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# QUALITY ASSURANCE AND QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS: EXCHANGING GOOD PRACTICE

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CARITA BLOMQVIST, TONY DONOHOE, MARIA KELO, KARIN JÄRPLID LINDE,  
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword.....	4
Qualifications Frameworks in the European Higher Education Area: The state of development and perspectives for the future .....	5
The role of quality assurance agencies in the self-certification of compatibility of NQFs with the QF-EHEA.....	9
Role and meaning of Qualifications Frameworks in external quality assurance .....	14
Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks: A stakeholder view .....	19
Qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes in programme oriented quality assurance - A brief story of Denmark, and a few international comments.....	24
Recognition of prior learning and the role of quality assurance agencies. Accreditation of prior learning in France as a case study .....	29
Assessment of learning outcomes: the case of ANECA .....	35
Conclusions .....	38
Annex I .....	40
About ENQA.....	42

# FOREWORD

The theme of qualifications frameworks and their relation to quality assurance is gaining urgency in the European scene as more and more countries are completing their national qualifications frameworks and quality assurance agencies need to take important decisions on how to implement them. Some of the key features of the qualifications frameworks are the specification of learning outcomes, processes for assessing learners' attainment of the expected outcomes, their relation to the ECTS, identification of transfer and progression routes, and recognition of prior learning.

ENQA wanted to respond to the need of agencies to address the issue by providing a forum for exchange of experience and methods in implementation of qualifications frameworks and for a discussion on what these changes mean for the work of the agencies. The workshop from which this publication is an outcome of took place in Dublin on 9-10 February 2012. The workshop picked up and took forward work that ENQA had done in this area in the past years, and in particular since a workshop in 2007 on qualifications frameworks and workshop in 2010 on learning outcomes.

This current publication presents seven articles covering themes such as the state of development of qualifications frameworks, the role of agencies in the self-certification process, and the meaning of qualifications frameworks in external quality assurance. In addition, an article presenting the view of the labour market sector on qualifications frameworks provides depth to the range of views provided. Also recognition of prior learning, assessment of learning outcomes, and qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes in programme oriented quality assurance are addressed by this publication.

The debate and mutual sharing within ENQA on this theme will no doubt continue in the coming years. In the meantime, I am confident that this publication is a useful tool for all agencies, as well as other interested parties, which are currently faced with new demands and challenges due to the implementation of qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes based assessment in the European Higher Education Area.

**Achim Hopbach**

*President*

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

# QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA: THE STATE OF DEVELOPMENT AND PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE

***Carita Blomqvist, Head of Unit, Recognition and Comparability of Qualifications, Finnish National Board of Education***

## **INTRODUCTION**

In May 2005 the Bergen Conference of European Ministers responsible for higher education adopted the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA (QF-EHEA). The QF-EHEA as adopted in 2005 comprises three cycles, generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes, and credit ranges in the first and second cycles. Broadly, the QF-EHEA provides international transparency, facilitates the recognition of qualifications and international mobility. It has been described as a “translation device”, which allows national qualifications to be compared.

Ministers also committed themselves to elaborating national qualifications frameworks by 2010. Even if national qualifications frameworks are developed at the national level, one of their purposes is international comparability. The development of national qualifications frameworks has proved to be an important, but also demanding undertaking. In 2007 ministers asked the Council of Europe to take responsibility for coordinating the sharing of experience in the development of national qualifications frameworks. This request was renewed in 2009 Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Ministerial Communiqué. In Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve ministers also acknowledged the importance of national qualifications frameworks in the implementation of lifelong learning. The 2010 deadline proved to be too early, and the ministers indicated that they would implement their national qualifications frameworks and prepare for self-certification against the QF-EHEA by 2012 instead.

Since 2007 the Council of Europe has chaired the Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks as well as the network of national correspondents. This article has benefitted from the draft report by the EHEA Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks, adopted by the Bologna Follow-up Group in January 2012.

The start of the implementation of the qualifications frameworks was slow, and there was lack of progress. This was at least partly due to the fact that there was a relatively small pool of experience and expertise, particularly regarding the implementation of learning outcomes and transfer from teaching to learning orientation in higher education. Despite the slow start, a lot of activity and co-operation has been seen in the last few years at the European, national and institutional level, and in a relatively short time good progress has been made at all levels. By now there is a huge amount of information, advice and experience available for all stakeholders.

## **COMPATIBILITY AND CO-OPERATION BETWEEN QF-EHEA AND EQF**

The adoption of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) in February 2008 has meant a boost also to the implementation of the QF-EHEA and the development of national qualifications frameworks especially in the EU member states, but also beyond. The two frameworks are not identical, but they are compatible and share similar objectives. The compatibility has been explicitly stated in the EQF Recommendation<sup>1</sup>. According to the Recommendation, the descriptor for the higher education short cycle corresponds to the learning outcomes for EQF level 5, the descriptor for the first cycle to the learning outcomes for level 6, the descriptor for the second cycle to the learning outcomes for level 7, and the descriptor for the third cycle to the learning outcomes for level 8. This also means that it is possible to develop national qualifications frameworks that are compatible with both frameworks.

For implementation, close co-operation has been established between the European Commission and the Council of Europe, as well as in member states. Co-operation in member states is supported by the co-operation between the European networks: the network of national correspondents and the National Coordination Points of the EQF.

National qualifications frameworks developed within the European higher education area should be compatible with the QF-EHEA. This compatibility is demonstrated and verified through the agreed self-certification process. This means that the competent national authorities (with the support of international experts) carry out a verification process and issue a document certifying the compatibility of their national framework with the QF-EHEA. A similar process, called the referencing process, has been agreed upon to confirm the reference of member states' national qualifications levels to the EQF. For this process, the EQF Advisory Group has agreed on a set of criteria and procedures to guide the process. The starting point for the EQF Advisory Group in this work was the self-certification process which had been established for the QF-EHEA earlier. One of the important success factors for the compatibility of the QF-EHEA and the EQF are self-certification and referencing processes. They share not identical, but rather similar criteria and procedures and it is possible for countries to combine both processes in one report.

## **LINKING QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS, QUALITY ASSURANCE AND RECOGNITION**

Qualifications frameworks link closely to quality assurance and recognition. One of the common issues for all of them is learning outcomes, even if the perspectives are different.

Using learning outcomes is a basic requirement for the design and implementation of qualifications frameworks. The learning outcomes expressed in the national qualifications frameworks are essential for aligning the national qualifications framework with the QF-EHEA and the EQF.

On the other hand, even if only the first steps have been taken, recognition authorities and practice focus more and more not only at the input factors, like time and number of credits, but also on the learning outcomes. Self-certified/referenced national qualifications frameworks are considered a tool to facilitate recognition of foreign qualifications. At least they should help recognition authorities avoid asking detailed questions about quality, level, and workload, and they would considerably help recognition authorities understand the learning outcomes provided by foreign qualifications. One of the approaches for defining substantial difference relates to the

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<sup>1</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (April 2008)

learning outcomes of the qualification. The legal basis for recognition is the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education qualifications (Lisbon Recognition Convention). The Bureau of the Committee of the Lisbon Recognition Convention has started work on subsidiary text to the Convention - a recommendation on the role of qualifications frameworks in facilitating recognition. The aim is to have the subsidiary text adopted in the next intergovernmental committee meeting in 2013.

Again, quality assurance experts are important stakeholders in the design and implementation of the qualifications frameworks. Transparent national quality assurance is a prerequisite for the implementation and functioning of the national and European qualifications frameworks. International self-certification and referencing processes can be considered as part of the overall quality assurance of qualifications frameworks at national and European levels. As one of the purposes of the national qualifications frameworks is to improve the quality of teaching and learning, quality assurance is seen as increasingly linked also to learning outcomes and discussion about the role of quality assurance in different stages of the learning process as well as in assessing learning outcomes is emerging.

## **CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN IMPLEMENTATION**

Even if developing and designing a national qualifications framework is a demanding task, which requires a lot of discussions, communication, consistency, and stakeholder participation, it is even more challenging to actually implement the national qualifications framework. It seems that proper, inclusive, and consistent work in designing the framework also makes the implementation easier. A wide basis for stakeholder involvement is important.

It is important that the purposes and aims of the national qualifications framework have been thoroughly considered. In general, the aims and purposes of the national qualifications frameworks are very similar but there can be national priorities. It is up to national stakeholders to consider whether our national qualifications framework is mainly seen as a transparency tool: aid for international comparability and recognition, and recognition of non-formal and informal learning - or whether the emphasis is placed on the shift towards learning outcomes in higher education. Other common purposes are the enhancement of access and lifelong learning. Overall improvement of the quality of teaching and learning should always be one of the purposes of the national qualifications frameworks, even if it were not always clearly articulated. According to self-certification and referencing reports it seems to be common that national qualifications frameworks serve several purposes. This, again, means that they are useful instruments for many purposes.

Qualifications frameworks are already making a difference in promoting learning outcomes. It is important to see that this does not happen in isolation, but the link to quality assurance and recognition is maintained. The connection between qualifications, learning outcomes, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance is such that they should not be regarded as discrete aspects to be worked on in isolation. Qualifications frameworks are also tools which can be used to facilitate validation in general and recognition of non-formal and informal learning specifically.

At the European level it is important to pay attention to consistency, when it comes to referencing and self-certification of qualifications. Lately, access qualifications have been discussed and the discussion concerning short cycle qualifications is emerging. While it is up to the national authorities to decide on the levels of qualifications, it is



internationally difficult to understand decisions which have been made against broadly accepted trends, especially when it comes to qualifications concerning access to higher education and their established recognition practice. In the long run, inconsistency in referencing or self-certifying certain qualifications that are typical for all countries could even undermine the overall importance of national and the European frameworks.

## **WAY AHEAD**

It cannot be emphasised too much that we still need better understanding of the dynamics and links between quality assurance, qualifications frameworks, learning outcomes, and recognition. They can all be seen as tools that support and complement each other and should be developed and implemented jointly.

