if “European harmonisation” is neither wished for nor expected. Could they still create one EHEA system?

For the time being only very few self-certification procedures have been undertaken, but it is expected that closer to 2010 the demand from the participating countries could be much higher. Shall we have enough experts? And will they have a similar approach; will they use the same methodology in their assessments? How shall we deal with the fact that the EU

Member States can choose between two compatible but slightly different frameworks, compatible but slightly different criteria and procedures for self-certification against QF-EHEA and referencing to EQF and two sets of structures? Do we not just double bureaucracy, work and costs, harm mutual recognition and decrease potential of the system created by European and national frameworks with all these initiatives?

To have credible national frameworks of qualification in the EHEA the BFUG has been invited to **create a network of international experts that the countries can use as external examiners for their self-certification processes**. The range of experts should be broad enough for the countries to find those who are familiar with the higher education systems and developments in the country they are supposed to assess. The participants considered it very useful if the experts could be trained in the methodology and preferably be able to carry out evaluation in several languages. The discussion on the language issue was quite rich but among some colleagues the pragmatic approach prevailed, i.e. the use of English. There was a very clear demand for **elaboration of reference points and guidelines which could be used by the experts for verification of national frameworks** for qualifications. The participants further suggested that a **check list for self-certification process built on existing experiences should be elaborated** building on existing experience with self-certification and existing sets of criteria and procedures. A clear need for **coordination of EU and Bologna actions** was highlighted and close co-operation between the two sides was required. And indeed there are positive achievements already on the table. One of such positive examples is the suggested set of criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF-LLL as annexed to the note to the EQF Advisory Group no. 14499 of 6 November 2008.

### **V.3. Self-certification against QF –EHEA and referencing to EQF-LLL**

If we compare the **draft criteria and procedures for referencing to EQF-LLL with the self-certification ones (for QF-EHEA)**, see Appendix 4, we can find recurring synergies. And they are not random. It was agreed that even if both frameworks, the EQF-LLL and the QF-EHEA, were based on different political initiatives they overlap in terms of their objectives, the descriptors are compatible and timing is similar. As mentioned above, the EQF levels 5-8 are fully compatible with the QF-EHEA first, second and third cycles as well as with the possibilities for national frameworks to include intermediate/short qualifications within the first cycle. With respect to its specificities the QF-EHEA can be seen as part of the EQF-LLL. This, of course, led to the idea that sets of criteria and procedures which the national framework for qualifications should meet for self-certification (against QF-EHEA) and the criteria and procedures for referencing (to EQF-LLL) should be compatible. The referencing criteria have been designed in such a way. This leads to a conclusion that **a country which has completed the self-certification process against QF-EHEA has the choice of not repeating it for the relevant levels of the EQF-LLL. And vice versa, a country which refers its qualifications levels to the EQF-LLL has likewise the choice not to repeat it for the self-certification within the QF-EHEA. Thus it should in principle be possible to carry out one of the two exercises and mutually recognise the results.** Having one national verification process covering both the EQF-LLL and the EHEA would not only help to avoid double work but also most importantly contribute to greater transparency, avoid confusion among all stakeholders, including students and employers, i.e., those who could benefit the most from the national as well as the European framework for qualifications, and

make the work at the national level and in particular at the higher education institutions easier.  
<sup>11</sup>

## **VI. Recommendations agreed upon by the conference participants**

At the end of the conference a set of recommendations was adopted by the participants:

### **Recommendations to national authorities**

National authorities should

- focus on communication with and involvement of all relevant stakeholders (higher education institutions, students, employers, including small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), quality assurance experts, ENIC and NARIC networks, and alumni,...);
- make certain that all stakeholders involved understand why the national framework for qualifications is needed and what its particular benefits are;
- not rush, but take the time to do proper implementation. It is necessary to complete the national frameworks for qualifications soon, but even more important to do it well;
- take into account international developments, in particular under the Bologna Process and in the EU;
- introduce international participation in the self-certification process from the very beginning of the establishing of a national framework for qualifications as a *conditio sine qua non*;
- prepare all documents in both the national language(s) and a widely understood foreign language (English);
- ensure that national quality assurance mechanisms are in line with European Standards and Guidelines and that they form part of the national framework for qualifications;
- look for synergies between EQF and QF-EHEA and establish one national framework for qualifications for higher education compatible with both;
- follow the agreed set of criteria and standards for self-certification;
- have in mind that development of national frameworks for qualification costs money and provide funds for it;
- create direct as well as indirect incentives for higher education institutions to be able to implement the learning outcomes methodology.

### **Recommendations to higher education institutions**

Higher education institutions should

- be actively looking for involvement, otherwise somebody else will prepare standards for them;
- they should create networks in which they can co-operate on discipline specific descriptors with employers, national authorities, quality assurance experts, students, alumni,....

