

**THE SOUTH AFRICAN QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY**

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November 2013

*The significance of the Bologna Process for South and Southern Africa*





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## Foreword

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The Bologna Process is a voluntary inter-governmental process in Europe that has been underway since 1999. It has included the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), as well as the development of a learning outcomes-based higher education qualifications framework, the Qualifications Framework for the EHEA (QF-EHEA). The Bologna Process aims to restructure higher education in Europe and involves, amongst others, the introduction of a three-cycle degree system which is guided by a set of level descriptors, referred to as the Dublin Descriptors. The Bologna Process involves 47 countries, is administered by the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG), and is guided through regular meetings of the European Ministers of Education; the most recent which took place in Bucharest on 26 and 27 April 2013 (see the annexure at the end of this Bulletin).

In a parallel development, and directly influenced by the Bologna Process, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for primary, secondary, vocational and higher education is being developed by the European Commission. The EQF is also based on learning outcomes, and just as the QF-EHEA, also has a set of level descriptors that describes progression across the levels. Countries involved in the EQF are however limited to the 27 EU member states. One of the main purposes of the EQF is to establish a common reference system which enables links between national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) across EU member states.

This massive effort from Europe to transform and modernise itself that has taken place over the last 14 years, in the broader global context of the internationalisation of education, has undoubtedly impacted many countries and regions. South and Southern Africa included. A notable example of how the European process has influenced other parts of the world is the current Tuning Africa Project which aims to improve staff capacity at African higher education institutions to develop curriculum in five subject areas, based on learning outcomes, and which builds on similar Tuning projects in Europe, Latin-America and the United States. Other examples include European-African collaboration in the area of quality assurance of higher education, and also a variety of development funding projects.

Over the years SAQA has participated in both QF-EHEA and EQF processes, most recently this has included the Bucharest meeting in April 2013 (referred to above). In order to encourage debate on the impact of the Bologna Process within South Africa, SAQA, in collaboration with the Council on Higher Education (CHE), organised a seminar as part of the Higher Education South Africa (HESA) Quality Assurance Forum that took place in April 2013 in Stellenbosch, South Africa. The specific purpose of this symposium was to create an intellectual space in which the higher education sector and policy makers could engage meaningfully on the topic of internationalisation of higher education, with a specific focus on the Bologna Process in Europe. This included:

- Critical engagement with the manner in which the Bologna Process has taken place in the European context;
- The relationship between Bologna and the QF-EHEA and EQF frameworks;
- The impact of the Bologna and related processes on South African learners;
- Considerations of similar and related regional processes in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), including the SADC regional qualifications framework (SADC RQF).

The debate was of great interest to the participants and as a result, SAQA has opted to publish the two main papers by Stephen Adam (an internationally recognised expert and contributor to several Bologna processes) and Martin Oosthuizen (the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning at the University of the North-West and member of the SAQA Reference Group on Credit Accumulation and Transfer) for wider dissemination.

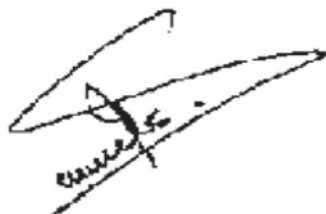
Following a successful National NQF Research Conference that was held in Johannesburg earlier in the same year, a paper by Dr. Pdraig Walsh (the newly appointed Chief Executive of Quality and Qualifications Ireland) on the role of national and Europe-wide frameworks has also been included in this Bulletin. Pdraig's paper provides a useful view of the European process from an Irish perspective and complements the contributions by Adam and Oosthuizen.

SAQA wishes to thank HESA, through the South Africa-European Union Strategic Partnership, and the CHE for making the seminar a reality. We also thank Stephen



Adam and Martin Oosthuizen for their thoughtful contributions, as well as Padraig Walsh for his insightful country perspective presented at the NQF Research Conference.

We look forward to continuing this important debate through this Bulletin and future engagements. There is still much to be said on this important topic.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Joe Samuels', written over a large, stylized, abstract scribble.

**Joe Samuels**  
**Chief Executive Officer**  
**South African Qualifications Authority**



## Editorial comments

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This edition of the SAQA Bulletin draws together three papers focusing on the Bologna Process in Europe that have recently been presented in South Africa on request from SAQA. The impact of the Bologna Process on South African learners, and more broadly, the South African higher education system was identified by SAQA as an area that requires greater scrutiny. There is no doubt that the significant effort by Europe to modernise its education systems through the Bologna Process, notably through the development of national and regional qualifications frameworks, has had an effect not only in South and Southern Africa, but also across the world.

South Africa has been one of the pioneering countries that has developed an NQF and is also closely involved in regional qualifications framework development in SADC. The relationship between qualifications framework development in South and Southern Africa and that in Europe remains relatively unexplored; the exception being a report developed by SAQA for the European Training Foundation (ETF) in 2010 on transnational qualifications frameworks. The three papers included in this edition have been specifically selected to address this important relationship between the attempts at modernising the South African education and training system since 1994, notably through the NQF, and the broad European attempt embodied in the Bologna Process, that has included the development of two regional qualifications frameworks and more than 30 NQFs.

The first paper is from Stephen Adam, a recognised expert on the Bologna Process, who accepted SAQA's invitation to speak at the seminar held in Stellenbosch in April 2013. Adam has contributed to several Bologna-related initiatives, including experiential learning, referencing and verification of qualifications frameworks to the QF-EHEA. In his paper, Adam provides a cogent overview of the intricacies of the Bologna Process, as well as some of the strengths, achievements and also weaknesses and failures. Adam points out that the EHEA is 'clearly in its immature years' but adds that some of the approaches and tools could be of value to South and Southern Africa. Adam's paper emphasises the need to build trust and also to avoid developing what he refers to as

“zombie” qualifications frameworks that do not have a relationship with other related processes:

The relationship of the NQF with other necessary supportive reforms can be unclear. In some cases, zombie NQFs can be the result - useless frameworks that are not fully alive nor have any real impact on current practices. Such fake reforms can also find a parallel at institutional level where Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) create new cosmetic learning outcomes for old re-packaged, unreformed qualifications.