Experience in the design and implementation of qualifications frameworks is gained all the time at institutional, national, and European levels. National and European qualifications frameworks must not become static - they need to evolve and develop. Also level descriptors and learning outcomes develop and change over time. Should this have an influence also at the European level and the European frameworks? At the European level we should look at the synergies between different Bologna and transparency tools. This may also lead to a renewal of self-certification and referencing processes, which, again, have to be looked at critically at some stage. Do they serve their purpose and are they up-to-date?

We should also try to make sure that European, but especially national qualifications frameworks, become more visible and bring benefits to end users, be they individuals, higher education institutions, academic staff, or employers. So far a lot of attention has been paid to structures and institutions, but in the end the acceptance of and trust towards national and European qualifications frameworks by end users will be decisive for the overall success of qualifications frameworks.

# THE ROLE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES IN THE SELF-CERTIFICATION OF COMPATIBILITY OF NQFS WITH THE QF-EHEA

*Bryan Maguire, Head of Qualifications Services Designate, HETAC, Ireland*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Two of the most potent and concrete policy tools resulting from the Bologna Process reforms are quality assurance, as epitomised by the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG)<sup>2</sup>, and the widespread use of learning outcomes in higher education, of which the highest level expression is the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). This paper will examine a key process in which these two policy tools interact, namely the verification of compatibility of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) with the QF-EHEA by means national self-certification.

It is axiomatic that quality assurance is first and foremost a prerogative of the higher education institutions (HEIs) but independent, external quality assurance agencies (QAAs) are also indispensable actors in the European model and it is these agencies that constitute the membership of ENQA. The growth of quality assurance in higher education predated the Bologna Declaration but as the reforms flowing from that took shape, it was clear that quality assurance was to play an important role. The political commitment to quality assurance took concrete form when the ministers responsible for higher education endorsed the ESG at their meeting in Bergen in 2005. The ESG confirmed the role of QAAs as having responsibility for the external dimension of quality assurance (Part 2 of ESG) and identified key characteristics and accountability mechanisms for the QAAs themselves (Part 3 of ESG).

An interest in specifying learning outcomes for higher education and the use of qualifications frameworks as an organising device to support this task also predated the Bologna Declaration. This work took on renewed urgency as the reforms into two and later three cycles were rolled out across the continent. This led a number of countries to organise a project called the Joint Quality Initiative where they worked out a set of descriptors for the qualifications awarded at the end of the cycles. From there the next step was to consider bringing these Dublin Descriptors, as they came to be called, into an overarching meta-framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). A Working Group (WG-QF-EHEA), chaired by Sjur Bergan of the Council of Europe, prepared a detailed proposal which was also adopted at the Bergen ministerial meeting in 2005. QA agencies contributed strongly to this working group both in the initial development of the QF-EHEA and in its subsequent implementation.

As well as adopting the Dublin descriptors, the ministers at Bergen also endorsed criteria (List 1) and procedures (List 2) for verifying the compatibility of national

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2 [http://www.enqa.eu/pubs\\_esg.lasso](http://www.enqa.eu/pubs_esg.lasso)

qualifications frameworks with overarching QF-EHEA and set out an ambitious timeline that all member countries should have completed this verification by a process of self-certification by 2010. No European level authority was established to pass judgment on these verifications, though the Bologna Follow-up Group did request WG-QF-EHEA to continue to monitor and support the implementation of the QF-EHEA.

Since both the ESG and the QF-EHEA proposals were developed in advance of the Bergen Summit and neither set of proposers could be sure that the other would actually be adopted, the two documents do not explicitly cross-reference each other. However, there are important substantial linkages. Guideline 1.2 of the ESG states that “the quality assurance of programmes and awards are expected to include [...] development and publication of explicit intended learning outcomes”, thereby invoking learning outcomes, the key concept underpinning the QF-EHEA. Similarly criterion 5 for self-certification anticipates convergences in the development of national quality assurance systems that are expressed in the ESG.

#### **LIST 1 - CRITERIA FOR VERIFYING COMPATIBILITY OF NQFS WITH QF-EHEA**

1. 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
2. There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework
3. The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS compatible credits
4. The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent
5. The national quality assurance system for higher education refers to the NQF and is consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent communiqué agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process
6. The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements
7. The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published

#### **LIST 2 - PROCEDURES FOR VERIFYING COMPATIBILITY OF NQFS WITH QF-EHEA**

1. The competent national body/bodies shall certify the compatibility of the national framework with the European framework.
2. The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies in the country in question recognised through the Bologna Process
3. The self-certification process shall involve international experts
4. The self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall be published and shall address separately each of the criteria set out
5. The ENIC and NARIC networks shall maintain a public listing of states that have confirmed that they have completed the self-certification process
6. 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

## **TYPICAL STEPS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK**

It was recognised that the development of a NQF is a national prerogative and that different national systems and traditions would take slightly different paths towards its achievement. By way of guidance the WG-QF-EHEA outlined a set of typical steps required in the development of national qualifications frameworks, which it included in its progress report to the ministerial conference in London in 2007. That report also included other guidance based on lessons learned from the pilot self-certifications carried out in 2006 in Ireland and Scotland:

1. Decision to start
2. Setting the agenda: the purpose of our NQF
3. Organising the process
4. Design
5. Consultation
6. Approval
7. Administrative set-up
8. Implementation at institutional/programme level
9. Inclusion of qualifications in the NQF
10. Self-certification of compatibility with the EHEA framework

## **COUNTRIES THAT HAVE COMPLETED SELF-CERTIFICATION**

The initial target of the ministers, adopted in Bergen in 2005, was for all countries to have completed verification by means of self-certification by 2010, in time for the formal inauguration of the EHEA. This timetable was always ambitious and in the Leuven Communiqué (2009), on the advice of the WG-QF-EHEA, the ministers extended the deadline. To date, ten NQFs have completed self-certification and given the pace of national developments it is expected that many more, though certainly not all 47 signatory states, will do so in 2012. A significant factor that has complicated, and in some cases inevitably delayed, completion has been the introduction of the European Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LLL) in 2008. In some countries the verification of the QF-EHEA is carried out in a combined exercise with the referencing of the NQF to the EQF-LLL, which necessarily involves a wider range of stakeholders.

## **COUNTRIES THAT HAVE COMPLETED SELF-CERTIFICATION AS OF FEBRUARY 2012**

- Belgium - Flemish Community, February 2009
- Denmark, November 2009
- Germany, January 2009
- Ireland, November 2006
- Malta, August 2009
- The Netherlands, February 2009
- Portugal, May 2011
- Romania, November 2011
- UK - Scotland, December 2006
- UK - England, Wales and Northern Ireland, February 2009

## **PARTICIPATION OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES IN SELF-CERTIFICATION OF NQFS**

The participation of quality assurance agencies in the implementation of NQFs, including verification, was anticipated from the outset. The second required procedure in self-certification states that “the self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies in the country in question recognised through the Bologna Process”. Nevertheless, the different roles, capacities, and priorities of various QA agencies within national contexts, have led them to play different parts in self-certification. Regardless of the how central or otherwise the QA agency is to the conduct of the self-certification exercise itself, each agency can be expected to form a view about the individual criteria from the perspective of quality assurance.

### **AGENCIES’ PARTICIPATION IN SELF-CERTIFICATION OF NQFS**

Coordinating role in verification:

- NVAO (BE-FL)
- NVAO (NL)
- EVA (DK)
- QAA (UK)
- ARACIS (RO)
- NQAI (IE)

Committee/steering group member:

- German Accreditation Council (DE)
- IUQB, HETAC (IE)
- ACE Denmark

Other role:

- VLIR, VLHORA (BE-FL)
- MQC\* (MT)
- A3ES\* (PT)

*\*Not an ENQA member.*

**Criterion 1** states that “the national framework for HE qualifications and the body or bodies responsible for its development are designated by the national ministry with responsibility for HE”. The rather initial straightforward question here is whether the QA agency is satisfied that its role in relation to self-certification has been properly and formally defined. If it is *de facto* responsible, has this been formally determined by the minister?

**Criterion 2** - “there is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework” - is the core issue for verification. The question that a QA agency must ask is whether the outcome of the technical analysis supporting a positive response to this criterion corresponds to the operational understanding on which its quality assurance activities are based.

**Criterion 3** - “the national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS compatible credits” - is an example of an issue that depends to a considerable extent on the role of the QA agency. Is it the QA agency that has responsibility for demonstrating the basis on learning outcomes or does this rest more with the HEIs? Is the QA agency responsible for

articulating learning outcomes for disciplines at a national level in the form of standards or guidelines?

**Criterion 4** - "the procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent" - goes to the heart of quality assurance. The two basic models are either that the agency has responsibility for contributing to this transparency through programme accreditation, or that its quality assurance of institutions ensures that the higher education institutions are transparent.

**Criterion 5** relates even more explicitly to quality assurance and hence to the QA agencies: "the national quality assurance system for higher education refers to the NQF and is consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent communiqué agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process". At this stage in development this means that a country must have implemented the ESG and have had its QA agency or agencies reviewed under Part 3 of the ESG.

**Criterion 6** - "the national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements" - may or may not be a concern of the QA agency. In some systems the QA agency has a role in guiding or auditing the implementation of the diploma supplement.

**Criterion 7** - "the responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published" - may be more difficult to judge than appears at first sight: this is particularly the case in countries where roles and responsibilities are changing or are highly contested. The QA agency has to ensure that its role is accurately expressed in the documentation used to support the answer to this criterion.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, verification by self-certification is a process in which each QA agency has a significant and obligatory role to play. However, self-certification is only a staging point along the way towards the dream of the EHEA. If we are to realise the objectives of the QF-EHEA in relation to transparency, mobility and recognition further work is required. As the "critical mass" of countries with frameworks grows the expectations of partner countries and other stakeholders is that NQFs should be implemented with quality assurance being used to demonstrate that programmes are based on intended learning outcomes and that qualifications are awarded on the basis that these outcomes have been achieved.

