

# **7th European Students Convention**

## **Qualifications Frameworks**

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### **General Report**

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#### **1. Introduction**

The 7<sup>th</sup> European Students Convention, held under the Irish presidency of the European Union, was devoted to the topic of Qualifications Frameworks. It was the first opportunity for ESIB to discuss this issue with student representatives from almost 40 countries. The convention was divided into different sessions; presentations followed by discussions and workshops, which discussed various issues more in depth. The presentations gave an overview of the different national Qualifications Frameworks that exist at the moment and the processes they went through in their development; about the opinions of various stakeholders in Higher Education on Quality Assurance, institutional autonomy as well as student involvement in relation to Qualifications Frameworks the final plenary looked at possibilities for an overarching European Qualifications Framework.

The outcome is not a final policy of ESIB in this field, but rather the basis for further discussions. These discussions should take place both at European level and, as importantly, at the national level.

#### **2. Background**

Qualifications Frameworks are a newly emerging topic in the Bologna Process and touches almost all Bologna objectives. It was first mentioned in the work programme between the ministerial meetings in Prague (2001) and Berlin (2003). Now the language of the Bologna Process comes more and more into practice. A Bologna Seminar was held during that period, organised by the Danish authorities. The main

recommendations of this seminar were adopted by the European ministers responsible for Higher Education in the Berlin Communiqué. The Berlin Communiqué makes a reference to Qualification Frameworks as follows:

*Ministers encourage the member States to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile. They also undertake to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area.*

*Within such frameworks, degrees should have different defined outcomes. First and second cycle degrees should have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs. First cycle degrees should give access, in the sense of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, to second cycle programmes. Second cycle degrees should give access to doctoral studies.*

*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 topic of Qualification Frameworks is therefore gaining more importance and is becoming a priority issue both at the national and the European level. The development of a national Qualifications Framework is becoming a priority issue for the national level whilst the elaboration of an overarching European Qualifications Framework is a major point of discussion at the European level.

At the same time the knowledge about this topics differs greatly in Europe and only a minority group of experts can be found, from a limited number of countries. Hardly any clear information is available and there is no common terminology at the European level.

## **2.1 (Overarching European) Qualifications Framework**

In the Bologna Process one of the main objectives for the establishment of a European Higher Education Area by the year 2010 was, right from the beginning, an easily readable, comparable and compatible degree structure. Another objective was to establish a system based on a two-tier structure, commonly known as a Bachelor/Master structure. In the first phase of the process the main focus lay on the setting up of the two-tier structure where it did not exist before. Most countries have by now introduced this structure, although not necessarily for all kinds of degree courses yet. Official Bologna seminars on the topic of Bachelor and Master Degrees took place and primarily focussed on more technical aspects, such as how many credits does a Bachelor's degree require etc..

The implementation in the single countries differed quite a lot. Some countries took the opportunity for a complete restructuring of the curricula towards a more output and student centred model. Some countries though just divided their existing one-tier courses into two parts and gave them a different name than before. This pure re-labelling fulfilled the objective of the system based on two tiers. Soon, however, it

became obvious that the objective of a more easily readable, comparable and compatible degree structure required more than just a common nomenclature. The question of recognition problems was not solved by giving degrees another name. It was never envisaged to harmonise the contents of degree courses in different countries. However, what was envisaged was to make the learning outcomes more compatible and more importantly to have some more transparency in the national systems. Therefore some actors in the process thought about tools, which could enhance the transparency and thus the compatibility. Some countries had a national Qualifications Framework, namely Ireland, Scotland and a more or less joined one for England, Northern Ireland and Wales. Denmark was just developing its own. These Qualifications Frameworks are output oriented and allow for easier comparability, as the qualifications obtained at different Higher Education Institutions are compatible. Such Qualifications Frameworks became the model, which was deemed most useful also in the European context. Although not specifically mentioned in the Prague Communiqué an official Bologna seminar was organised in 2003 by the Danish authorities. In the conclusions of the seminar and its recommendations for the minister responsible for Higher Education it was stated that countries should develop national Qualifications Frameworks, in which the qualifications should be described in terms of workload, level, quality, learning outcomes and profile. A European Qualifications Framework should in more generic terms describe the qualifications with due regard to institutional, historical and national contexts. Whereas national Qualifications Frameworks should encompass all levels of education the focus on the European framework should be the qualifications gained in Higher Education and the ones needed for access to Higher Education. This also implied looking at sub-degree post-secondary education. Some months later another official Bologna seminar took place in Prague, which focussed on Lifelong Learning. One of the outcomes was that also Lifelong Learning activities should fit into a Qualifications Framework. A Qualifications Framework is composed of levels for different stages of education, which have individual sets of learning outcomes as indicators. These learning outcomes are usually defined in terms of the actual workload that a learner needs in order to achieve them. The workload is expressed in credits.