Martin Oosthuizen, who is also a member of the SAQA Reference Group on Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT), was asked to respond to Adam. In his carefully considered response, Oosthuizen recognises similar challenges in the South African and European higher education systems, including high drop-out rates, outmoded curricula as well as the urgent need for higher enrolment rates. Considering these challenges, Oosthuizen explores two main themes in his response: that of the Bologna Process as a framework for reform, and NQFs as tools to promote transparency, comparability and mobility. He makes several observations in the process, such as what constitutes an acceptable level of convergence between diverse national systems. Drawing on Van Damme (2009), Oosthuizen suggests that the Bologna Process provides a good example of balancing the forces of convergence and diversity. In the process of interrogating Bologna as a reform process, he notes the interconnectedness and interdependence of different reform initiatives, the capacity and willingness to adapt, and the support mechanisms put in place for the reform process; points which have been made in the NQF discourse in South Africa for many years. Oosthuizen then applies these insights to the South and Southern African context and comes up with useful considerations for the South African NQF, CAT and quality assurance. He ends his paper with a call for mutually beneficial collaboration opportunities.

The third paper by Pádraig Walsh is written from an Irish perspective as it reflects on the role of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and the European-wide qualifications framework in promoting articulation. The paper is written at a time when the Irish system has just gone through a reform process at a governance level (the oversight bodies have been integrated). In the first part of his paper, Walsh provides a complementary perspective on the EHEA process to that provided by Adam, with

specific attention to the inter-relationship between NQFs in European countries and the two meta-frameworks, the QF-EHEA and the EQF. The second part of his paper provides useful insights into the Irish NFQ development leading to the recent establishment of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

**James Keevy**  
**Editor**



# What might be the significance for South and Southern Africa of the Bologna Process, the creation of the European Higher Education Area and the global internationalisation of higher education?

*Stephen Adam*

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## INTRODUCTION

The global internationalisation of higher education is of enormous significance for South and Southern Africa as it is for every country and region of the world. However, stating this is easy; the real difficulty lies in untangling the complex mix of global interactions, potential possibilities and domestic realities that lies behind this assertion. Globalisation presents both tremendous dangers and benefits for educational systems.

Worldwide higher education is certainly undergoing a period of unparalleled rapid change. The Bologna reform process is itself both an example of, and a reaction to, globalisation. It seeks to fundamentally transform and modernise European higher education and has achieved much in a relatively short time. It also faces severe challenges that slow progress. The Ministers representing the current 47 countries in the process are aware of both the achievement and future challenges (Bucharest Communiqué, April 2012:1):

Higher education is an important part of the solution to our current difficulties. Strong and accountable higher education systems provide the foundations for thriving knowledge societies.

The Bologna reforms have changed the face of higher education across Europe, thanks to the involvement and dedication of higher education institutions, staff and students.

Higher education structures in Europe are now more compatible and comparable. Quality assurance systems contribute to building trust, higher education qualifications are more recognisable across borders and participation in higher education has

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widened. Students today benefit from a wider variety of educational opportunities and are increasingly mobile. The vision of an integrated EHEA is within reach.

However, as the report on the implementation of the Bologna Process shows, we must make further efforts to consolidate and build on progress. We will strive for more coherence between our policies, especially in completing the transition to the three-cycle system, the use of ECTS [European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System] credits, the issuing of Diploma Supplements, the enhancement of quality assurance and the implementation of qualifications frameworks, including the definition and evaluation of learning outcomes.

The EHEA was born out of the Bologna Process and its rapid development, inauguration and acclaim have helped to encourage a series of analogous meta-qualifications framework initiatives across the globe. There are existing and planned regional frameworks, consistent with existing geo-political blocks, in South-East Asia, the Caribbean, the Pacific region, Southern Africa, Latin America, etc. The ETF estimates that over 140 countries are planning, developing or implementing “new style” learning outcome-based NQFs.

The academic press is rightly obsessed with the globalisation agenda and a number of recurring themes arise, including: internationalisation, transnational/borderless education (including branch campuses and massive open online courses [MOOC]), global university rankings, knowledge economies, educational competitiveness, the impact of “brain drain/gain”, international mobility (student, staff, course), international recognition, proliferation of education hubs, new knowledge platforms, and innovative meta and NQFs. This is an exciting but daunting time for both higher education institutions (HEIs) and education authorities. The way forward is certainly not unproblematic or obvious.

A further complication is that there is no common understanding about what “internationalisation” and “globalisation” of education actually mean. For the purposes of this paper, the following are useful:

In simplistic terms, globalisation refers to the widening, deepening and speeding up of global interconnections. (Held *et al* 1999:14)



...local happenings are shaped by events happening many miles away and vice versa. (Giddens 1990:64)

Internationalization includes policies and programs adopted by governments, and by academic systems and subdivisions to cope with or exploit globalization. (Altbach 2004:64)

In terms of higher education, this means that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century almost every dimension of university activity is impacted. There are implications for international, national and local organisations. These different dimensions interact. How institutions, global regions and countries respond to these market forces is of vital importance. To ignore the new realities of the situation is risky. This paper is designed to explore (regionally and nationally) European responses, raise issues, explore recent positive and negative experiences and draw some tentative conclusions for discussion. It is based on a relatively profound ignorance of South and Southern African higher education reforms and therefore leaves it mostly to the reader to identify any useful and applicable insights from recent European initiatives and experiences.