## REFERENCE WEBSITES

Definitive list of verification reports on the ENIC-NARIC website

<http://www.enic-naric.net/index.aspx?s=n&r=ena&d=qf>

Qualification frameworks page on the website of the Bologna Secretariat

<http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=69>

Official site of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning

<http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/>

# ROLE AND MEANING OF QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

**Karin Järplid Linde, Assistant Head of Department, Swedish National Agency for Higher Education**

## **A NEW MODEL FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (the Agency), established in 1995, has the national responsibility for quality assurance of higher education through quality evaluation of first, second and third cycle study programmes. The Agency is also responsible for the appraisal of higher education institutions entitlement to award qualifications. This article will focus on the system for quality evaluations of first and second cycle programmes. A new model, focusing on student attainment of the learning outcomes specified in the Higher Education Ordinance was introduced in 2011. No evaluation reports have yet been published, and the question is: can results of an academic study programme be measured? If yes: how can that be done? And last, but not least: is this European quality assurance of the 21st century?

But first, some background information.

## **QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN SWEDEN**

Higher education in Sweden is to a large extent regulated by the Higher Education Act and the Higher Education ordinance. In 2007 major changes were made in order to align the Swedish qualification system with the Bologna Process and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) adopted by the ministers in Bergen in 2005. A National Qualifications Framework was established, and as from 1 July 2007 all qualifications are defined in terms of learning outcomes and workload. Each qualification is ascribed to one of three cycles: first, second and third. The requirements for each cycle are specified in the Higher Education Act and correspond to the QF-EHEA. In line with the Bologna Process and the goal of increased employability for students, qualification descriptors were introduced with specified outcomes of what "a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a period of learning"<sup>3</sup>. These qualification descriptors<sup>4</sup> have become a very important tool, or you might say, *the* tool, in quality assurance of higher education in Sweden.<sup>5</sup>

## **QUALITY ASSURANCE IN SWEDEN - AN IDEOLOGICAL APPROACH**

In March 2010 the Government presented the bill *Fokus på kunskap – kvaliteten i den högre utbildningen* [*Focus on knowledge – quality in higher education*] which was enacted by the Riksdag on 3 June 2010.<sup>6</sup> According to the government, greater autonomy should be given to the higher education institutions.<sup>7</sup> One important consequence was that the

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3 A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area, Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, Denmark, 2005, p. 166

4 The qualification descriptors can be found in Annex 2 to the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100), the Annex to the Ordinance for the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (1993:221) and the Annex to the Ordinance for the Swedish National Defence College (2007:1164).

5 Govt. Bill Ny värld – ny högskola [New world – New university] (2004/05:162) p. 99.

6 Govt. Bill Focus on knowledge – quality in higher education. 2009/10:139, bet. 2009/10:UbU20, rskr. 2009/10:320.

7 Govt. Bill En akademi i tiden [Academia for this day and age- greater freedom for universities and other higher education institutions] (Govt. Bill 2009/10:149).

institutions should take full responsibility for the development and quality assurance of their activities. The national quality assurance system, for which the Agency is responsible, was no longer to focus on the internal processes of the higher education institutions, but on the results of courses and study programmes. The National Agency was to assess to what extent the students' achieved learning outcomes correspond to the intended learning outcomes laid down in the qualification descriptors specified in the Higher Education Ordinance.

In previous systems for quality assurance in Sweden, excellence has not been rewarded. No differentiation has been made between higher education institutions whose programmes barely achieve expected standards and those whose programmes produce excellent results. In the Government's view, this is not reasonable. Therefore, higher education institutions with high quality programmes will be rewarded through increased funding. The evaluations will provide a basis for the Government's allocation of a small percentage of that extra funding.

### **THE EVALUATION MODEL 2011-2014 - HOW DOES IT WORK?**

In the peer review based quality evaluation system that was introduced in 2011, the Agency assesses the outcomes of study programmes. This is done by appraising the degree to which the students achieve the outcomes laid down in the qualification descriptors. The National Agency assesses the extent to which the students' achieved learning outcomes correspond to the intended learning outcomes. For each evaluation the peer review team makes a selection of the outcomes listed in the Higher Education Ordinance on which to base the subsequent assessment of the material. As the outcomes vary in numbers and complexity, the Agency has set up guidelines for the selection procedure in order to assure equivalence in the evaluations. The peer review team suggests a selection of outcomes which are discussed with the higher education institutions before a final decision is made by the Agency.

### **WHAT KIND OF INFORMATION IS USED?**

Four different assessment factors are taken into account: the students' independent projects (degree projects), the higher education institution's own self-evaluations, questionnaires sent to previous students, and the students' impression of the outcomes of their programmes of study in relationship to the outcomes laid down in the qualification descriptors. The students' independent projects together with the learning outcomes accounted for in the self-evaluations provide the main basis for the overall assessments.

### **STUDENTS' INDEPENDENT PROJECTS**

When the Bologna reforms of higher education in Sweden were implemented in 2007, the requirement of an independent project (degree project) for the award of virtually all qualifications was introduced. The result of the independent project is seen as one way of confirming that students have achieved the intended outcomes. Therefore, in the national quality assurance system, assessment of a selection of anonymous independent projects is important to ascertain student attainment in relation to intended outcomes as indicated in the qualification descriptors. According to a statistical model a random selection of a maximum of 24 and a minimum of 5 projects from each study programme is assessed. This appraisal is not a review of individual students but a means of assessing the results of a study programme on the basis of the outcomes laid down in the qualification descriptors. *It is the aggregate quality of a programme's independent*



*projects that is to provide the basis of the evaluation and not specific excellent or poor productions.* Thus, it is an important part of the process, as it is a clear indication of the extent to which students have attained the expected academic outcomes. However, the importance of these projects varies between different programmes, and it is sometimes relatively minor when it comes to some of the professional degrees, which must be taken into account in the evaluations. In these cases the other assessment materials, especially the evidence of outcome attainment in the self-evaluations, become more important.

## **THE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS' SELF-EVALUATIONS**

The self-evaluations submitted by the higher education institution serve two purposes. The first is to enable a broader and more comprehensive presentation of outcomes than a selection of independent projects can offer. In their self-evaluations, therefore, the institutions should present, analyse, and assess the outcomes attained in relation to all the outcomes to be taken into account in the evaluation. *They should include specific evidence that outcomes are attained rather than references to plans, conditions and processes.* Evidence may be presented in terms of summaries and analyses (with illustrated examples) of students' essays or laboratory reports. The institutions' own analysis of the independent projects may also be used. Some reference to prerequisites and processes may, however, be presented to demonstrate how the institution guarantees student attainment of these outcomes. Secondly, circumstances that have manifest significance for the results of a programme, e.g. the qualifications of teachers and their availability, as well as students' preconditions, can be taken into account. In cases where few independent projects are available or where they play a minor role in the programme, the self-evaluation becomes proportionately more important.

## **STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES**

Students' experiences are collected in interviews with students approaching the end of their studies. The aim is to find additional evidence regarding the extent to which the programme contributes to their attainment of its intended outcomes as indicated in the qualification descriptors.

## **ALUMNI QUESTIONNAIRES**

Questionnaires for alumni are intended to provide information about whether a programme attains the outcome of usefulness in the labour market. They may also provide indications about whether those now employed consider that they attained the intended outcomes. The questionnaires are sent primarily to those who graduated two years prior to the evaluation, and who can thus be assumed to have gained labour market experience, while at the same time their studies are not too distant. Questionnaires are sent to no less than 20 alumni. A response rate of at least 50 per cent is required for results to be considered reliable.

## **A THREE-LEVEL SCALE FOR THE OVERALL ASSESSMENT**

The overall assessment of an evaluation is presented on a three-level scale:

1. *Very high quality: the study programme displays a very high degree of achievement of outcomes*
2. *High quality: the study programme displays a high degree of achievement of outcomes*
3. *Inadequate quality: the study programme does not achieve all outcomes*

The panel submits its overall assessment of each study programme to the Agency using the three-level scale. This evaluation must clearly indicate how well the students are considered to have achieved the outcomes evaluated. The grounds for each evaluation must be provided by the panel. On the basis of the assessment panel's report, the Agency reaches a decision on the overall assessment to be awarded to each programme of study.

Those that are given the overall assessment of *Very high quality* or *High quality* are considered to have attained the quality standards for higher education. Those that fail to attain the required standards are given the evaluation *Inadequate quality*, in which case the Agency extends the higher education institution's entitlement to award the relevant qualification conditionally. These programmes will then be reviewed within the following year before the Agency decides whether or not the entitlement should be revoked. A small percentage of the higher education budget provided by the Government will be reserved for institutions with programmes that display *Very high quality*. This funding will be made available as from 2013, after the first results of the four-year cycle have been presented.

### **SOME POSITIVE SIDE EFFECTS**

The evaluation system will contribute to increased knowledge and awareness of the national qualification descriptors. What we have seen so far is that higher education institutions review how intended learning outcomes for individual courses are linked to the qualification descriptors.

Higher education institutions have been seen to work harder to improve their internal quality assurance. For example, they do their own pre-evaluations, in particular when it comes to the assessment of independent projects. In some cases institutions have decided to close down a programme facing evaluation.

### **CHALLENGES**

#### **A minimum of five independent projects for the programme to be evaluated**

In an output oriented evaluation system where student's results are an important part of the assessment, the independent project has proved to be a key element in the evaluation process. A random selection of between 5 and 24 independent projects is appraised for each programme evaluated. No programmes with less than five independent projects will be part of this evaluation system. How they will be evaluated, remains to be decided.

#### **An output oriented self-evaluation**

The most important part of the self-evaluation is where the higher education institution has the opportunity to present, analyse and assess the outcomes achieved in relation to the targets in the qualification descriptors. A minor part of the self-evaluation treats prerequisites, such as teacher qualifications. This shift, towards an output oriented self-evaluation has caused difficulties for the higher education institutions as to how to present evidence of attainment of outcomes. Student's intended learning outcomes are usually unproblematic to describe, but how is evidence of the actual achievement presented in a self-evaluation? This has been one of the key issues for the higher education institutions in the self-evaluation process.