### **Recommendations to the European level**

As qualification frameworks are one of the main issues in the EHEA the BFUG should

- maintain them on the agenda;

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<sup>11</sup> See the Note for written consultation on Criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF as annexed to the note to the EQF Advisory Group no. 14499 of 6 November 2008.



- continue the coordination of their development at the Bologna Process level and use the existing and newly emerging structures;
- prolong the mandate of the Coordination Group established by the BFUG under the leadership of the Council of Europe;
- continue work on the creation of a network of national qualification framework correspondents which can build on informal contacts, personal contacts and mutual trust under the leadership of the Council of Europe;
- create and maintain a web page with information both in the national language(s) and English accessible through the Bologna web page;
- organise platforms for the exchange of experiences in the full Bologna context and pay attention to avoiding „discrepancies“ among countries in information flows;
- make all efforts for all to understand the common methodology, procedures and criteria in same way. By
  - putting strong emphasis on terminology and
  - possibly develop a common glossary

To have credible national frameworks for qualifications in the EHEA the BFUG should

- create a network of international experts for the countries to chose as examiners for the self-certification process.
  - The experts should be familiar with the higher education system and developments in the country they assess;
  - The experts should as far as possible be trained in the methodology in several languages
- elaborate reference points and guidelines for the experts to use for verification of national qualification frameworks;
- building on existing experience with self-certification and existing sets of criteria and procedures to establish a check list for the self-certification process.

The European Commission and the Bologna Process should

- continue co-operation to facilitate dialogue between different parts of education, in particular to remove obstacles to dialogue between vocational and higher education;
- continue co-operation to build on synergies between QF-EHEA and EQF-LLL to create conditions for national authorities to establish one national qualification framework for higher education compatible with both existing qualification frameworks at European level and thus make life less cumbersome for all - national governments, higher education institutions, quality assurance bodies and, in particular, the main users of the qualification frameworks - students and employers; follow examples of good co-operation practice;
- avoid to concentrate exclusively on “own“ qualification framework;
- mutually recognise the results of the self -certification and referencing processes.

The European Commission should

- continue the Bologna Experts projects and make maximum use of the existing projects under both the LLP and Tempus programmes for the training of experts able to work on implementation of the learning outcomes methodology;
- organise or facilitate training seminars for both “Erasmus” and “Tempus” Bologna experts to provide an integrated approach and maximum exchange of experience.

The BFUG was invited to repeat this conference in 2-3 years to check up on developments and gather further experiences on the self-certification processes.

## References

- 1) All presentations and background documents from the conference are available on the official Bologna web-site:  
<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/BolognaSeminars/Tbilisi2008.htm>;
- 2) A framework for Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area, background report submitted by the Bologna working group to the Bergen Conference and adopted at this conference in 2005: [http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main\\_doc/050218\\_QF\\_EHEA.pdf](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf);
- 3) National Qualification Frameworks – Development and Certification; Report by the Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks submitted to the London Conference in 2007 :  
<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/londonbologna/uploads/documents/WGQF-report-final2.pdf>
- 4) Berlin, Bergen and London Communiqués of the Bologna ministers:  
[http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/declarations\\_communiques.htm](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/declarations_communiques.htm);
- 5) Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 23 April 2008, on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning:  
[http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm);
- 6) Criteria and procedures to reference national qualifications levels to the EQF, Annex to the note 14499 of 6 November 2008;
- 7) CoE/UNESCO Convention No. 165: Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region, Lisbon 1997

## Appendix 1

### Steps in the Development of National qualification frameworks

(Steps 1 -10 are contained in National Qualification Frameworks – Development and Certification; Report by the Bologna Working Group on Qualification Frameworks submitted to the London Conference in 2007, while step 11 – establishing a web site for national qualifications frameworks, has been added by the present Coordination Group)

1. Decision to start taken by the national body responsible for higher education
2. Setting the agenda: The purpose of our national qualification framework WG-Report nr. 1<sup>12</sup> (section 2.3)
3. Organising the process: Identifying stakeholders and setting up a committee/working group
4. Design Profile: Level structure, Level descriptors (based on 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 higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies 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 national qualification framework; 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
11. Providing a web site for the national qualifications framework. This site may contain new material and/or it may provide, easily accessible through one site, links to relevant existing sites.

The sequence of steps need not be identical in all countries.

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<sup>12</sup> A framework for Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area, background report submitted by the Bologna working group to the Bergen Conference and adopted at this conference in 2005

## **Appendix 2**

### **Recommendations to be considered by countries in undertaking the verification process: Criteria and Procedures for Verification of Framework Compatibility (Extract from Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks Report, 2005)**

#### **Criteria**

- C1. The national framework for higher education qualifications and the body or bodies responsible for its development are designated by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education;
- C2. There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework;
- C3. The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS compatible credits;
- C4. The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent;
- C5. The national quality assurance system for higher education refer to the national framework of qualifications and are consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent communiqué agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process;
- C6. The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements;
- C7. The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published.