## **THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA - THE BOLOGNA PROCESS**

### **CLARIFICATIONS**

There are many myths and misconceptions surrounding the Bologna Process. It is a voluntary inter-governmental process and not a European Commission (EC) initiative. It is not backed by legislation but open to all Bologna countries that are party to (have ratified) the *1954 European Cultural Convention*<sup>1</sup> and commit to the goals and policies of the Bologna Process. There is no international treaty but rather a highly complex set of inter-related initiatives that relatively few fully comprehend. Various educational tools have been voluntarily adopted by the Bologna higher education ministers including: the *1997 Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region* (known as the Lisbon Recognition Convention), the *Diploma*

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1 The 1954 European Cultural Convention is a Council of Europe convention with the purpose of developing mutual understanding, reciprocal appreciation of cultural diversity, safeguarding European culture, etc. It can be accessed at: <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/QueVoulezVous.asp?NT=018&CL=ENG>

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*Supplement*, the ECTS, the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*<sup>2</sup> and the European Area of Recognition (EAR) manual. These devices have been developed under the process and new tools have been added, notably the creation of the EHEA itself and its central meta-qualifications framework - the overarching QF-EHEA<sup>3</sup>.

Despite the lack of any legally binding documents, there is a strong commitment to change that is periodically reinforced by jointly agreed Ministerial Declarations: Sorbonne (1998) and Bologna (1999), and Ministerial Communiqués: Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), London (2007), Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve (2009), Budapest/Vienna (2010) and Bucharest (2012). The EHEA itself was launched in 2010 and the next Ministerial meeting will take place in Yerevan, Armenia (2015). Currently, there are 47 participating countries in the Bologna Process<sup>4</sup>. In addition, three Bologna policy fora have been held alongside Bologna Ministerial meetings: Louvain-la-Neuve (2009), Vienna (2010) Bucharest (2012)<sup>5</sup>.

The Bologna Process represents a series of education reforms needed to make European higher education more compatible and comparable. It is also designed to improve higher education, quality, recognition, transparency, mobility and competitiveness. The overarching aim of the Bologna Process is to complete the EHEA based on international co-operation and academic exchange that is attractive to European students and staff as well as to students and staff from other parts of the world.

It is estimated that Europe has 4000 HEIs, 19 million students and 1.5 million staff. The number of students worldwide is expected to double to 262 million by 2025. Higher education is seen as a powerful driver of growth. A major impetus for reform is the underlying sense of panic by European higher education ministers realising that their

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2 The ESG are currently under revision.

3 Details of the QF-EHEA can be accessed at: <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/qf/overarching.asp>

4 There are numerous publications on the Bologna Process. Good sources of information are the official Bologna Process and EHEA websites: <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/> and <http://www.ehea.info>

5 Details of these meeting, background reports and the official statements issued can be accessed at: <http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=44>

existing education systems and practices are archaic and unfit for the new realities of the 21st century. Other common drivers of reform include: poor existing qualifications; high education drop-out rates; overlong completion times; outmoded curricula; a low skills base; high graduate unemployment rates; the need to develop a knowledge economy; the necessity for more socially inclusive open access; and increased numbers in the education system. However, it is not about disregarding all previous approaches, qualifications and good practice.

The creation of the EHEA is designed to respect educational diversity and is not about the harmonisation (making identical) of European education systems, priorities, cultures and regulations. It is important to stress that the Bologna Process does not aim to standardise national education systems but rather to provide tools to connect them. It does not lead to automatic recognition but seeks to make systems and practices transparent so that “fair” informed recognition decisions can be made. The EHEA provides the overarching context for transparency, compatibility and comparability via common standards.

The EC is heavily involved but does not dominate the Bologna Process (it has a limited legal remit in this area), notwithstanding the fact that its 27 EU members form a majority of the total 47 countries in the EHEA. The EC provides funding to various initiatives but it remains the main responsibility of each Bologna state to fund its own internal education reforms. The EC has also developed the EQF for Lifelong Learning that encompasses all sectors of education - primary, secondary, vocational and higher<sup>6</sup>. This has caused some confusion and overlap with the QF-EHEA. Ironically, it was the success of the Bologna Process that revitalised the moribund progress of many previous EC initiatives.

## **THE BOLOGNA PROCESS - STRENGTHS, TRIUMPHS AND ACHIEVEMENTS**

It is useful to explore the factors that contribute to the success of the Bologna Process as they contain some useful insights for similar initiatives. The unprecedented speed, agreement and degree of educational progress associated with the Bologna Process are astounding. The pace and depth of education reform and co-operation is historically

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6 Details of the EQF can be accessed at: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/eqf\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/eqf_en.htm)

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unparalleled. Bologna represented a colossally ambitious initiative from the start and this is one of its strengths. Although the EHEA is not yet completed, the level and impact of reforms have been immense but uneven. Understandably, there are huge variations in the level of progress made between different states<sup>7</sup>. There is no single factor responsible for its success but an important component is how it is organised and implemented at international, national and institutional level, and the blend of key organisations involved in the process.

At the international level, there is the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG)<sup>8</sup> that consists of all signatory countries plus the EC, the Council of Europe, the European Universities Association (EUA), European Students' Union (ESU), European Association of Institutions of Higher Education (EURASHE), UNESCO European Centre for Higher Education (UNESCO-CEPES), European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), Education International (EI) and Business Europe (UNICE). These well-established international organisations combine to make a very powerful group of key stakeholders who play a substantial role in implementing change. Real stakeholder involvement by influential "players" has proved to be one of the success factors of the Bologna Process. In particular, the role of students and student organisations as stakeholders at international, national and local level should not be underestimated<sup>9</sup>.