#### **Are we assessing students more than programmes?**

This is probably one of the most frequent criticisms of the evaluation system. To us, it is obvious that if the qualification descriptors, established in line with the QF-EHEA, are to

be at the centre of the evaluation processes, it is necessary to include students' actual goal attainment in the evaluation process. And, as has already been stated, the appraisal of the students' independent projects is not about redoing the work of the examiner, but to look for goal attainment in relation to the outcomes in the qualification descriptors. It is the aggregate quality of the programme's independent projects that is to provide the basis of the evaluation and not specific excellent or poor productions. The panel assesses the degree of outcome achievement in the independent projects, in the self-evaluation or in any of the other assessment material. This evaluation system is not about assessing students, but putting students' knowledge and employability at the heart of quality assurance.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Now, back to the initial questions: yes, we believe this can be done. We are at the beginning of the process and continuous review will help us learn and develop best practice. We evaluate learning outcomes in line with the Bologna Process for the sake of the students and increased employability.

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# QUALITY ASSURANCE AND QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS: A STAKEHOLDER VIEW

*Tony Donohoe, Head of Education Policy, Irish Business and Employers Confederation*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Access to a skilled workforce is a pressing challenge that companies face to maintain and improve their competitive position at global level. Around the world, we witness an unprecedented competition between companies to attract talent. It is critical that Europe has a work force that is mobile and equipped with a set of skills and competencies that are responsive to actual labour market demands. Therefore we need transparent and comparable qualifications, irrespective of the way the competencies have been acquired.

This short paper offers an employer's view, of quality assurance and qualifications frameworks. In order to provide a context, it starts with a brief recent history of the evolution of qualifications and quality assurance in Ireland. It explores some of the benefits for policy makers, employers, employees and funders. The paper also suggests that there are significant challenges at a national and European level before the potential of qualifications frameworks to underpin a lifelong learning society can be fully realised.

## **EVOLUTION OF QUALIFICATIONS AND QUALITY ASSURANCE IN IRELAND**

Towards the end of the 1990s, there was a growing realisation of the need for a coherent national policy approach to qualifications in Ireland. It was based on an acknowledgement that the present and future workforce would need to constantly update its knowledge, skills and competence. This would require a more flexible system of qualifications and greater clarity in the meaning of qualifications. As the global workforce was becoming more mobile, there was also a need for international comparison and alignment of qualifications. Meanwhile developments, such as the Lisbon Strategy, the Copenhagen process, the Bologna framework and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) provided further impetus to the development of the a National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Key milestones in the process were:

- Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999
- The establishment of three new organisations to bring coherence to the system. These were (a) the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) which would have responsibility for making and promoting awards at levels 1 - 6<sup>8</sup> on the NFQ; (b) the Higher Education and Training Award Council (HETAC) which would have responsibility for levels 6-10; (c) the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) which would have overall responsibility for the establishment and maintenance of a framework of qualifications.
- The introduction of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in 2003. The NFQ is built on an architecture of 'levels', 'award-types', and 'named awards'. There are ten levels and four classes of award-type (major, minor, supplemental and special-purpose). The framework includes 16 major award-types defined for the

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<sup>8</sup> The Irish NFQ predated the EQF and was based on a 10-level framework. These levels have since been referenced to the EQF.

framework (e.g. advanced certificate, honours bachelor degree). A 'named award' is what a learner actually receives (e.g. Advanced Certificate in Craft – Electrical.)

- Ireland verified the compatibility of its National Framework of Qualifications with the Bologna Framework in 2006 and completed the referencing of its levels against those of the EQF in June 2009.

In 2008, the Irish Government decided to amalgamate the NQAI, FETAC and HETAC into a single agency, Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland. The new organisation will also take responsibility for the external quality assurance review of the universities, a function which is currently performed by the Irish Universities Quality Board and the Higher Education Authority.

## **BENEFITS FOR EMPLOYERS**

The development of NFQ has helped to deepen Irish employers' understanding of the education and training system so that they can attract and develop staff that possess the skills needed for business success. As in many European countries, the education and training systems in Ireland had developed along parallel lines. Employers do not make this distinction. The framework has been a valuable tool for Irish companies in comparing qualifications, whatever their origin. It has also allowed employers to:

- Specify the level of knowledge, skill and competence required for occupational roles.
- Evaluate qualifications presented. In this regard, the NFQ widened the pool of suitable applicants as individuals with comparable qualifications to those stipulated and those with comparable foreign qualifications could be considered for positions. The NQAI offered a service called Qualifications Recognition, which provided employers and recruiters with a means of comparing and contrasting foreign qualifications with qualifications in the Irish system.
- Simplify their applications procedure.
- Connect training and development with business needs – the ten levels of the NFQ are based on learning outcomes; what an individual knows, understands and is able to do following successful completion of a programme of study. Learning outcomes and the clarity provided by the NFQ regarding access, transfer and progression opportunities has helped employers to plan and assess staff training and education needs, by pitching and fitting the right education and training with both individual and business needs, thereby increasing return on their investment.
- Get their in-company education and training certified. All qualifications on the NFQ are quality assured and the Framework supports the development and certification of all learning wherever it takes place; this includes the workplace. In-company training can lead to nationally and internationally recognised qualifications, thus rewarding employees for their participation in continuous professional development programmes.
- Secure funding for workplace training. Increasingly, public funding for workplace training and development is aimed at supporting up-skilling initiatives that lead to qualifications recognised through the NFQ.
- Support performance management by using qualifications on the NFQ to motivate their workforce to maintain high performing work environments.
- Become an employer of choice. Using the NFQ as a workplace resource demonstrates the company's commitment to investing in their most important asset and helps them to attract, retain and motivate the talent needed for success.

While this paper primarily offers the employer perspective, it is also noteworthy that the NFQ enables learners to achieve qualifications in different ways, in formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts. It also emphasises credit accumulation and transfer, and the achievement of smaller packages of learning. The framework removes the distinction between qualifications attained for learning on the job and off the job. It also provides access to learning opportunities and improves information provision.

Overall the NFQ has provided a coherent framework on which to base Ireland's national skills strategy. This presents a vision of Ireland in 2020 with a well-educated and highly skilled population which contributes to a competitive, innovation-driven, knowledge-based, participative and inclusive economy. The strategy states that by 2020:

- 48% of labour force should have qualifications at NFQ Levels 6-10 (3rd/4th level)
- 45% should have qualifications at Levels 4 & 5 (upper secondary);
- The remaining 7% will have qualifications at Levels 1-3 (lower secondary or below)
- Ireland should aim to build capability at fourth level and double its PhD output (Level 10) by 2013

The framework enables the government agency to tangibly measure its progress in achieving these ambitions.

## **CHALLENGES**

This account does not seek to minimise the significant challenge facing qualifications and quality assurance agencies, particularly at a European level. The most significant of these challenges is the need to develop awareness of the frameworks amongst all stakeholders. This task is sometimes made more difficult by the obscure language that surrounds the subject. Qualifications and quality assurance is a highly technical and specialised business with its own conceptual framework. However, it is in danger of becoming an industry in itself, which is divorced from the realities of the workplace and learner needs. I would suggest that this challenge has been acknowledged in Ireland and a lot of effort has been invested in translating the technicalities of the subject into something that employers and their staff can understand. A recent survey by the Irish Business and Employers Confederation indicated that 70% of Irish employers considered accreditation on the NFQ as a significant factor when selecting an external training programme.

Given its relatively short (nine year) history, this is a remarkable achievement. However there are challenges. For example, in some sections of the third level sector, there is a perceived conflict of interest between labour market orientation and higher education values. There is a belief amongst some academics that qualifications frameworks encourage a limited 'reductionist' view of education. Again, in Ireland, there has been significant progress in addressing these concerns. The University Framework Implementation Network was jointly established by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and the Irish Universities Association in 2007 (see <http://www.nfqnetwork.ie>). The purpose of the network is to deepen the implementation of the NFQ within the university sector, primarily through the exchange of experience and practice between members. The network has developed common principles and approaches to framework implementation, and produced guidelines on the design of programmes and the use and assessment of learning outcomes.

There are also missed opportunities with regard to employers fully using the framework, particularly to accredit their own programmes. Irish and European companies spend significant resources on in-company training. Yet the IBEC survey revealed that only 22.5% of companies were seeking accreditation for their internal training

programmes. This is not helped by the perception that the accreditation process is complex and time-consuming. There will always be a healthy tension between awarding bodies, who are concerned with quality, and training providers who are seeking accreditation for their courses in the fastest and most cost effective way possible. Quality is the most important underpinning principle of qualifications frameworks and should never be compromised. However, it is important that accreditation processes are efficient, fast and not burdened with bureaucratic procedures.

The potential of qualifications frameworks to underpin the development of recognition of prior learning (RPL) also has not been fully realised. Good experience of RPL practice has been built up in Ireland. However this has been achieved largely on an *ad-hoc* or project basis. More mainstream development takes time and resources. Policy and practice should focus on areas of demand by expanding on the basis of existing effective practices and demonstrated successful outcomes/benefits relative to costs. Features of an effective 'mainstream' RPL system include:

- One-Stop-Shops for RPL advice, guidance and assessments
- Dedicated RPL resources, personnel and infrastructure
- Dedicated RPL 'knowledge centre' for policy, information and promotion.

At a European level, the challenges facing quality assurance and qualifications frameworks appear more serious. This is not helped by the confusing number of instruments:

- European Qualifications Framework (EQF)
- Qualifications Framework for European Higher Education Area (Bologna Framework)
- European Quality Assurance in VET (EQARF)
- European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)
- European Credit System for Vocational Training and Education (ECVET)
- ESCO: a new European classification of skills and competences

European business welcomes the fact that these tools are expressed in terms of knowledge, skills and competence, i.e. learning outcomes rather than input based measures such as duration of studies. However, they also needed to be assessed based on whether they will contribute to improvements in the functioning of labour markets, facilitate the development of lifelong learning and not lead to unnecessary bureaucracy. Measured against these preconditions, it is clear from the actual outcomes so far that these instruments are still far from delivering. The Copenhagen and Bologna processes cannot continue to develop separately.

