

7th ESIB Student Convention

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

"A Qualifications Framework is composed of levels from different stages of education, which have individual sets of learning outcomes as indicators. These learning outcomes are usually defined in terms of the actual workload that a learner needs in order to achieve them. The workload is expressed in credits."

About the Qualifications Framework; it was never envisaged to harmonize the contents of degree courses in different countries. It is to make the learning outcomes more compatible and more importantly to have some more transparency in the national systems. The question of recognition problems is not solved by giving degrees another name. The Qualification Frameworks in some countries (namely Ireland, Scotland and a more or less joined one for England, Northern Ireland and Wales. Denmark was just developing its own) are output oriented and allow for easier comparability, as the qualifications obtained at different HEIs are compatible. At the official Bologna Process Seminar in Denmark in 2003 it was stated that countries should develop national Qualifications Frameworks, in which the qualifications should be described in terms of workload, level, quality, learning outcomes and profile. A European Qualifications Framework should in more generic terms describe the qualifications with due regard to institutional, historical and national contexts and what a student needs to access higher education and the qualifications gained from it.

Generally could be concluded that "the vast majority of the participants seemed to be in favor of national Qualifications Frameworks and an overarching European Framework. However, it was felt that there is no need to rush the development and elaboration of these devices but rather the need for more discussions, as a lot of questions are not answered yet."... "Full use should be made of already existing tools, especially the Diploma Supplement, which at the moment is not used as much as it could be. For these reasons the main focus should first and foremost lie on the proper implementation and full use of the existing tools. Any initiative that promotes the shift of paradigm towards a more student centered system is welcomed." It is regarded necessary to include all major stakeholders in the development of the Qualifications Frameworks. There lies a great responsibility on the local level to ensure the students' interests in making the Frameworks a successful reality.

Also see the official site and the ESIB report:

<http://www.esib.org/7convention/index.php>

<http://www.esib.org/7convention/rapport.php>

And the press-release after the convention:

<http://www.esib.org/7convention/pressrelease2.php>

ISO Report 7th ESC Dublin

Report is written by Willem Glasbergen and deals with the 7th ESC in Dublin, Ireland from February 10th – 13th 2004, Dublin Castle. The convention was organized by USI.

Overview

An ESIB Student Convention is an event that is organized by the NUS of the country which is holding the EU-presidency and lasts 3 to 4 days. Topics are introduced by experts and then are further explored by the participants in workshops. A final report is then constructed which forms the basis for further discussion and probably for a policy paper of ESIB on the treated topics. The topic of 7th ESC was "National Qualifications Framework and Student Involvement within the European Higher Education Area".

For ISO attending the 7th ESC is important to gain more experience in the field of Qualifications Frameworks and to represent the views of ISO in the development of an ESIB position on this new topic. Furthermore attending these events expand the network of ISO and the recognition of ISO on the international HE level as a constructive NUS in the representation of students' interest within Europe.

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Quoted from the draft general report by Bastian Baumann (member of the ESIB Bologna Process Committee):

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Generally could be concluded that *"the vast majority of the participants seemed to be in favor of national Qualifications Frameworks and an overarching European Framework. However, it was felt that there is no need to rush the development and elaboration of these devices but rather the need for more discussions, as a lot of questions are not answered yet."*... *"Full use should be made of already existing tools, especially the Diploma Supplement, which at the moment is not used as much as it could be. For these reasons the main focus should first and foremost lie on the proper implementation and full use of the existing tools. Any initiative that promotes the shift of paradigm towards a more student centered system is welcomed."*

A special note to comment the last line: this could very well imply that also the financing of HE would be centered on the individual student, thus favoring a shift from government finance to student finance.

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Summary of notes, taken from presentations at plenary sessions

Slides of **all** presentations will be made available on the convention website:

<http://www.esib.org/7convention>

First plenary: Introduction and general overview to some National QF's

Wednesday 11th February.

Speakers were **ESIB** (Bastian Baumann), **NOAI** (Sean o Fughlu, Ireland) and **DEA** (Dorte Kristofferson, Denmark).

ESIB

Presentation is constructed around 3 issues: why are we having this topic, what is it and where are we at this moment. Lots of terms are coming at you in this. It is hard to let it all make sense.

The presentation started with the position of Qualifications Frameworks (QF) in the Bologna Process (BP).

- BP is a European process
- Hardly any clear information is available
- There is only a minority group of experts
- Bologna Seminar Denmark (at the time it was unclear what it dealt with)

In the Berlin Communique it was already mentioned that Ministers were to develop these frameworks. It is a priority issue → pressure is present and there are loads of discussions about it. Nearly everything around the BP is linked with the QF and accreditation. One should deal with the basic questions, examples (Ireland, Denmark, etc.) and structural problems. From the Bologna objectives some countries took the opportunity to redesign their higher education (HE) and some have just split their curricula and did no effort for evaluating their system. To deal with the understanding of levels, a framework is needed. QF is output oriented, compatibility at European level is the objective.