The process has employed a series of international Bologna seminars, official Bologna Working Groups and conferences to focus on issues, develop policy and overcome problems. These have facilitated an unprecedented level of co-operation that has overcome problems previously seen as insuperable. A particularly important feature of the early developments was the commissioning of background reports for discussion that focused on particular issues and made practical recommendations. These were successful in developing radical solutions to complex problems. Other significant progress drivers are the biennial Ministerial meetings that issue communiqués, take

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7 For details see *The European Higher Education Area in 2012 - Bologna Process Implementation Report*: [http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/\(1\)/Bologna Process Implementation Report.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/(1)/Bologna%20Process%20Implementation%20Report.pdf)

8 Details of the role of the BFUG, the Board and Bologna Secretariat can be accessed at: <http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=5>

9 The European Students' Union (ESU) has been a particularly effective organisation in this regard: <http://www.esib.org/>

stock of progress, approve new initiatives and adopt by consensus further remedial action. These are further informed by detailed research progress reports<sup>10</sup>. Such reports are particularly effective when they “name and shame” countries that make little progress on the various Bologna scorecards and indices. This informal peer pressure has been a significant spur to education change. In addition, national teams of Bologna experts have been formed to provide a pool of expertise and enhance progress towards higher education reform<sup>11</sup>. National correspondents (QF-EHEA) and National Co-ordination Points (EQF) have been established to link and facilitate the development of NQFs. There has also been a series of useful sub-regional Ministerial meetings to explore common issues concerning the implementation of the EHEA in the Central and Eastern European area<sup>12</sup>.

National-level initiatives complement the international processes. These vary from country to country but normally involve government and ministries responsible for higher education, rectors’ conferences, quality assurance bodies, student bodies, university associations and a mix of social partners. There are variations in process and strategy for change; some countries enshrine education change in new laws, others use “soft power” approaches. In most cases, there is some sort of national strategy or plan adopted for reform that forces/promotes appropriate changes in degree structures, recognition tools and processes, credit systems, mobility programmes, education management, institutional autonomy, quality assurance (internal and external), etc. This has led to massive changes in national higher education policy, processes and priorities. Obviously, progress to date is very varied between participating countries; some had relatively little to change (North Western Europe) whilst others have massive alterations to their traditional education cultures, paradigms and systems (Southern, Central and Eastern Europe).

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10 A variety of bodies produce detailed and sometimes conflicting reports on progress including CEDEFOP, the European Students’ Union (ESU) and the European Universities Association (EUA). The ESU reports *Bologna with Students Eyes* are particularly illuminating:<http://www.esu-online.org/news/article/6068/Bologna-With-Student-Eyes-2012/>

11 More information on these can be accessed at: [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/llp/support\\_measures\\_and\\_network/bologna\\_experts\\_en.php](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/llp/support_measures_and_network/bologna_experts_en.php)

12 The most recent held in 2012 under the auspices of the Council of Europe included delegations from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

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The third dimension of success is at the institutional level. Much has been achieved where HEIs have wholeheartedly embraced change. Similarly, countries have made the most progress where there is an integrated education strategy that links and supports national and local reform. The Bologna reforms and internationalisation for many HEIs are profound and impact on their autonomy, purposes, governance, responsibilities, organisation, policies and processes. This is a controversial, slow and difficult process. Logic indicates that without bottom-up reforms there can be no real progress. Although there is much emphasis in the Bologna Process on new tools, devices and processes, this must not obscure the point that the reform is about better qualifications, efficiently and effectively delivered. This is accomplished at university level where the focus is now increasingly placed on “teaching and learning policies” and the process of curriculum development. Here, at the qualification level, the introduction of learning outcomes is of critical importance. It is clear that institutions that have sophisticated staff development and training processes to support these innovations have the most success. In this regard, the adoption of learning outcomes also facilitates the implementation of the important “employability agenda” and emphasis and inclusion in all studies of “transferable skills”.

A final positive element is the creative improvement of old tools and the development of new ones associated with transparency, standards, mobility and recognition. The sets of Bologna tools are inter-related and reinforce each other in ways that were initially not fully appreciated. The most important in this connection are: the Diploma Supplement, the European Network of Information Centres in the European Region - National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (ENIC-NARIC) network<sup>13</sup>, ECTS, EAR, QF-EHEA, new-style NQFs based on learning outcomes, the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the ESG. It is possible that some of these will become the basis of global standards - with similar identical and/or compatible devices and approaches existing worldwide. Currently within the Bologna Process it is recognised that no more new tools should be invented. The need now is to make the existing tools work.

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13 The ENIC-NARIC network is a joint network of national academic and professional recognition bodies. Its electronic gateway can be accessed at: <http://enic-naric.net>

Arguably the most profound Bologna reform concerns the creation of the EHEA and its core element, the QF-EHEA. The latter is a work in progress as relatively few countries have developed their new NQF and self-certificated it against the overarching framework<sup>14</sup>. The function of the QF-EHEA is to:

- Describe the “outer limits” within which national frameworks should be situated
- Allow for diversity within those limits;
- Ensure compatibility between national frameworks (act as a framework of frameworks);
- Present a “common face” for higher education in Europe, which is important in a global context.

NQFs are viewed as closer to operational reality and are owned by national systems. They should facilitate movement within systems and describe qualifications (using learning outcomes) and how they link. The self-certification process designed to demonstrate the compatibility of NQFs with the QF-EHEA is proving to be a very powerful tool. The criteria and procedures for verification are effective and revealing. States have to provide evidence of implementation and not just aspiration statements: if reports are seen to be poor or imperfect then recognition will not follow.