For member states that are already making use of the EQF levels, it is necessary to evaluate whether implementing these has successfully contributed to the use of learning outcomes by education providers, employers and employees. Social partners on European and national level play an important part in the implementation process and their experience of the tool so far should be assessed.

There is a high level of agreement on the benefits of shifting from a workload based approach in credit and qualification systems towards one that is based on outcome. Such an approach constitutes a step towards greater openness of standards, learning programmes and qualifications. It follows from this added transparency that national and cross-border staff mobility will increase as well.

For employers, building credit and qualification systems on the actual outcome from learning will make it easier to assess what competencies an individual possesses. This

will in turn contribute to a better match of supply and demand on European labour markets. It should be said that employers do not reward qualifications. They reward performance. Likewise, the education system should increasingly reward the actual outcome from studies rather than for instance the number of weeks a course comprises.

Progression opportunities from VET towards higher education are important and could be facilitated by making more transparent what the learning outcome is of a certain VET education. For an individual who wishes to continue into higher education, it should be easy to demonstrate to the people responsible for accrediting within the higher education system what skills and competencies he or she has acquired. EQF could prove a useful tool to increase permeability between VET and higher education credit systems, since it makes qualifications more transparent.

However, it is imperative that enabling such permeability will not lead to an increased focus on theoretical elements for VET overall, to the detriment of practical training. This is fundamental for VET students to acquire the competencies and skills that will make them employable on the labour market. The shift towards an outcome-based learning needs to be promoted more strongly also for higher education. This will enable students to move more easily between VET and higher education as the qualification and credit systems of higher education become more compatible with those of VET.

It is also important that the European and national qualifications frameworks are underpinned by robust quality assurance systems. Trust in the frameworks is essential to the guarantee of comparability between awards and of the parity of esteem in the awards provided by different bodies.



# QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS AND LEARNING OUTCOMES IN PROGRAMME ORIENTED QUALITY ASSURANCE - A BRIEF STORY OF DENMARK, AND A FEW INTERNATIONAL COMMENTS

*David Metz, ACE Denmark - The Accreditation Institution*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2007 the concept of *learning outcomes* was introduced into Danish university programmes through a ministerial order on a new grading scale (compatible with the ECTS scale) to be used in the assessment of students' achievements. It did not enter into force until late in 2007, since it required that "the university lays down precise descriptions of objectives and criteria for assessing the fulfilment of such objective for the individual subjects/subject elements which are concluded with a test"<sup>9</sup>. The requirement of "precise objectives" - another term for *intended learning outcomes* - for each subject was relatively new in a university educational context in Denmark. Up until that point educational programmes were typically described in somewhat broader terms of objectives<sup>10</sup>, while subjects were mostly defined by their curriculum. In many ways this could be perceived as a small revolution, since students and teachers alike now in theory - because of the required description of objectives - were enabled to see the intended purpose of every subject in any programme.

Later in 2007 an act and an order on accreditation and accreditation criteria was given, in which it was specified that the learning outcomes of all university programmes had to meet the requirements of the new Danish National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (NQF-HE). The NQF-HE was first published in 2008 and finally became an official part of the legislation in December 2009 through the latest revision of the order on accreditation criteria<sup>11</sup> of which the NQF-HE is an appendix.

## RECEPTION OF LEARNING OUTCOMES AND QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

There have been no official national studies on the reception of learning outcomes and qualification frameworks among stakeholders in higher education in Denmark. A recent PhD thesis<sup>12</sup>, however, has studied Bologna reforms in Portugal, England and Denmark in a comparative perspective. Empirically it is based on interviews with students and faculty staff (in physics programmes), as well as document studies and interviews with government agency officials and other stakeholders at a national level (carried out in 2010). The findings for Denmark here are *indifference* towards anything Bologna

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9 Ministerial Order no. 250 of 15 March 2007

10 To be fair, universities had since 2003 worked on implementing learning outcomes *on a programme level*, using an early draft of the Danish national qualification framework, and were since 2004 required by ministerial order to formulate "academic and vocational skills" achieved in all programmes.

11 Ministerial Order no. 1402 of 14 December 2009

12 Cristina Sin (2012): *Loose Policy and Local Adaptation: a Comparative Study of Master Degrees in the Context of the Bologna Process*, Lancaster University, Department of Educational Research.

related amongst faculty staff and students, except for two things: 1) the 3+2 structure of university programmes, which is seen as an irrelevant formality since a bachelor degree is perceived as having next to no relevance in a Danish context; and 2) the support for international student mobility through a structural degree convergence on the European level and the ensuing commitment to mutual recognition of qualifications.

While some teachers in Danish universities find *learning outcomes* to be a useful tool in course planning and student assessment, they reportedly tend to not give them much thought while carrying out courses. Most students, on the other hand, seem to be aware of the presence of described learning outcomes in the course syllabus as well as on an aggregate level in the overall study programme description, but do not perceive them as useful in guiding their studying activities – they are more concerned with reading prescribed texts and doing prescribed exercises. Contrastingly, interviewees from both the Danish Ministry<sup>13</sup> and from Universities Denmark<sup>14</sup> together with other stakeholders at the national level, regard *learning outcomes* as having had a “huge impact” and having been “an enormous administrative task to implement”.

Sin’s PhD thesis is a case study, sampling only physics programmes. The findings on the perceptions and knowledge of learning outcomes, however, coincide with the experiences in the Danish accreditation system, when interviewing students and teachers from all types of programmes during site visits. An impression that was recently substantiated at a meeting hosted by ACE Denmark in January 2012 with a presentation from a representative of the Danish Students’ Union, stating that while programme learning outcomes could be a relevant add-on guiding students in their choice of education, hardly any potential students ever see them today. Furthermore a representative from the Confederation of Danish Industry, speaking on behalf of employers, said that she sees the programme learning outcomes as mainly a tool to be used within the universities and largely useless as a tool for employers. Indeed, there seems to be good evidence for the characterisation Sin makes of the Danish Bologna implementation as a “top-down” process and effectively resulting in “strategic conformity” due to the perceived gains in international student mobility.

The case could be made for a little less gloomy picture, though. At the aforementioned meeting in January 2012 a researcher from a Danish university stressed the potential for programme learning outcomes to bridge the gaps between educational programmes, students, and employers, while still acknowledging the current pitfalls of e.g. making the writing up of learning outcomes a tiresome, bureaucratic exercise of trying to describe what is already being done, only now in slightly different terms. Ownership and commitment seem to be lacking, so the question now is what can external QA do in this respect?

## **THE ROLE OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE**

In Denmark there is a very long tradition of external quality assurance of education at all levels through the use of external examiners. With the introduction of course level *learning outcomes* and programme accreditation in 2007, a division of labour was introduced:

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<sup>13</sup> The Ministry of Science, Innovation and Higher Education (current name)

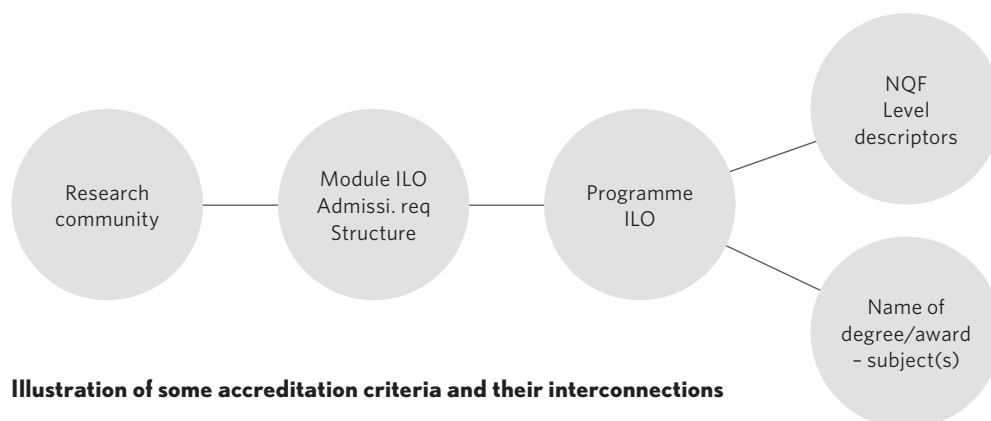
<sup>14</sup> The confederation of all Danish universities

EXTERNAL EXAMINERS	EVALUATION TEAMS (ACCREDITATION PANELS)
Measure ALO vs. ILO on 1/3 of all ECTS-credits in all programmes	Programme ILO vs. NQF-descriptors
Are obliged to report problems with assessment practice	Module ILO vs. Programme ILO
Report once a year on status, including any given problems on ALO levels	Assessment practices vs. Programme ILO

External examiners take part in the assessment of students' achievements in minimum 1/3 of every programme by grading them in collaboration with course teachers. Since 2007 the grading is done by assessing the achieved learning outcome as compared to the intended learning outcome of the subject. Furthermore, the external examiners oversee that assessment practice is appropriate and draft up a report once a year on that subject.

The evaluation teams in programme accreditation also evaluate assessment practices but as a theoretical analysis by comparing the practices described in a programme with the overall learning outcome to make sure there is a minimum of alignment. The validity of the analysis is tested during site visits by student interviews.

The evaluation team further analyses the overall alignment of the (intended) learning outcomes at module and programme level, as well as the conformity of the programme learning outcomes to the requirements of the NQF-HE at the appropriate level:



### Illustration of some accreditation criteria and their interconnections

Some difficulties have been identified thus far:

1. In some cases the programme learning outcomes are of a very generic nature, almost replicating the descriptors of the NQF-HE<sup>15</sup>. There is no easy answer to this problem. At formal level, the description is aligned with the NQF level, but two types of intervention can be possible: in cases of very generic descriptions it can be pointed out that the description is not aligned with the name of the programme and the award. And since generic descriptions are very broad in scope, it can be pointed out that the learning outcomes of the modules do not in full support the programme's description. In some cases this can lead to universities revising the description of programme learning outcomes. Whether it has any impact on the actual planning of the curriculum of the programme remains to be seen.