Multiple interpretations of the term QF are possible:

- "QF is a device to clarify the purposes, aims and relationships between different qualifications."
- "QF is a systematic description of an education system's qualifications when all learning achievements..."

The aims are focused on both learners as well as the public awareness and on access and exit points in each HE-system.

The components consist of:

- Levels
- Workload (measured in ECTS)
- Learning outcomes / competencies
- Profile (subject area)

Various definitions have been presented for the key-issues/keywords. These are not the only just ones, it is more for helping the discussion. For clarity the definition of a 'level descriptor' is chosen to be: description of competences at a given level in terms of *standard* knowledge etc.

Where are we now?

- 4 QFs now in Europe present (Scotland, Ireland/ ENIW, Denmark)
- Seminar in Denmark ahead early 2005, dealing with QF
- Call upon countries to develop National QF's
- Creating overarching European QF
- ESIB joins Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) to ensure student voice

Expectations

It has become a priority topic on both the national and the European level, the first discussions are taking place and raise information, knowledge but also questions. It is still under development, but a big question is: will fast development help the situation?

NOAI

Unfortunately the speaker was very hard to understand since he spoke with very low volume voice and an Irish accent. Sheets are made available.

Some points the speaker raised:

- National and international research (*No idea again what the relevance was*)
- Key involvement of national stakeholders
- Approach should be one of open consultation
- Build as much consensus as possible, without sufficient support no successful system will be reached, no matter how well and smart developed it may be.
- Think of new concept of 'award'
- Framework is to bring out change and introduces a new approach
- The situation for Ireland is one with a structure of 10 levels, based on a range of standards of knowledge, skills and competences, with level indicators. The system is based on major awards for a typical range of outcomes at a certain level and on minor... supplemental and special purpose.

Ireland has a vision written down on learner mobility. It also facilitates the QF. Amongst other things implementing it means a cultural shift and brings attention on what learners need for mobility.

DEA

The Danes have known a very rapid development of their QF. Around 2002, fuzz aroused on not having a QF and the rest did already have one. So the Danes began developing a QF at great speed. Actually, they were not behind and now are in the fore group. Although we have these European process and development, higher education systems are still (and remain?) mostly nationally driven/based/focused/oriented/etc.

Already from the '90s Denmark has the Bachelor Master degree structure.

The Danish QF is not:

- encompassing the whole educational sector
- incorporated in the legislation for HE
- tested at subject specific level

People involved: all stakeholders, all those who would benefit working with a QF. Perspective per stakeholder was taken to look for benefits and needs. This enhanced transparency. It is not sure if this process was also consensus driven. Besides regular bachelor degrees the Danes also have the professional bachelor degree, somewhat like the Dutch 'HBO'.

Next was presented the views on so called competency goals:

- Intellectual competencies
- Professional and academic competencies
- Practical competencies

A lot of discussion took place before the Danes could agree on the set above. This is to say at the least, a very interesting approach of describing competencies.

What is next?

- Ministry is asking the HEIs to test this QF, including describing the competencies. This has been given a deadline on January 1st 2005.
- Discussions on the QF will not be part of new ministerial order on university programs.
- The function in higher professional education remains unknown.
- Outcomes will be part of criteria in program evaluation.

- Many study boards are defining competencies. Before the Berlin Communiqué Danish groups were already talking about competencies in their HE system.

Question and answer part of 1st plenary

→ Questions

- 1) What about the threat of harmonizing programs on content?
- 2) Are there more degree-awarding bodies welcome in the system?
- 3) What will happen with the 'old' degrees?
- 4) QF centered on whom? Students, HEI's, ...?
- 5) Dominance of professional bodies?

→ Answers

DEA:

- 1) It brings discussions like what is the right curriculum. Look, it doesn't matter how students reach end terms, just they have to reach them. To go abroad we need the transparency. There is no need for fear that the HE system on national level will standardize program content on European level. On the contrary, cultural differences are very welcome.
- 2) Closing up for foreign providers. Few of these providers tried to gain access, but no student went there because of not getting any money if you study there. The Danish government pays up to 5 or 6 years of studying (free HE and a state grant).
- 4) No need to fear national system in HE and strict laws. Flexibility is the key term here.

ESIB:

- 1) The framework is only to focus on the outcomes! The content is not subject to harmonization. Not too rigid outcome descriptions will prevent also movements in the direction of harmonization.
- 2) Enhancing recognition devices within Europe makes it more difficult for providers outside Europe. Different speeds of enhancing are visible

NQAI:

- 2) Difficulty with professional studies and the awarding of titles (for example: law, medicine, etc.)