An important objective of the Bologna Process is to make European higher education more attractive internationally. This has, in many ways, been accomplished. The EHEA and the Bologna Process have drawn considerable attention from the rest of the world. Collectively and individually, Bologna countries are promoting themselves as academic partners, study destinations and strategic education exporters. This is clearly acknowledged by the development of the Bologna Policy Forum (see the section below) and the global interest generated.

This brief exploration identifies several features and aspects of the Bologna Process and EHEA that are responsible for its success to date. Individual reasons for success

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14 For full details, texts and working reports on developing (10 steps) Bologna NQF, QF-EHEA and the self-certification ‘*Criteria & Procedures for Verification of Framework Compatibility*’ plus access to existing verification reports, see: <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/qf/national.asp> - C

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are not simple to disaggregate. The main impetus for change is the existence of a shared strength of purpose emerging from common difficulties faced by European states. Several of the approaches and tools identified above could be applicable or adapted to be valid in South and Southern African contexts.

## **THE BOLOGNA PROCESS - WEAKNESSES AND FAILURES**

The Bologna Process is not just a story of success; it has shortcomings and failures and has by no means yet achieved all that it set out to do. The announcement of the EHEA in 2010 was an important landmark:

We, the Ministers responsible for higher education in the countries participating in the Bologna Process, met in Budapest and Vienna on March 11 and 12, 2010, to launch the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), as envisaged in the Bologna Declaration of 1999. (Budapest-Vienna Declaration on the European Higher Education Area 2010:1).

The EHEA vision is not complete and it will probably take until 2020 before this could be declared with any confidence. Ministers acknowledge this in their communiqués, their lists of priorities 2012-2015, various Bologna working group reports, and the 2012 Bologna Process implementation report. It is worth emphasising the point that its strengths and achievements currently and easily outweigh its weaknesses and problems.

It is certainly going to take longer to complete the reforms than anticipated in 1999 at the start of the process. Furthermore, higher education reform is a process that needs to be permanently ongoing as the pace of technological changes and globalisation is relentless.

It took several years before the full implications of the interconnectedness of the Bologna reforms (10 Action lines<sup>15</sup>) were fully appreciated. The Bologna reforms envisage a competitive national and international reality with autonomous HEIs existing in an

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15 Details of the Bologna Action lines can be accessed at: <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/actionlines/index.htm>



education framework consisting of external reference points, new-style qualifications frameworks based on learning outcomes and rigorous quality assurance arrangements. This context is designed to provide increased transparency, mobility and recognition (but not automatic recognition) and improved qualifications.

There is evidence that several of the Bologna reforms tools and dimensions have proved slow to be implemented and become fully effective. These include the ECTS, the Diploma Supplement, policies to implement student-centred learning, improving the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and the introduction of more flexible learning paths. The whole dimension of lifelong learning has proved to be an area where progress is difficult.

There has been some failure to provide sufficient good practice examples and support for reform. This combines with an underestimation of the depth of the paradigm changes involved and the challenges they represent to “conservative” academics. In every country, academics are adept at subverting reforms, especially those that undermine traditional practice. At national level, many states did not comprehend the significance and depth of reforms required. This has meant that appropriate national policies, financial support and guidelines for institutional level change are absent or poorly conceived. Often detailed, measurable, strategic action plans at local and national level are not put in place. There has often at local institutional level, been no real understanding of the level of fundamental change required.

There are also unrealistic expectations about existing higher education systems that suffer from endemic failures and problems, e.g. high levels of corruption, nepotism, proliferation of institutions with university status, poor facilities, low standards, rote-learning, huge inequality of opportunity, elitism, inadequate funding and overcrowding. For such systems and institutions, Bologna provides no overnight solutions; it is no universal panacea or silver bullet. For some countries, the profound level of academic, systemic and practical change required is immense. Intrinsic academic cultures and historical traditions cannot be transformed overnight.

Particular difficulties continue to exist associated with the introduction of learning outcomes and the creation and implementation of new-style NQFs. There is considerable pressure for states to create new NQFs and then self-certificate them against the QF-

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EHEA and/or EQF. The problem is that such reforms cannot be rushed. Too many new NQFs lack detailed level descriptors and have vague purposes<sup>16</sup>. Some even just enshrine the status quo and are not designed to transform. How old qualifications are placed in new qualifications frameworks is often problematic. Sometimes traditional prejudices between vocational education and training (VET) and higher education are not resolved. The relationship of the NQF with other necessary supportive reforms can be unclear. In some cases, zombie NQFs can be the result - useless frameworks that are not fully alive nor have any real impact on current practices. Such fake reforms can also find a parallel at institutional level where HEIs create new cosmetic learning outcomes for old re-packaged, unreformed qualifications<sup>17</sup>.

## **THE BOLOGNA PROCESS - FOCUS ON INTERNATIONALISATION AND THE GLOBAL DIMENSION**

The EHEA can be viewed as a regionally confined internationalisation project. It is clearly influenced by global forces, and responsive to an increasingly global higher education landscape and agenda. Both internationalisation and the global dimension are recognised as increasingly important elements of the EHEA:

Co-operation with other regions of the world and international openness are key factors to the development of the EHEA. We commit to further exploring the global understanding of the EHEA goals and principles in line with the strategic priorities set by the 2007 strategy for “the EHEA in a Global Setting”. We will evaluate the strategy’s implementation by 2015 with the aim to provide guidelines for further internationalisation developments. The Bologna Policy Forum will continue as an opportunity for dialogue and its format will be further developed with our global partners. (Bucharest Communiqué 2012:4)

The evolution of the EHEA has accelerated “Europeanisation” and internationalisation of HEIs within Europe. This is manifested in increased international partnerships,

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16 In Europe, it has been found that generic level descriptors often need to be augmented by subject benchmark statements, sectoral qualifications frameworks and national occupational standards.