<sup>15</sup> The Danish NQF has an absolutely abstract nature because it has to cover all conceivable subjects.

2. Evaluation teams can be prejudiced as to what the norms are for programmes within a given subject, or more concerned with curriculum and syllabuses than with the described learning outcomes of the specific programme. Tell-tale signs are usually when team members ask for book lists for a specific course or when they openly compare the evaluated programme to programmes they are familiar with at other universities. The response to this difficulty has so far been to up-grade the training of evaluation team members, among other things focusing on the concept of learning outcomes, with the aim of making the teams act as advocates of the concept. Increased guidance of team members' compliance with the accreditation concept before or after site visits has also been used.

If the above difficulties do not prevent a relevant analysis, the team tests it in interviews with programme management, students, and teachers during a site visit. As indicated earlier it is during these interviews that it becomes apparent more often than not, that students and often several teachers have only rudimentary knowledge of the formulated learning outcomes for subjects and the programme as a whole. Programme management, however, are typically more knowledgeable, but they have recently written a self evaluation report that should account for the alignment of outcomes.

The possible effects of programme accreditation, with regards to the implementation of learning outcomes and qualification frameworks in Denmark, can in benign cases be raising the awareness of the use of learning outcomes and how they can be utilised for planning and further developing educational programmes. This is achieved through the exercise of writing up the self evaluation report<sup>16</sup> and through the interviews with the evaluation team. In more problematic cases the effect can be achieved by a more direct intervention in the make-up of a programme, by pointing out inconsistencies and requiring for them to be amended.

Whether these stipulated effects are sufficient for stimulating the development of commitment and ownership towards learning outcomes (and NQF) for stakeholders in university education cannot yet be answered. It seems safe to guess, though, that it will probably not be the case for employers. That would require a different approach.

## **A FEW INTERNATIONAL COMMENTS**

Most other countries do not have a system similar to the Danish use of external examiners, and to many it would not be "culturally acceptable" to try to implement such a system. The Danish system relies on some form of measurement of *achieved* learning outcomes. Other countries will have to find other ways of achieving this. The discussion in the break-out group touched upon different types of measures:

1. *Career track studies* following the career paths of graduates
2. *Survey of alumni* asking for their self evaluation of learning outcomes
3. *Survey of employers* asking their evaluation of graduates' proficiency
4. *Pre-graduation survey of students* asking for their self evaluation of learning outcomes
5. *Measuring the outcome of keystone courses* make sample studies of student performance

While all of the above methods may be enlightening, they can only be indirect measures of learning outcomes. On the other hand, the Danish model with external examiners is expensive and less than bulletproof: it relies on external examiners actually adopting

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<sup>16</sup> Assuming the writing of the report is not commissioned from a specialised unit within the university, which sometimes seem to be the case.

*intended learning outcomes* as the benchmark for assessing students' achievement, and yet they only take part in assessing less than half of the programmes' outcomes.

So perhaps, if the scale of the potential small revolution is to be investigated seriously, the answer lies not in better measurement, but instead in finding new ways of stimulating ownership of the concept of learning outcomes.

# RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING AND THE ROLE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES. ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN FRANCE AS A CASE STUDY

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) implies the formal acknowledgement of learning acquired in a non-formal context (usually coming from experience unrelated to an academic context). This process is generally seen as an important tool for progressing in the fields of lifelong learning and continuing education, two preeminent objectives of the Lisbon agenda. RPL is normally conducted by educational institutions or professional certification bodies. In the case of certifications issued by educational institutions, this process provides recognition of a certain academic level (according to a national qualifications framework) in view of two main objectives: increasing labour market recognition and/or enabling access to a higher level of studies.

Because of its potential role in the fields of employment and social promotion, RPL practices are politically sensitive and are normally part of an explicit political agenda which responds to national objectives. This political dimension must be taken into account by quality assurance agencies as a starting point in order to develop quality assurance criteria in this field. The answer to the question: *what makes a sound RPL process?* is fundamentally dependent on the pursued goals and cannot in any way be affronted from an exclusively technical perspective.

An ENQA break-out group session devoted to this subject within the workshop on Quality assurance and qualifications frameworks has enabled to confront different national realities and policies regarding RPL and, in consequence, different quality assurance roles and practices among the different QAA represented. In this paper, the French experience in the field of prior learning recognition, or in French terms, *validation des acquis de l'expérience* (VAE), is presented as a case study which enables to illustrate some important general issues. After analysing this case, the last section of this paper tries to reproduce the main issues raised during the discussion held at ENQA's workshop break-out session on recognition of prior learning, and draw some conclusions as to the possible role of quality assurance agencies.

## RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN FRANCE (VALIDATION DES ACQUIS DE L'EXPÉRIENCE- VAE)

### NATIONAL CONTEXT

RPL processes, as they are practiced today in France, were established by the 2002 Law on social modernization<sup>17</sup> with the name of VAE (*validation des acquis de l'expérience*).

This law establishes an *individual right* to the recognition of professional experience in the acquisition of an academic title or a diploma. This recognition device was established within the following context:

- *The existence of a significant population sector with a low or inexistent graduation level*<sup>18</sup>. Regardless of their individual competences, this population sector was not recognised by the French labour market, and their professional and social ascension was, in practice, very difficult.
- *Initial qualifications play a stronger role in France than in other countries* (Anglo-Saxon countries, for example) in reference to social hierarchy. Some authors talk about a 'French structural fondness for qualifications'<sup>19</sup> or even about a 'French dictatorship of qualifications'<sup>20</sup>. A 2005 study shows that over 73% of job offers in France, regardless of the age of the candidate, mention the number of years of study and the qualification required (in Great Britain, this rate goes down to 27%)<sup>21</sup>. Different studies also show that the possession of a diploma enables a quicker and more stable access to the job market in France. The fact of having a diploma has also an impact on the stability of the contract (with a much higher rate of indefinite contracts for graduates)<sup>22</sup>. Finally, the possession of an initial academic qualification plays, at least since Napoleonic times, an important symbolic role in the meritocratic France, where initial qualifications are one of the axes for social differentiation.
- *A dual training system which establishes a sharp distinction between initial training and continuous and vocational education training (CVET)*. As an example, only around 1,5 % of continuous education actions in 1996 resulted in an academic title or diploma<sup>23</sup>.

The new VAE system established by the 2002 law tries to profit from the major role played by initial diplomas in France in order to attain two main objectives:

- Facilitate social promotion and secure career paths
- Build a bridge between the CVET system and the initial training system.

### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE FRENCH VAE SYSTEM

The VAE process enables an individual to get all or part of a certification (diploma or professional qualification certificate) based on his/her professional experience (salaried, non-salaried, or voluntary). This experience, which must be related to the intended certification, is validated by a panel. If the VAE process leads to an academic

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17 Law n° 2002-73 du 17 janvier 2002 de modernisation sociale

18 According to the 1995 INSEE (Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques- *National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies*) employment survey, four out of ten workers in France didn't have any formal qualification at the time.

19 TRYBY, Emmanuel; *Accreditation of prior experiential learning and the development of higher education*; European journal of vocational training, N° 46- 2009/1-ISSN 1977-0219

20 Méhaut Philippe, Lecourt Anne-Juliette (2007) ; *The accreditation of prior learning experience in France : A good start, to be continued* ; Discussion paper.

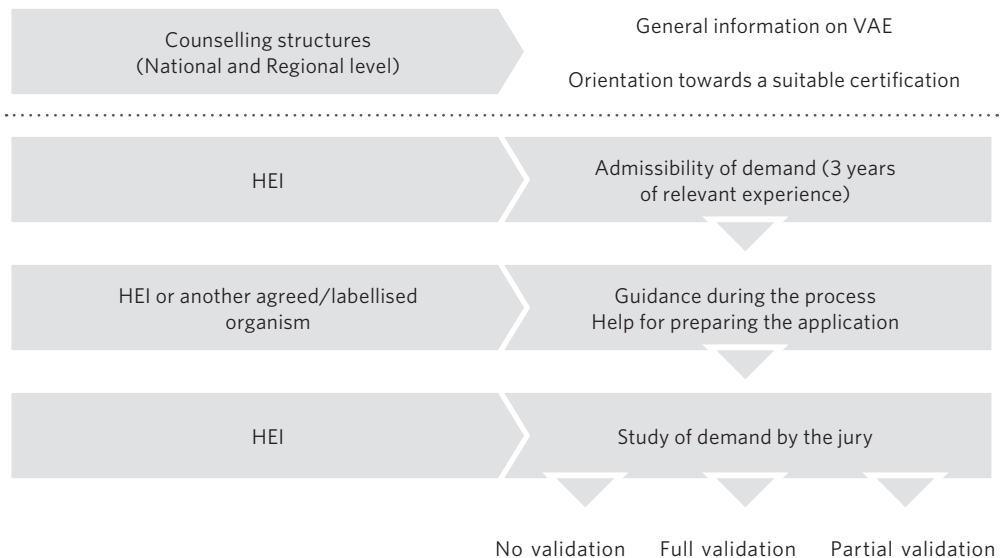
21 Marchal Emmanuelle, Rieucou Géraldine (2003) « *Candidat de plus de 40 ans non diplômé ou débutant s'abstenir* », *Connaissance de l'emploi* n°11, CEE

22 Studies made by the CEREQ (Centre d'Études et des Recherches sur les Qualifications - *Center for the study and research on qualifications*)

23 Again from the studies by the CEREQ

qualification, it is directly assessed and recognised by the higher education institution. The diploma obtained has exactly the same validity as a diploma obtained by an ordinary study path. All diplomas, certificates, and professional qualifications are available through VAE. They are registered in a public registry (RNCP- National Register of Professional Certifications, <http://www.rncp.cncp.gouv.fr/>). Academic diplomas registered in RNCP cover a variety of levels, from secondary education to the masters level. All engineering degrees (masters level diplomas) are included by law in the RNCP and have thus the obligation of delivering their diplomas also through VAE.

