

Quality Assurance in European Higher Education

WITH THE GOAL OF IMPROVING STUDENT MOBILITY between countries by 2010, the Bologna Process has helped make higher education systems across Europe more comparable. The efforts toward implementing Bologna, including the introduction of similar degree cycles and credit transfer systems, have spawned further postsecondary initiatives. These include the adoption of two quality assurance frameworks to help establish a common way of measuring educational outcomes: the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). In addition, individual countries are also creating National Qualification Frameworks to place their educational qualifications relative to each other and improve alignment with the overarching European frameworks.

In September 2003, in the Berlin Communiqué, the European ministers of education asked member states to elaborate a system of “comparable and compatible” qualifications for the EHEA. In 2005 the Bergen Conference adopted an overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA, comprising the three Bologna degree cycles (bachelor’s, master’s, and Ph.D.), generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competencies, and credit ranges in the first and second cycles.

In April 2008, a second quality assurance framework, the EQF for lifelong learning, was officially signed. While the QA framework for the EHEA is intended as a reference point for all 46 signatories of the Bologna Declaration, the EQF applies only to members of the European Union.



Additionally, while the Bologna EHEA framework is only relevant to higher education, the EQF focuses on lifelong learning more broadly. It applies to vocational and educational training as well as higher education. At its core are eight reference levels, which according to the European Commission “are defined by a set of descriptors indicating the learning outcomes relevant to the qualifications at that level in any system.” The levels span the range of qualifications from approximately upper secondary school to the highest possible academic, professional or vocational qualifications.

“The EQF has a far wider application than university education. EQF encompasses all types of learning, whether academic or vocational, formal, informal, or nonformal, in everything that takes place after compulsory education. It is meant to be a tool for ‘lifelong

EDITOR’S NOTE: *Two new initiatives have been developed in Europe due to the implementation of the Bologna Process. The European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, which the European Parliament adopted in December 2007, aims to more uniformly measure learning outcomes at all educational levels. In addition, many European signatories of the Bologna Declaration are creating their own National Qualifications Frameworks. Some countries are further ahead than others in developing and implementing these frameworks, which are separate from but related to the Bologna Process. This article provides an update on the progress of three different countries—Ireland, Romania, and Germany.*

WHAT U.S. INSTITUTIONS NEED TO KNOW

QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS such as the new European Qualifications Framework can be an important tool for U.S. universities evaluating foreign degrees. According to Robert Watkins, assistant director of the Graduate and International Admissions Center at the University of Texas at Austin, one of the major concerns for U.S. educators is how to judge three-year degrees.

“We are seeing some decided movement in favor of accepting these three-year degrees for graduate admission in U.S. colleges ... Certainly, to have a major player like Berkeley announce that they would accept three-year degrees to graduate study is a major step. Even so, others, such as UT-Austin and Indiana-Bloomington ... continue to require the four-year full-time post-secondary degree from abroad for graduate admission purposes,” he says.

The problem is that once the three-year Bologna-compliant degrees have been accepted, the same standard must be applied to all three-year degrees. “The only possible answer to this dilemma could be the quality assurance piece to the Bologna Process ... After all, a tightly controlled quality assurance process that emanates from the program level all the way up to the national or even area-wide level ... [could allow graduate admissions officers to] assert that a different policy for Bologna-compliant degrees is logical and appropriate,” Watkins says.

He outlines several questions that U.S. graduate admissions officers will need to consider when evaluating three-year degrees:

- Is this three-year degree acceptable to the specific department considering the applicant?
- Is the degree in the same or a very comparable field?
- Is the degree meant to go on to graduate education in that country?
- Is the three-year degree coming from a similar institution?

learning,’ and is not limited to the Bologna reforms. The descriptors used in the Bologna Process to describe the three cycles (bachelor’s, master’s, and Ph.D.) are closely related to the EQF levels 6, 7, and 8, but are not identical,” says John Macdonald, spokesperson for Education, Training, Culture, and Youth at the European Commission.

One of the major goals of the recently adopted EQF is to help learners and educational providers make sense of the different educational systems across Europe, and facilitate mobility between countries and sectors (for instance, from vocational schools to universities). The Commission defines the EQF as “a common European reference framework which links countries’ qualifications systems together, acting as a translation device to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems in Europe. It has two principal aims: to promote citizens’ mobility between countries and to facilitate their lifelong learning.”

To achieve these goals, many EU countries are also creating their own NQFs. Although different countries have made

varying degrees of progress, one of the major developments has been more focus on learning outcomes, referring to a student’s knowledge, skills, and competence upon completion of a course or program. This makes it easier for educators to assess the compatibility of educational systems and sectors across national borders.

After the qualification frameworks have been elaborated at the national level, individual universities have to describe their own courses and programs and relate them to the European quality assurance frameworks. “If you can relate a national qualification to the European level, an educational provider in Spain thereby has a point of reference for an equivalent degree from the Netherlands or Germany. Knowing the level of a certain qualification is the first step in being able to compare them across countries,” says Leonard van der Hout, a Dutch Bologna expert and head of international affairs at the University of Applied Sciences in Amsterdam.