17 A forthcoming article explores the current challenges posed by the introduction of learning outcomes in the EHEA: Adam (2013) *The central role of learning outcomes in the completion of the European Higher Education Area 2013-2020*, Journal of the European Higher Education Area, Raabe publishing.

rising levels of competition, proliferation of branch campuses, a focus on transnational networking, a widespread rise in importance of international offices and the adoption of appropriate strategic plans within institutions, etc. New global opportunities and massively increased levels of competition are transforming the possibilities of a university education. The concept of the traditional university itself is under pressure. In some ways, the Bologna Process can be viewed as an experimental solution to the uncertainties of 21st century education. The rapidly emerging new education landscape requires a new education architecture in response. New types of learner, new learning platforms, MOOCs, the “marketisation” of education, disruptive technologies and an emphasis on knowledge economies are all facets of this changed environment<sup>18</sup>. The big question is how should regions, states and institutions react to the new realities? The Bologna Process and creation of the EHEA is the foremost part of Europe’s reaction.

It should not be forgotten that one element of the EHEA is about attracting non-European students, out-competing other regions and exporting/developing the presence of European institutions worldwide. Higher education is now a highly competitive and lucrative industry for many countries. Paradoxically, Ministers also view the ‘EHEA as a partner to other higher education systems in other regions of the world’ (EHEA 2007:1). One increasingly important aspect of the evolution of the Bologna Process is its “external” global dimension. In May 2005, the Bergen Communiqué (2005:4-5) included the following statement:

The European Higher Education Area must be open and should be attractive to other parts of the world. Our contribution to achieving education for all should be based on the principle of sustainable development and be in accordance with the ongoing international work on developing guidelines for quality provision of cross-border higher education. We reiterate that in international academic co-operation, academic values should prevail.

We see the European Higher Education Area as a partner of higher education systems in other regions of the world, stimulating balanced student and staff exchange and

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18 An example of a useful yet apocalyptic discussion of new education realities and challenges can be found in the new report, by Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi, *An avalanche is coming: higher education and the revolution ahead*, published by the UK Institute for Public Policy Research (2013).

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co-operation between higher education institutions. We underline the importance of intercultural understanding and respect. We look forward to enhancing the understanding of the Bologna Process in other continents by sharing our experiences of reform processes with neighbouring regions. We stress the need for dialogue on issues of mutual interest. We see the need to identify partner regions and intensify the exchange of ideas and experiences with those regions. We ask the Follow-up Group to elaborate and agree on a strategy for the external dimension.

This communiqué directly led to the working party 2006 report by Pavel Zgaga - *Looking out: the Bologna Process in a global setting - on the “external dimension” of the Bologna Process* (Zgaga 2006) which in turn led to the adoption by Ministers of the 2007 strategy document: *European Higher Education in a Global Setting - A Strategy for the External Dimension of the Bologna Process*<sup>19</sup> (EHEA 2007). The strategy document delineated the following five core policy areas (*Ibid.*:3):

- Improving information on the EHEA;
- Promoting European higher education to enhance its worldwide attractiveness and competitiveness;
- Strengthening co-operation based on partnership;
- Intensifying policy dialogue;
- Furthering recognition of qualifications.

This strategy contains many significant points including the statement regarding recognition emphasising the principles of (*Ibid.*:5):

...a shift in emphasis from the procedures and formalities of higher education to learning outcomes and, second, the developing of a better common understanding of the concept of “substantial differences”...

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19 These texts can be respectively accessed at: [http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/WGR2007/Bologna\\_Process\\_in\\_global\\_setting\\_finalreport.pdf](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/WGR2007/Bologna_Process_in_global_setting_finalreport.pdf) and <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/WGR2007/Strategy-for-EHEA-in-global-setting.pdf>

It is for individual European countries and HEIs to implement appropriate strategies associated with the overall statement.

Following the initial global publications, three policy fora have taken place: Louvain 2009, Vienna 2010, and Bucharest 2012. These coincided with the Bologna Ministerial meetings and were designed to bring representatives from interested non-Bologna states into global reform discussions (to further develop dialogue, debate and co-operation)<sup>20</sup>.

In terms of significance, the third policy forum (Bucharest 2012) is the most important to date<sup>21</sup>. It issued the statement document *Beyond the Bologna Process: Creating and connecting national, regional and global higher education areas*<sup>22</sup>. This emphasises inter alia the role of higher education in promoting democracy, human rights protection and sustainable growth; a focus on the need to create and connect national, regional and local higher education; the need for open, transparent education systems; good governance of higher education; the significance of quality assurance as a tool to promote international education transparency and trust; the importance of graduate employability and learning outcomes; to increase regional exchanges; and further dialogue and co-operation in the context of Bologna policy fora. Global partners identified these topics as areas of common interest. In particular, the following four key themes raise significant questions for further debate and dialogue:

- Global student mobility: incentives and barriers, balances and imbalances;
- Global and regional approaches to quality assurance;
- Public responsibility for and of higher education (including consumer protection);
- The contribution of higher education reforms to enhancing graduate employability.

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20 A Bologna Working group 2009 report, *The European Higher Education Area in a Global Context* explored in detail the overall developments at the European, national and institutional levels. This can be accessed at: [http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/2009\\_EHEA\\_in\\_global\\_context.pdf](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/2009_EHEA_in_global_context.pdf)

21 A Bologna working group report, published in 2012, '*Beyond the Bologna Process: creating and connecting national, regional and global higher education areas*' can be accessed at: [http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/\(1\)/BPF\\_background\\_paper.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/(1)/BPF_background_paper.pdf)

22 This can be accessed at: [http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/Documents/BPF\\_Statement\\_27042012\\_with\\_additional\\_event.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/Documents/BPF_Statement_27042012_with_additional_event.pdf)

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These are important topics of vital interest to any world region contemplating a regionalisation agenda. The questions, implications and solutions associated with each of the four topics are explored in the background paper for the Third Bologna Policy Forum, Bucharest, April 27th, 2012: *Beyond the Bologna Process: Creating and connecting national, regional and global higher education areas*<sup>23</sup>.