### **3. Aims of Qualifications Frameworks**

There are various aims and purposes of a Qualifications Framework. However, in a number of cases it is arguable whether the aims can actually be achieved by a Qualifications Framework or whether also other mechanisms might be sufficient for reaching the aims. In the following the main aims are shortly described.

#### 3.1 Comparability and Compatibility

The comparability and compatibility of degrees and qualifications is sought to be improved so that the different qualifications can be easier related to each other and through the application of a more harmonised structure fit into one scheme, thus making them compatible.

#### 3.2 Mobility

The removal of obstacles to mobility is one of the core Bologna objectives. Qualification Frameworks aim to remove some of the structural obstacles in terms of transparency and recognition. But Qualification Frameworks might also facilitate the inter-sectorial mobility. This can mean easier mobility between different types of institutions (Polytechnics, Colleges, Universities). It can also mean easier mobility between courses of different profiles. Furthermore it can ease mobility between vocational education, Higher Education and other types of post-secondary education.

### 3.3 Recognition

Another aim of Qualifications Frameworks is to facilitate recognition. The different learning outcomes and qualifications will be more easily comparable through greater transparency. The improved recognition of prior, non-formal and informal learning is also envisaged.

### 3.4 Transparency

A major purpose of Qualification Frameworks is to improve transparency. It is sought that the degree structure, the qualifications and learning outcomes can be easily understood by learners and the public. Especially also employers are a target group of Qualifications Frameworks so that they will be aware of what a learner is able to do without specific knowledge about the educational systems, the programme types and the degree courses. Different access and exit points are also intended to be made clearer.

### 3.5 Flexibility

Qualification Frameworks are to lead to more flexibility in terms of access and exit regarding Higher Education. This should be achieved by the recognition of prior learning but also facilitating the continuation of education after a period of practical experiences.

### 3.6 Output orientation

Qualification Frameworks should build on and enhance the paradigm shift from an input based model towards a system, which has the learner at the centre and is based on the output.

## **4. Terminology**

One of the major obstacles in the discussion about Qualifications Frameworks is the lack of a common terminology at the European level. This often results in misunderstandings and interpretations of definitions. There is a need to elaborate a glossary or at least some common language. But it should also be envisaged to use a language, which is easily understandable and therefore allows everybody to contribute to the discussion.

Subsequently and drawing from the experiences from other tools, it might be envisaged to also reach an agreement on the proper implementation of a Qualifications Framework. Such a document would have to be the result of an inclusive discussion at all levels.

## 5. (Possible) Positive aspects of a Qualifications Framework

There are a number of positive aspects and the issues mentioned hereafter are not to be exclusive. Some of them are also identical with the aims and purposes of Qualifications Frameworks.

- Improved mobility through overcoming of structural obstacles (also inter-sectorial mobility)
- Easier recognition of qualifications and degrees, especially through output oriented approach, which would make comparison of contents obsolete; also a possible improvement regarding the recognition of prior, non-formal and informal learning
- Easier inclusion of LLL into the EHEA
- Improved Quality Assurance, especially in the field of accreditation
- More transparency for learners and employers
- Better employability
- Change from input to output based system

## 6. (Possible) Negative Aspects of Qualifications Frameworks

- Harmonisation / standardisation of content elements of degree courses
- Less cultural diversity
- Risk of too narrow or too ample descriptions
- Less institutional autonomy, as it might be too prescriptive or too bureaucratic
- Less quality, as only an average will be the envisaged learning outcome
- No impulses for innovation
- Risk of less attention for the other Bologna objectives and tools
- Decrease possibility for very specialised qualifications
- Too much concentration on the goals themselves and not also on the process

## 7. Open Questions

As it was the first discussion about Qualifications Frameworks, there are a number of questions that remain unanswered or evolved during the discussions. Also a number of related questions arose? ESIB and the National Unions of Students need to discuss these questions in the future in order to be able to actively contribute to the discussion that already take place and the ones in the future. However, it is to be expected that many more questions will come up in the future. It seems to be necessary to reach as much clarity as possible before taking any far reaching decisions. Some of the questions, which need to be addressed are as follows:

- Who will have the ownership over a Qualifications Framework at both the national and the European level?
- How can dead ends in the frameworks be prevented so that a Qualifications Framework would contribute to more flexibility and access and exit points?
- How to ensure that all purposes of education will be taken into account when deciding on the learning outcomes and thus prevent a focus solely on the labour market?