Van der Hout says the new quality assurance mechanisms have challenged individual institutions to rethink the

way educational programs are designed, representing a shift from a provider-oriented qualifications system to one more learner-centered. They must ask why a certain book or theory should be taught in a particular program: “If you educate someone, what should he or she be able to do, and what does that mean for the curriculum?”

He is careful to point out that the goal of Bologna quality assurance processes is to compare—not harmonize—education systems across Europe. Although it may be easy for American educators to brush over the differences, van der Hout stresses the fact that “Europe is not one country. In terms of educational systems, the countries are dramatically different. The idea is to create a grid to compare countries, but the differences should remain.”

The Commission also emphasizes the framework should respect “the rich diversity of national education systems.” Preservation of national differences is an important reason why member states are willing to sign onto the process in the first place, as it is not seen as a breach of national sovereignty.

The various national qualifications systems are at different stages of development. Only a few countries already have NQFs in place, the foremost examples being Ireland and the UK, both of which already had NQFs pre-dating the development of the EQF.

In some senses, the success or failure of a NQF depends on the willingness of individual institutions to implement the European quality assurance system. Van der Hout says it takes more time and commitment than other Bologna components such as the diploma supplement or the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). “It’s a lot of work to describe your courses in terms of learning outcomes. The necessity of this is not always seen by everyone,” says van der Hout.

He says progress is not necessarily about how rich a country is: “My feeling is that openness to third parties is much more of a driving force than money.” While the new member states in Eastern Europe have in general made less progress on quality assurance systems than their counterparts in Western Europe, they may also be more willing to accept policy guidance from the EU.

Michael Graham, a policy adviser with the Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture, confirms this view. "The newer member states have generally been very positive towards the EQF so they are very active in setting up NQFs...They see the EQF and NQFs as a way to reform their systems along lifelong learning lines," he says.

Achim Hopbach, managing director of the German Accreditation Council, says the quality assurance process must also be bottom-up. "The most important factor is probably the willingness of at least one major player in the higher education system—such as the national rectors' conference—and this should not be the ministry. In my experience, you can find some reluctance in the disciplines in every country because the NQFs are seen as too generic," he says.

Other factors might be the compatibility of the existing national education system with Bologna, as well as the size of the country and number of educational institutions. Ireland's system, for instance, was already consistent with the three Bologna cycles so fewer reforms needed to be made to link the national system with the European quality assurance frameworks.

Regardless of progress made thus far, both national governments and individual institutions are increasingly recognizing the value of a common quality assurance system.

In particular, quality assurance mechanisms allow universities and other institutions to benchmark their programs against common standards. "If you want to compete and be in the market for education, you need to show the quality of your offering," says van der Hout.

"The playing field is becoming more equal for everyone. The whole Bologna process means that we are trying to create a transparent higher education area. It's also designed to become more competitive, especially toward the U.S.," he says.

CASE STUDY:

Ireland

WITH THE ADOPTION of a national framework for qualifications in 2003, Ireland is considered to be one of the European front-

runners in terms of implementing measures associated with the Bologna Process in higher education. In terms of quality assurance, the NQF is underpinned by nationally agreed quality assurance processes across the spectrum of educational and training provisions. The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area have been adopted within Irish higher education. Two quality assurance agencies, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, have also successfully completed reviews to ensure compliance with the standards as part of the membership requirements for the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), while the Irish Universities Quality Board is currently undergoing such a review.

According to the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, discussions and developments around lifelong learning and quality assurance had taken place in Ireland throughout the 1990s prior to the development of the NQF, but the development of the framework brought these issues to the forefront. There has been a general concern within government with the promotion of lifelong learning as part of broader economic and social policies, so the development of a national framework of qualifications and active engagement with the Bologna Process was, and is, consistent with broader national policy.

The preexistence in Ireland of a three-cycle system of education (bachelor's degree, followed by master's degree, and doctoral degrees) assisted Ireland in implementing some of the Bologna Process action lines more quickly than other countries that were faced with more significant structural changes to their higher education systems.

Ireland has been only one of two countries—the other being Scotland—to complete the self-verification process, ensuring compatibility between the NQF and the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (the Bologna Qualifications Framework). Irish

universities have been engaged since the outset in the implementation of the NQF, and are currently evaluating where various nonmajor awards (currently designated as certificates and diplomas) fit within the national framework. Other challenges in Ireland include consistently titling awards across the university sector, and addressing the issue of how awards issued prior to the development of the national framework are to be included in the framework.

As in many other countries, the success of implementation of the NQF within the university sector in Ireland has depended a lot on the activities of individual institutions. According to the Qualifications Authority, the Irish universities have also been very engaged in implementing the Bologna Process, which is sometimes regarded in terms of maintaining international competitiveness.