The diagram below shows the main steps of the VAE process and the main actors involved. Several structures at the regional and national level have been put in place in order to provide general information on the procedure and to orientate candidates towards a suitable certification. Once the certification is chosen, a first check on the admissibility of the request (mainly the verification of the candidate having the three years of relevant experience required) is conducted. After passing the admissibility check, the candidate must prepare an application which will be finally examined by a mixed panel composed of academic and professional members. The panel may issue a full or a partial validation. In the latter case, the jury can propose the necessary pedagogical complements (courses, internships, and so on). There is no time limit for obtaining these additional competences.



## THE VAE PROCESS IN ENGINEERING HIGHER EDUCATION IN FRANCE: THE ROLE OF CTI

The main mission of CTI is to conduct accreditation of engineering programmes in France. CTI supervises all paths for obtaining an engineering diploma, including VAE. All engineering institutions must include a specific section concerning VAE in their self-assessment report in view of programme accreditation (VAE procedures, number of accreditations issued, number of candidates, cost of the process, type of compensatory measures proposed, etc.).

CTI has developed a set of criteria regarding the way VAE procedures should be conducted. These criteria are gathered in the document *Références et Orientations*



(References and Guidelines- available at [www.cti-commission.fr](http://www.cti-commission.fr)). The quality criteria applied are coherent with the political goals established at the national level. In consequence, the criteria have been developed under the assumption that VAE is *basically a beneficial procedure*, with a strong potential to boost employment and social advancement. Engineering institutions in France are sometimes accused of being elitists, and VAE is considered by CTI as one of the devices which can be employed to foster social diversity in this environment.

The legal obligation for all HEIs to establish VAE processes has also had some methodological benefits at the national level, in the sense that it has been a major driver to formalise the competence-based approach within French higher education institutions. Some engineering institutions in France are reluctant to deliver their diplomas through VAE, as they think that the educational value of the VAE is lower than a classical diploma and hence could degrade the value of their academic certificates. Being able to articulate a VAE procedure that ensures the same level of exigency as in the standard path is indeed a crucial issue for CTI.

At the other end of the spectrum, some higher education institutions could take this practice as a business opportunity. The fact that they can deliver a “partial validation” followed by a recommendation on pedagogical complementary elements could encourage engineering institutions to use VAE in order to *fill* their continuous education programmes. CTI is aware of this potential conflict of interest and tries to be vigilant in order to prevent abuse.

As far as accreditation is concerned, CTI has tried to adopt a balanced position, which respects the specific policies of each institution with regards to VAE but, at the same time, tries to ensure a fair implementation of these recognition processes. The main accreditation criteria applied by CTI are:

- *Certification*: the diploma delivered must be strictly the same as that delivered through other learning paths.
- *Professional outcomes of the programme*: engineering institutions must adequately formalise the outcomes of their programmes in a way that they can serve the certification of professional competences. These descriptions must be made public and transmitted to the National Registry of Professional Certifications.
- *Evaluation procedures and criteria*: the procedures and evaluation criteria must be clear and public. They must guarantee an equitable treatment of all candidates. The evaluation criteria should be at the same exigency level than the ones used to attribute the diploma through other paths.
- *Information and guidance to the candidate*: institutions must be transparent and provide sufficient information to possible VAE candidates. They must put in place (or offer) guidance and counselling to the candidates throughout the process.
- *Accreditation panel*: the VAE panel must include academic and professional members (other than the external lecturers of the programme). It must include some members from the jury that delivers the ordinary diploma in order to ensure a same exigency level, but other than that, the composition must be substantially different and adapted to understand the specific challenges of this track.

## CONCLUSIONS

Recognition of prior learning is implemented at various levels and with various objectives in the different European countries. Whereas the RPL process in some countries<sup>24</sup> mainly involves considering the learner’s prior formal or informal learning in order to gain entry

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24 Such as Ireland, Germany or the Netherlands

to further study or to gain credit or exemption towards a degree, in other countries, such as France, RPL is used as a major route to award an academic degree.

The case of France's VAE is indeed an extreme case. VAE enables the acquisition of a complete academic degree through the exclusive validation of professional experience. The VAE legislation does not limit the number of certifications obtained by a particular person. In France, it is hence possible to get up to the master level without having any formal academic qualification. As an example, we can examine the case of a French citizen, who left school without his secondary education degree and was subsequently able to obtain 6 academic diplomas through VAE (including a bachelor in literary Arabic) up to the master level. This person is currently in charge of VAE processes at a prestigious engineering institution<sup>25</sup>.

The French approach to RPL raised some critical voices among QA colleagues during the ENQA workshop break-out group discussion. Whereas the break-out group participants could easily accept that one can arrive to the same level of professional competence through working experience as via an academic degree, it is more difficult to argue that this path could be equivalent in terms of methodological skills and analytic capacity. There is also an experiential dimension associated to formal higher education which definitely plays a role in building a competence profile.

The case of Hong Kong<sup>26</sup> provides an example of how RPL processes can be established without mixing the notions of *level* and *profile*. In Hong Kong the recognition of professional competences is made by a number of specific agencies with close links to industry. Candidates obtain recognition of a certain academic level and the right to be admitted to a higher level of studies, but they do not obtain an academic degree.

However, the French VAE should be understood in the light of the French specific national context, namely a number of urgent structural problems which needed to be addressed in order to improve competitiveness and social equity, and the special role played by initial qualifications.

RPL practices are indeed politically sensitive and highly dependent on the context. Agencies must explicitly assume this political dimension in order to define what role to play regarding RPL processes. The following questions should be posed:

- Is RPL an important issue in my specific national and political context? Is it being practiced at a significant level?
- Are there any risks of derive in the way HEIs are implementing these recognition processes?

Depending of the answer to these questions, the quality assurance agency may adopt a more or less active role. In the case of France, RPL practices are politically important and there are indeed certain risks - such as a general resistance of institutions to VAE; conflicts of interest to be avoided; and certain methodological aspects associated to the competences approaches - which justify, as we have seen, an active role from the national accreditation agency.

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25 See for example, the case of Hassane Akka:  
<http://orientactuel.centre-info.fr/Hassane-Akka-de-bac-3-a-bac-5-en.html>

26 [http://www.hkqf.gov.hk/guie/HKQF\\_intro.asp](http://www.hkqf.gov.hk/guie/HKQF_intro.asp)

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MARCHAL Emmanuelle, RIEUCAU Géraldine (2003) « Candidat de plus de 40 ans non diplômé ou débutant s'abstenir », *Connaissance de l'emploi n°11, CEE*

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# ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING OUTCOMES: THE CASE OF ANECA

*Rafael Llavori, Head of Unit for International Relations, ANECA, Spain*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The assessment of learning outcomes (LO) has become a major element in the last five years in the quality assurance and accreditation approaches throughout the European Higher Education Area. They play a major role in the evaluation of the study programmes. The challenge is the definition of clear and useful tools, which allow agencies to identify that the programme has in place mechanisms that assure the correct achievement of the different types of learning outcomes defined in the programme. To be sure that planning journey that comes from the intended learning outcomes defined in the programme proposal, to the achieved learning outcomes attained by the students according that proposal has been properly chartered.

We could say that the approach must be necessary tri-dimensional. It means that we need to bear in mind the '*length*' defined by the scope of the evaluation; a '*width*' represented by the national/regional/specific context; and the '*height*', represented by the nature of the institutions involved: programme or institutional. There is a general agreement on the fact that it is not possible to identify successful practices in a particular context and trying to transpose them into a different context. The contexts of the higher education system certainly matters. Here is where the different approaches accomplished by the agencies at the European level can provide us with a useful range of good practices to be collected and the different experiences of the higher education institutions in implementing these processes are definitely meaningful.

## **OUTCOMES OF THE BREAK-OUT GROUP ON I - ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING OUTCOMES**

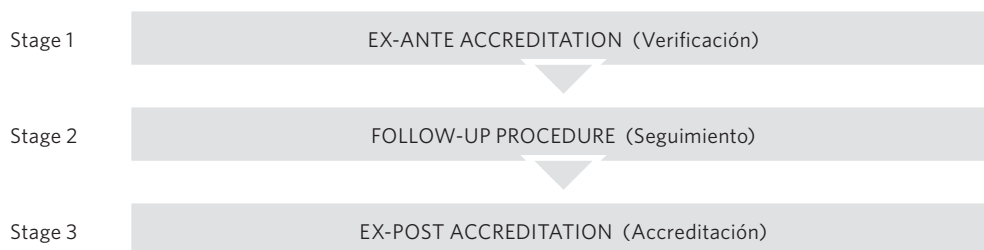
The main focus of the breakout group was to exchange the current experiences developed in the different settings represented at the table. As an introduction for the further debate the Spanish example represented by the National Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation, ANECA, was explained, underlining the challenges for both agencies and institutions 'in the making'.

## **THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS IN SPAIN: THE ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING OUTCOMES**

In Spain the legal framework establishes programmes accreditation in a three-stage process comprising ex-ante accreditation, a follow-up procedure throughout the implementation of the programme and an ex-post accreditation in six years for bachelors and four years for masters.

## THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS IN SPAIN

The Spanish legal framework establishes three different stages in the accreditation process



1. Ex-ante accreditation (*verificación* in Spanish): to verify that the design of the programme includes the criteria established by the Ministry. A public report is delivered by ANECA.
2. Follow-up procedure (*seguimiento*): to check, by non-intrusive means, that the institution is implementing the programme according to the approved design based on a certain number of indicators.
3. Ex-post accreditation (*acreditación*): to certify that the programme has been accomplished according to the already approved conditions in the ex-ante accreditation process.