What is clear from these ongoing fora and other initiatives is that there appears to be the start of a global consensus (given the widening worldwide attendance and agreement of forum statements) focused on many of the key ideas, principles and concepts embodied by the Bologna Process.

## **CONCLUSIONS - POSSIBLE ISSUES FOR DEBATE RELEVANT TO SOUTH AND SOUTHERN AFRICAN EDUCATION**

The creation and connection of national, regional and global higher education spaces is beginning to happen - what will this mean? There is no simple answer to this question but this is a phenomenon that should not be ignored. What we teach, what we learn, how learning and skills should be assessed, how we learn, where learning takes place, who should learn and how learning and qualifications are recognised are all questions that globalisation and new technologies are having a profound effect upon. National higher education systems are reforming and finding it useful to do this in the context of regional global frameworks, which share common problems and realities. These natural areas of co-operation are beginning to develop dialogues with other education areas. In the future, common tools and global standards are likely to emerge. This will be beneficial, provided that the end results are better qualifications, increased opportunities, recognition and mobility for all citizens. This is the optimistic vision, a pessimistic one might envisage destructive competition, exclusive education zones and neo-imperialistic education chaos.

Much can be learned from the Bologna experiences to date. It is clear that the creation of the EHEA is a significant achievement but it has a long way to go before it is complete and any final assessment of its long-term success can be made. It is the European response

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23 This can be accessed from the EHEA website.

to the new education realities. The EHEA represents complex and very ambitious sets of elements designed to reform and promote European higher education. Individual European countries within the process are confronted with both common problems and sets of unique individual education issues and realities. Each European country and region is unique and tailors its higher education policies and activities to meet its own needs and priorities. They find it beneficial to do this within the context of the EHEA, which allows them to fashion their own diverse detailed national policies.

Across Europe there are wide variations in demographics, levels of academic corruption, quality of academic infrastructure, student participation rates, inequalities (social inclusion and access problems), public-private mix of educational provision, etc. Policy priorities in one state are not necessarily appropriate, necessary or possible in another. The EHEA recognises this aspect of diversity whilst focusing on areas and tools of common accord. This is a useful approach that appears to have global resonance. Obviously, some European experience will be inapplicable and/or counterproductive in the context of South and Southern Africa - the hard part is to identify what might be constructive. Certainly, European and Southern African higher education face many common problems and should learn from each other's experiences. Only appropriate aspects of Bologna should be adopted. South and Southern Africa should create their own solutions and ways forward informed by their particular needs and priorities.

The EHEA is clearly in its immature years. The brief exploration in this paper identifies many features and aspects of the Bologna Process and EHEA that are responsible for its success to date. Some of these approaches and tools could be applicable or adapted to be valid in South and Southern African contexts. In particular, the following are worth considering:

### ***EHEA as a regional voluntary response that respects national autonomy***

A key element of the success to date of the EHEA regional development is that it is completely voluntary, inter-governmental and driven by common consensus (with full stakeholder involvement). The administrative mechanisms, seminars, working groups and research studies have proved effective in facilitating its rapid progress. It is about the development of common processes and the harmonisation of standards whilst

preserving national and institutional autonomy and thus diversity. It provides a context for national reforms that are then tailored to the needs, priorities and realities of each individual state. Southern Africa should consider its regional education needs and priorities and ensure its voice is heard in the global arena. Inter-regional frameworks are emerging and any global “community of practice” must hear the African voice.

### ***Evaluate the Bologna transparency tools and the 2012 Bucharest policy forum agenda***

Appropriate South and Southern African authorities should evaluate the Bologna recognition, mobility and quality assurance “transparency tools”, as well as the approach to self-certification of NQFs. It needs to be recognised that some of these devices and approaches could well become central to global standards. The tools should be assessed to gauge if any are useful, require adaptation, and/or are applicable to South and Southern Africa’s needs. Such an assessment could be done in the context of the consideration of the four key themes identified in the 2012 Bucharest *Third Bologna Policy Forum Statement*. The four themes raise numerous significant questions for further debate and dialogue:

- Global student mobility: incentives and barriers, balances and imbalances;
- Global and regional approaches to quality assurance;
- Public responsibility for and of higher education (including consumer protection);
- The contribution of higher education reforms to enhancing graduate employability.

### ***The role of meta-qualifications frameworks and national qualifications frameworks***

QF-EHEA clearly has huge potential to establish common standards and improved recognition between European NQFs. However, its implementation is proving complex and difficult. The development and implementation of appropriate national higher education reforms has been underestimated. Some hurriedly created and ineffective zombie NQFs have been created. Ill-conceived NQFs with vague levels descriptors are not fit for purpose. Often the extent of the technical and practical aspects in creating



effective NQFs has been underestimated. The purposes, functions and relationships of both meta- and national qualifications frameworks need to be carefully considered and measurable outcomes identified. Unrealistic reform deadlines can be counterproductive.

### ***National level integrated higher education reforms***

The collective Bologna reforms form an integrated package. They reinforce each other and benefit from concurrent implementation. These important linkages were not sufficiently recognised, nor was the time they take to put in place. Furthermore, the underpinning role of learning outcomes for all the Bologna reforms was not fully appreciated nor were the real set of challenges they represent to curriculum developers, credential evaluators, academics, students and quality assurance bodies, NQF architects, etc. Without a full appreciation of their significance, plus positive strategies to implement them, the whole reform process suffers and is undermined.