- How do Joint Degrees and interdisciplinary courses fit into Qualifications Frameworks
- What should be developed first; the national or the European Qualifications Framework?
- Should the European level be a guideline for national Qualifications Frameworks or should it be build on them
- How can you prevent recognition problems between countries that (will) have a Qualifications Framework and the ones that do not?
- Should the progression to a next level be possible without limitations in the time-span? If this would be connected to possible conversion courses, where would these be put into a Qualifications Framework?
- How will courses of different length be placed in a Qualifications Framework without ending up in levels that resemble years of study (3ys and 4 ys Bachelor)?
- Should the elaboration of a European Qualifications Framework be undertaken only when every country has a national Qualifications Framework?
- How many levels should a European Qualifications Framework have?
- Should a European Qualifications Framework be descriptive or prescriptive?
- Should a European Qualifications Framework also embrace the level that gives access to Higher Education?

## **8. Final comments**

The vast majority of the participants seemed to be in favour of national Qualifications Frameworks and an overarching European Framework. However, it was felt that there is no need to rush the development and elaboration of these devices but rather the need for more discussions, as a lot of questions are not answered yet. The discussions and the further work regarding Qualifications Frameworks should be more inclusive than it is at the moment, not only from the perspective of participating countries, but also in terms of stakeholders. In a European process leading to a common European Higher Education Area this is a prerequisite for its success. The involvement of students and institutions is crucial at all stages in the work towards Qualifications Frameworks, but also in the further work once they have been established.

Qualifications Frameworks will provide an added value. But how great the added value will be, cannot be answered at the moment, as not all other tools and mechanisms for transparency, recognition and mobility have been (properly) implemented. Participants also feared a too strong emphasis on a new tool, resulting in too little attention for the implementation of other tools, which are already much further elaborated and agreed upon, such as the ECTS, the Diploma Supplement, the Lisbon Convention. Full use should be made of already existing tools, especially the Diploma Supplement, which at the moment is not used as much as it could be. For these reasons the main focus should first and foremost lie on the proper implementation and full use of the existing tools. There may also be benefits for HEIs and countries, which have already begun to reform, but that have become frustrated by the seemingly never-ending list of necessary reforms.

Any initiative that promotes the shift of paradigm towards a more student centred system is welcomed. Participants therefore stressed the need to use learning outcomes, which is not necessarily connected to Qualifications Frameworks only, but should also be in place for other tools e.g. ECTS. This shift of paradigms should also become part of the institutional and faculty culture. It is therefore crucial that discussion and decisions are led in a top down approach but also that the academic community has ownership through bottom-up involvement.

Participants see the advantages of using Qualifications Frameworks in terms of facilitated mobility and recognition, greater transparency, easier flexibility and better comparability and compatibility of degrees.

The move towards a more coherent system of qualifications is also welcomed. Therefore also common competences are seen as positive as long as they are not too broad or too specific. Common degrees, however, should be avoided at all costs. The protection of the rich diversity of European education has to be paramount and the independence of academic and subject specialists, or damage local and national academic authority should in no way be restricted.

## **9. Possible actions after return**

- Pass information on to colleagues
- Write a press release about the convention and the topic to help stimulate debate
- Prepare information and send it out to students
- Talk to other people with expertise in the area
- Discuss possibilities of implementation of Qualifications Frameworks in NUS
- Form a working group and try to reach positions
- Write report for interested people
- Inform national and subject bodies
- Discuss this topic with various grassroots committees
- Get presentation from the Convention and send them to stakeholders
- Officially ask ministry what they are doing on the topic
- Pass on information to education experts and give them mandate to work on topic
- Inform member organisation
- Discuss what are the competences at local level
- Check out ECTS definitions and goals
- Stress Diploma Supplement implementation
- Put Qualifications Frameworks into organisation plan of work
- Push experts to write some papers
- Have information meeting with local unions
- Write piece for student and other papers
- Talk to HEI administration and professors