#### **Procedures**

- P1. The competent national body/bodies shall certify the compatibility of the national framework with the European framework.
- P2. The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies in the country in question recognised through the Bologna Process
- P3. The self-certification process shall involve international experts
- P4. The self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall be published and shall address separately each of the criteria set out
- P5. The ENIC and NARIC networks shall maintain a public listing of States that have confirmed that they have completed the self-certification process [[www.enic-naric.net](http://www.enic-naric.net)]
- P6. The completion of the self-certification process shall be noted on Diploma Supplements issued subsequently by showing the link between the national framework and the European framework.

## Appendix 3

### Criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF as annexed to the note 14499 of 6 November 2008 (Note to the EQF Advisory Group)

1. *The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process, including the National Coordination Point, are clearly determined and published by the competent public authorities.*
2. *There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications framework or system and the level descriptors of the European Qualifications Framework.*
3. *The national framework or qualifications system and its qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and linked to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where these exist, to credit system*
4. *The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system are transparent.*
5. *The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications framework or system and are consistent with the relevant European principles and guidelines (as indicated in annex 3 of the Recommendation<sup>13</sup>).*
6. *The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies*
7. *The referencing process shall involve international experts.*
8. *The competent national body or bodies shall certify the referencing of the national framework or system with the EQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing and the evidence supporting it shall be published by the competent national bodies, including the National Coordination Point, and shall address separately each of the criteria.*
9. *The official EQF platform shall maintain a public listing of member states that have confirmed that they have completed the referencing process, including links to completed referencing reports.*
10. *Following the referencing process, and in line with the timelines set in the Recommendation, all new qualification certificates, diplomas and Europass documents issued by the competent authorities contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications systems, to the appropriate European Qualifications Framework level.*

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<sup>13</sup> Recommendation of the the European Parliament and the Council of 23 April 2008, on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning

## Appendix 4

### Self-certification against QF-EHEA and referencing to EQF

Self-certification against QF-EHEA	Referencing to EQF (Cr)
<b><i>Procedures for self-certification (Psc)</i></b>	
<i>Psc1. The competent national body/bodies shall certify the compatibility of the national framework with the European framework.</i>	Cr8.The competent national body or bodies shall certify the referencing of the national framework or system with the EQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing and the evidence supporting it shall be published by the competent national bodies, including the National Coordination Point, and shall address separately each of the criteria
<i>Psc2. The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies in the country in question recognised through the Bologna Process</i>	Cr6.The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies.
<i>Psc3. The self-certification process shall involve international experts</i>	Cr7.The referencing process shall involve international experts
<i>Psc4. The self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall be published and shall address separately each of the criteria set out</i>	Cr8. see above
<i>Psc5. The ENIC and NARIC networks shall maintain a public listing of States that have confirmed that they have completed the self-certification process [www.enic-naric.net]</i>	Cr9.The official EQF platform shall maintain a public listing of member states that have confirmed that they have completed the referencing process, including links to completed referencing reports.
<i>Psc6. The completion of the self-certification process shall be noted on Diploma Supplements issued subsequently by showing the link between the national framework and the European framework.</i>	Cr10.Following the referencing process, and in line with the timelines set in the Recommendation, all new qualification certificates, diplomas and Europass documents issued by the competent authorities contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications systems, to the appropriate European Qualifications Framework level
<b><i>Criteria for self- certification (Csc)</i></b>	
<i>Csc1. The national framework or higher education qualifications and the body or bodes responsible for its</i>	Cr3.The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing

<i>development are designated by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education.</i>	process, including the National Coordination Point, are clearly determined and published by the competent public authorities
<i>Csc2. There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework.</i>	Cr2. There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications framework or system and the level descriptors of the European Qualifications Framework
<i>Csc3. The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS compatible credits.</i>	Cr3. The national framework or qualifications system and its qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and linked to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where these exist, to credit system
<i>Csc4. The procedures for inclusion for qualification into national framework are transparent.</i>	Cr4. The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system are transparent
<i>Csc5. The national quality assurance systems for higher education refer to the national framework of qualifications and are consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent communiqué agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process</i>	Cr5. The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications framework or system and are consistent with the relevant European principles and guidelines (as indicated in annex 3 of the Recommendation.
<i>Csc6. The national framework and any alignment with the European framework is referenced in all Diploma Supplements.</i>	Cr10. see above
<i>Csc7. The responsibilities of the domestic party to the national framework are clearly determined and published.</i>	Cr3. see above