The Spanish Qualifications Framework (MECES) was established in 2010. The legal framework integrates it as part of the evaluation process regarding competences. Furthermore, the Dublin Descriptors are part of the legal framework as the reference points for the bachelor, master and doctoral levels. Designs for new degrees have to be evaluated according to a series of quality-based criteria. The ex-ante accreditation procedure defines ten criteria:

1. Description of the degree
2. Justification
3. Competences
4. Student entry and admission
5. Programme planning
6. Academic staff
7. Resources and services
8. Anticipated outcomes
9. Quality assurance system
10. Agenda for implementing the degree

Criteria number 3, 5 and 8 are the relevant ones in terms of intended learning outcomes and are the key ones to be followed in the ex-post accreditation procedure.

The real challenge for the Spanish approach to the assessment of learning outcomes is twofold. For the QA agencies, matching the achieved learning outcomes to the list of intended ones and to develop effective and coherent tools to assess achieved learning outcomes leaving enough room to the programmes to avoid the definition of a ready-to-use recipe or a sort of, in this very case '*ANECA Companion to the assessment of learning outcomes*'.

For the higher education institutions, the main challenge has been the need to work out their agendas for adapting their teaching-learning experiences on the learning outcomes- approach from intended to achieved learning outcomes, and developing feasible assessment mechanisms to assure their attainment by the students. For the QA agency the challenge is to be able to develop tools to orient the learning outcomes assessment towards the work done by the institutions. The goal of the agency is to guarantee that the programme as a whole reached its objectives defined in the ex-ante accreditation in terms of achieved learning outcomes.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The main conclusions of the lively debate that took place in the break out group can be summarised as follows:

- Need to analyse the assessment of learning outcomes paying attention to the legal framework and academic context
- The maturity of the higher education system as a whole, and the implementation of other 'Bologna tools', such as qualifications frameworks, plays a significant role in the process
- The maturity of the higher education institutions in implementing ways of assessing learning outcomes
- The maturity of QA agencies in developing mechanisms to evaluate learning outcomes in a transparent, reliable and coherent way
- Need to focus on the quality assurance of the assessment procedures of learning outcomes: check the assessing practices of the programmes to assess different learning outcomes (consistency)
- Need to incorporate opinions from external academic staff and questioning whether it is possible to incorporate 'external views' from graduate students and employers, too
- The focus is on the programme learning outcomes, not on the individual student

As a final conclusion it has to be stated that the most positive outcome of the session was likely the possibility to discuss and deal with experiences which are currently being implemented and being tested and to be able to do it through drawing on the daily experience and challenges from both agencies and higher education institutions.

# CONCLUSIONS

Several current reforms in higher education are having a significant impact on quality assurance and the work of quality assurance agencies. Among these, the establishment and referencing to qualifications frameworks and the adoption of assessment methods focusing on student learning outcomes pose important challenges to the methods and processes used for internal and external quality assurance.

The ENQA 2012 workshop on *Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks: exchanging good practice* and these articles covered a wide range of issues related to qualifications frameworks, such as the state of art in their development and adoption, the role of agencies in the self-certification process, and the impact of qualifications frameworks on external quality assurance. In addition, a view from the stakeholder community was presented through an article outlining the use and importance of qualifications frameworks to the labour market and employers. Recognition of prior learning, assessment of learning outcomes, and learning outcomes in programme oriented quality assurance were also discussed in smaller working groups during the workshop.

As the first article underlines, it is clear that while several changes have already taken place, we are still at the beginning of implementing qualifications frameworks. It is important to make sure that they are developed jointly with quality assurance, learning outcomes, and other recognition tools. At the same time, the article emphasises the importance of making sure that European, but especially national qualifications frameworks become more visible and better known, so as to bring real benefits to the end users, whether individuals, higher education institutions, academic staff, or employers.

In terms of self-certification, the second author underlines that verification by self-certification is a process in which each QA agency has a significant and obligatory role to play. The role of quality assurance is to demonstrate that programmes are based on intended learning outcomes and that qualifications are awarded on basis of achievement of these outcomes. If, however, we are to realise the objectives of the QF-EHEA in relation to transparency, mobility, and recognition, self-certification is only the first step.

The Swedish case example presents a recently adopted approach to quality assurance. In line with the Bologna Process and the goal of increased employability of students, qualification descriptors were introduced and have become the tool in quality assurance of higher education in Sweden. Continuous reviewing in the coming years will help to develop best practice in implementing the new approach, and will be able to provide informed answers to questions such as: Can results of an academic study programme be measured? If yes: how can that be done? And is this European quality assurance of the 21st century?

The system used in Denmark relies on the use of external examiners for the measurement of achieved learning outcomes. Discussions on the use of learning outcomes in programme based QA in the related working group brought up a number of different methods. A conclusion of the group's work was that if the scale of the potential small revolution brought about by learning outcomes based assessment is to be investigated seriously, the answer lies perhaps not in better measurement, but instead in finding new ways of stimulating ownership of the concept of learning outcomes itself.

The working group on recognition of prior learning discussed different ways in which prior learning is used for entry into further study, achievement of credits, or for the

award of an entire degree. It became clear that recognition of prior learning practices is politically sensitive and highly dependent on the national context. It was felt thus that agencies must explicitly assume this political dimension in order to define what role to play regarding recognition of prior learning processes in their own frameworks.

The working group discussing the assessment of learning outcomes concluded that there is a need to analyse the assessment of learning outcomes paying attention to the legal framework and academic context. In addition, the maturity of the higher education system as a whole, and the degree of implementation of other 'Bologna tools', such as qualifications frameworks, play a significant role in the process. The group felt a need to focus on the quality assurance of the assessment procedures of learning outcomes through checking the assessment practices used by programmes to assess different learning outcomes. The participants agreed that the focus of such assessment should be on the programme learning outcomes, not on the achievement of individual student.

Overall, the main conclusion of the workshop and of this publication is that there is great benefit in sharing and comparing national practices, and learning from good practice at the level of quality assurance agencies. However, the national political and legal context, as well as the degree of implementation of the Bologna reforms, has a significant impact on the way in which agencies can and should react and relate to the implementation of qualifications frameworks. Coordinating efforts in developing and implementing qualifications frameworks and other Bologna reforms is important to ensure a successful consolidation of the European Higher Education Area. In addition, all relevant actors should make efforts to ensure that information on the role and purpose of qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes-based assessment is provided to all interested parties, including employers, so that student employability can be improved, mobility facilitated, and recognition of non-formal and informal learning further developed.



# ANNEX I

## ENQA WORKSHOP - QUALITY ASSURANCE AND QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS: EXCHANGING GOOD PRACTICE

CO-HOSTED BY FETAC, HETAC, IUQB AND NQAI

9-10 FEBRUARY 2012

### Venue

The Bedford Hall, Dublin Castle  
Dame Street  
Dublin 2, Ireland

### PROGRAMME

#### Thursday 9 February

- 12.00 Registration of participants/lunch
- 13.00 Welcome, *Achim Hopbach, President of ENQA*
- 13.10 **Session I** Chair: *Achim Hopbach*  
Introductory plenary session  
Qualifications frameworks in the EHEA: the state of development and perspectives for the future  
*Carita Blomqvist, Finnish National Board of Education*  
Discussion
- 13.50 Self certification of Qualifications Frameworks: The role of QA agencies  
*Bryan Maguire, HETAC*  
Discussion
- 14.35 Role and meaning of Qualifications Frameworks in external quality assurance  
*Karin Järplid Linde, National Agency for Higher Education, Sweden*  
Discussion
- 15.20 Coffee break
- 15.50 Breakout groups  
Group I: Assessment of learning outcomes – exchanging national practice and experiences – Chair: *Rafael Llavori, ANECA*  
Group II: Recognition of prior learning- exchanging national practice and experiences – Chair: *Teresa Sanchez, CTI*  
Group III: Working with learning outcomes and NQFs in quality assurance: A practical interactive session- *Karena Maguire, HETAC and Mary Sheridan, HETAC*
- 17.30 End of Day 1  
Optional visit of Dublin Castle (30 min)
- 19.00 Workshop Dinner

## Friday 10 February

- Session II** Chair: *Maria Kelo, Director, ENQA*
- 9.00 Stakeholder view on the use of qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes in external QA  
*Tony Donohoe, the Irish Business and Employers Confederation*  
Discussion
- 09.45 Coffee break
- 10.15 Breakout groups  
Group I: Qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes in programme oriented QA – Chair: *David Metz, ACE Denmark*  
Group II: Qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes in institution oriented QA – Chair: *Sarah Butler, QAA*  
Group III: Working with learning outcomes and NQFs in quality assurance: A practical interactive session- *Karena Maguire, HETAC and Mary Sheridan, HETAC*
- Session III**
- 12.00 Qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes in practice:  
Good practice and challenges  
Chair: *Padraig Walsh, CEO, FETAC, HETAC, IUQB, NQAI*
- 13.00 End of Workshop/Lunch

# ABOUT ENQA

The European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education was established in 2000 to promote European co-operation in the field of quality assurance. In November 2004 the General Assembly transformed the Network into the **European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)**.

The **mission** of ENQA is to contribute significantly to the maintenance and enhancement of the quality of European higher education at a high level, and to act as a major driving force for the development of quality assurance across all the Bologna signatory countries.

ENQA's **purposes** are essentially threefold:

- **to represent its members** at the European level and internationally, especially in political decision making processes and in co-operations with stakeholder organisations;
- **to function as a think tank** for developing further quality assurance processes and systems in the EHEA;
- **to function as a communication platform** for sharing and disseminating information and expertise in quality assurance among members and towards stakeholders.

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**THE THEME** of qualifications frameworks and their relation to quality assurance is gaining urgency in the European scene as more and more countries are completing their national qualifications frameworks and quality assurance agencies need to take important decisions on how to implement them. This report is based on the ENQA workshop “Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks: exchanging good practice”, which took place in Dublin, Ireland, on 9-10 February 2012 and presents articles on themes such as the state of development of qualifications frameworks, the role of agencies in the self-certification process, and the meaning of qualifications frameworks in external quality assurance..

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