CASE STUDY:

Romania

THE ROMANIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM was highly centralized under Communist rule until the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989. Although education was in theory accessible to all, a chronic lack of material and technical resources led to an outdated and insufficient system. Romania signed onto Bologna in 1999, but it was not until 2004 that major reforms were undertaken when national legislation was enacted to reorganize university degrees into the three Bologna cycles of bachelor's, master's and Ph.D.

Prior to EU membership on January 1, 2007, Romania received support from the Phare program, and more recently the Structural Funds, for the development of a national qualifications system. The National Agency for Qualifications in Higher Education (ACPART) has been tasked by the Ministry of Education, Research, and Youth to create a methodology for developing a national qualification framework, which is currently under consideration by the Romanian government.

"We now have a general matrix concerning the descriptors that will be used in Romania, and according to these general descriptors, we will develop for the description

GLOSSARY

The Bologna Process

The Bologna Process aims to create a European Higher Education Area by 2010, in which students can choose from a wide and transparent range of high quality courses and benefit from smooth recognition procedures. The Bologna Declaration of June 1999 has put in motion a series of reforms needed to make European Higher Education more compatible and comparable, more competitive, and more attractive for Europeans and for students and scholars from other continents. The three priorities of the Bologna process are: introduction of the three-cycle system (bachelor/master/doctorate), quality assurance, and recognition of qualifications and periods of study.

Source: European Commission

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

The EQF is a common European Union reference framework for vocational, professional and higher education that links countries' qualifications systems together, acting as a translation device to make qualifications more readable. It has two principal aims: to promote citizens' mobility between countries and to facilitate their lifelong learning.

The EQF was formally adopted by the European Parliament and the Council in April 2008.

National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs)

A national qualifications framework is an instrument for classifying qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning, aiming to integrate and coordinate national qualifications subsystems and improve the transparency, access, progression and quality of qualifications across the entire educational system, both academic and vocational. The NQFs relate national qualifications to objectives set out at the EU level in order to make educational attainment comparable across member states.

Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area

In 2005, the European Ministers of Education adopted a qualifications framework in the European Higher Education Area, which is applicable to all 46 signatories of the Bologna process. It comprises three degree cycles (master's, bachelor's and doctoral), often referred to as the "Bologna cycles," and provides generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges for the bachelor's and master's levels.

of the qualifications for each study program," says Professor Sorin Zaharia at ACPART.

Zaharia says another job of his agency is to help universities better understand the issue of qualifications: "I think when we put the qualifications framework into practice, the Bologna objectives will become clearer. Now some of the representatives of universities do not really understand the new structure of higher education on the bachelor's and master's levels. We need to develop a new culture linking higher education to competences and change the emphasis from curricula to the competences. We should concentrate on identifying the skills needed by the labor market."

According to the 2007 Bologna Stock-taking report, future challenges for Romania

include: developing an integrated national qualifications framework for lifelong learning based on learning outcomes, evaluating all higher education institutions and their study programs, and increasing funding for higher education.

CASE STUDY:

Germany

GERMANY has been one of the countries that has made the most progress on developing a national qualifications framework since the Berlin Communiqué was issued in 2003. "Along with Denmark, Germany has the first qualifications framework that was drafted after the Berlin conference," says Achim Hopbach, managing director of the German Accreditation Council.

He says that the amount of national consensus in Germany regarding the NQF was rather surprising given that it was radically different than the traditional approach to quality assurance.

"The concept of working with competences was totally new for German higher education. Traditionally, degree programs were designed in terms of quantitative (inputs), such as contact hours and number of professors, so learning outcomes and all of these new ideas were a really new development in Germany," Hopbach says.

A national Bologna working group, as well as a subgroup for quality assurance, was set up consisting of all relevant stakeholders. "It took about one year to develop the first draft of a QF, and this was presented to the ministries. What we didn't expect was that they would immediately adopt this qualification framework," he says.

The German NQF is based very much on the European framework, which was developed at the same time. Germany will also become one of the first countries, after Ireland and the United Kingdom, to complete the self-certification process that ensures national compatibility with the EQF. Some disciplines have also begun developing subject-related quality assurance frameworks, which was particularly controversial in the German case due to strict regulations of degree programs, which were abolished in the early 2000s.

Hopbach says that German universities are increasingly taking the national and European qualifications frameworks into consideration. "More and more, universities not only use the concept of learning outcomes and qualifications frameworks as a means of reference, but they do this in quite a professional way," he says.

For in-depth information on the Bologna Process, read the *International Educator's* special Bologna Process supplement online at www.nafsa.org/bolognasupplement. **IE**

CHARLOTTE WEST, an expatriate from the United States and former Fulbright scholar, is a freelance writer in Stockholm, Sweden. Her last article for *IE* was "Abroad After Graduation, English Style" in the January/February 2008 issue.