Second plenary

Wednesday 11th February.

Speakers were **EUA** (Kate Geddie), **NUS-Scotland** (Duncan Cockburn), **HETAC/ENQA** (Seamus Puirseil) and **ESIB** (Nikki Heerens).

EUA

Presentation starts with a brief introduction of the working of the EUA. The mission of the EUA is to promote a coherent system of HE and research in Europe through support to members.

The position of EUA on national QF:

- It is premature to have an articulated policy position at this moment.
- The importance of issues is up to the European Council to discuss.
- Recent attention: related to all Bologna reforms.
- Need to clarify the debate on what are we talking about and which issues do apply in the discussion.
- Involve all institutions and countries.

There is variation in the approach, terminology and responsibilities in the discussion. EUA presented two powerpoint sheets with a given set of actions to clarify goals and objectives.

EUA does not find desirable:

- Danger of one-complexity: creating a monster
- Preference of one system above the other
- Confusion over level terminology
- Getting a system **of** qualifications rather than a system **for** qualifications
- Exclusion of universities or students from the discussions
- Each country working independently from one another
- Descriptors tied to disciplines

NUS-UK

Duncan presents the Scottish QF and advocates that a system should be in a clear language so that ordinary students should be able to understand it.

It is interesting to see that also community based learning is intended to be incorporated into the framework. Also see: <http://www.scqf.org.uk>

Also mentioned was the discussion on how to award honors degrees, should there be a difference? The honors program is situated between Master and Bachelor level.

Useful for students:

- Setting in context of life long learning
- Benefits for non-traditional entrants, as in students with backgrounds that are not familiar with studying
- Ease of understanding and use
- Transfer between HEIs and further education
- Useful basis for learning entitlement (responsibilities for government and student)

A future challenge for students lie within the implementation stage since it is situated mostly at the local level. Student involvement in higher education governance must be well organized.

Possible problems:

- Changes in qualifications / degree requirements because of language issues and credits needed to continue
- Difficulties in understanding how transfer operates in practice between institutions
- Creates admissions problems. If you need one 'course' and you already have to others, comparable. Some HEIs are flexible to let you in, others do not recognize that and stick to their own requirements, even though the student has the required knowledge.
- Is this new 'thing' compulsory or not? What does it say about commitment?

Institutional level:

- Level of condonement failure. What to do if you fail a final year exam? Is all previously learned for nothing? (Is this something like 'verwevenheid' when you can start a masters degree program without already having finished your bachelor?)
- Language of degree regulations: far from easily understood.
- Credit rating: notional hours. What is the average? What number to use? What is expected speed of studying? What is fair towards students that have different study behavior i.e. have to work harder to get the same amount of credits? How to measure this?

Final statement is about the need for appropriate and sufficient support for student representation to ensure the role of student involvement at local level.

ENQA

Remember that exemplary national QF's are national systems! Not overarching ones. They might be overregulated and still be too complex for use on the European level.

The Diploma Supplement does not need to be in the regulations within the QF. The DS rather needs a framework for itself, according to the speaker.

After presentations I asked speaker about the possibility of having differences in lengths of cycles between countries. It is, according to speaker, possible to have both 3-2-3 and 3-1-4 cycles in one overarching system as long as you look at the learning outcomes: these outcomes must be comparable and compatible.

Question and answer part of 2nd plenary

Most of the words spoken were about ECTS and partly about the DS.

→ Question

- 1) Increasing formalization of learning: where to leads this regulating? What about community learning?

→ Answer

EUA:

- 1) EUA views QF almost as a setback. Look at the ECTS discussion. 100 credits resembles different efforts in different national HE-systems. It is about setting higher standards as a HEI and that HEIs would be bounded by the (most probably) lesser recognition of efforts to make a course more challenging: students in a challenging study program would be deprived of extra 'reward' for studying harder in the same amount of time. How does this relate to the institutional autonomy. Is it in jeopardy? (NOTE: This is maybe boldly stated, my notes might be inaccurate on the precise words. The idea behind remains)

Some final food for thought after plenary sessions

Explore difference in content between polytechnics and universities; same level of awarding?

** Explore obstacles for mobility in study theme (from BA Law to MA engineering). **

Explore access to HE: former degree (secondary school and/or entry exam). ** Also important: what should be the status of conversion courses, to fill in the gap between study theme and required background knowledge (in content (level) in type (from BA polytechnic to MA university)? ** Accumulating 180 ECTS with 1st year stuff → getting a degree???

** International tests: what qualifies BA or MA? What type of exam could sufficiently deal with large amount of applicants? Is this type of tests suitable and not too rough? What do they measure?