### ***Internationalisation and university level reforms***

In Europe, internationalisation has a profound series of impacts on HEIs. The European reform agenda is altering the role, governance, autonomy, responsibilities and processes of HEIs. This constitutes an enormous paradigm change that seeks to reposition and free them to compete nationally and internationally more effectively. National and HEI policies and strategies to put this into effect are a matter of local determination. Most European institutions deem internationalisation of crucial importance as they reposition themselves. They regard it as a vital and defining matter of pro-active strategic concern. The latter often involves re-orientation of the institution's mission statement; the internationalisation of the curriculum; the provision of mobility opportunities for all students and staff; the development of branch campuses, distance learning packages, international partnerships, joint degrees and co-operation agreements, etc.

### ***Internationalisation and quality assurance***

Quality assurance is central to international recognition, mobility, qualifications frameworks and transparency. If there are doubts about national and institutional quality assurance systems, then there will be little mutual trust and confidence in national

education systems, the HEIs they contain and the qualifications of citizens. This is why in Europe the powerful ESG were developed to establish common standards and principles<sup>24</sup>. Across the globe, there is increasing co-operation and linkages made between national, regional and international quality assurance organisations that embrace similar principles and processes. The evolution of global quality standards has significance for every education system.

### ***Final thought***

Globalisation and internationalisation cannot be reversed. National higher education systems and institutions can no longer behave like isolated academic islands. Education is becoming more globally interconnected. The consequences of this are enormous: for national authorities - in terms of public responsibility; for universities - in terms of mission, governance, autonomy and responsibility; and for citizens - in terms of choice and opportunities. Major differences exist between Southern African and European higher education, each having distinctive regional, national and local priorities. However, both face a range of common education problems, for which we should share common solutions. The simplistic answer to the questions posed at the start of this paper is that there is a mix of good practice and pitfalls to avoid in the European experience that South and Southern Africa should examine. European countries should also learn from Africa. Education zones of mutual trust and confidence need to be established to avoid any future global clash of higher education spaces.

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24 In addition, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) exists as a register of quality assurance agencies. Details can be accessed at: <http://www.eqar.eu>

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Related websites:

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European Higher Education Area: <http://www.ehea.info>

European Universities Association: <http://www.eua.be/Home.aspx>



# Response to Stephen Adam's paper on the Bologna Process and its possible significance for South and Southern African higher education

*Martin Oosthuizen*

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## INTRODUCTION

In his paper, Adam places the Bologna Process and the creation of the EHEA within the context of the complex forces that are driving the process of globalisation. There is little doubt that higher education in South and Southern Africa needs to develop appropriate responses to globalisation. The list of themes in Adam's paper, such as knowledge economies, transnational education, international mobility, MOOCs, disruptive technologies, meta- and national qualifications frameworks and regional and international quality assurance frameworks are themes that demand a systematic and co-ordinated response at a national and regional level. Equally, the challenges to which Adam points in European higher education, such as high drop-out rates, length to completion, outmoded curricula, poorly articulated learning pathways, high graduate unemployment rates and the need for higher enrolment rates linked to a greater diversity of provision, strike a note that is all too familiar in South African education, and also within the wider Southern African context.

In responding to Adam's discussion, this paper will explore two main themes, namely the nature of the Bologna Process as a framework for reform; and specific tools for promoting transparency, comparability and mobility, namely qualifications frameworks, CAT schemes and quality assurance systems. It is important to emphasise that the paper will focus primarily on South Africa, and only occasionally refer to developments within the broader SADC region.

## THE BOLOGNA PROCESS AS A FRAMEWORK FOR REFORM

At various points in his paper, Adam suggests that the Bologna Process could serve as a paradigm for regional reform processes in other parts of the world, by virtue of the

examples of good practice as well as pitfalls that it provides. The following remarks will consider the usefulness of Bologna as a framework for reflection on regional higher education reform in terms of principles for regional co-operation, the complexity of reform and the goals that shape the process.

### ***Bologna as a model of principles for regional co-operation***

Adam argues that Bologna presents a model for the achievement of common processes and the harmonisation of standards, while preserving national and institutional autonomy. The Bologna Declaration states that the six objectives of the reform process will be achieved with 'full respect of the diversity of cultures, languages, national education systems and of university autonomy' (European Ministers Responsible for Education 1999:8). Of course, in order to achieve a coherent platform for comparability and mobility, it is necessary for convergence to occur around a set of common constructs including the degree structure, the qualifications framework, the CAT system and the quality assurance framework (Huisman and Van Vught 2009; Van Damme 2009). Therefore, Bologna raises important questions around how convergence should be understood, what constitutes an acceptable level of convergence and the extent to which, as the process unfolds, it is managing to maintain an appropriate balance between harmonisation and the diverse education needs of different national systems (Teichler 2007; Van der Wende 2000; Van Damme 2009). Clearly there will be differing views on these questions. Some may argue that the process undermines the integrity of national systems, while others may claim that there are insufficient or ineffective supranational co-ordination mechanisms to promote comparability (Neave and Maassen 2010).

The debate on the relationship between convergence and diversity within Bologna could be approached from different perspectives. One view, as Huisman and Van Vught (2009) indicate, is that the two forces pull against each other. Accordingly, Bologna's success lies in its ability, as a voluntary, intergovernmental process, to maintain a delicate balance between regional agendas, frameworks and collaborative activities and national and local responsibilities and initiatives. Indeed, there continues to be a considerable variety of practices within the various constructs that have been developed to promote convergence (Huisman and Van Vught 2009). Another view, as put forward by Van Damme (2009), is that convergence creates an enabling framework for diversity.

National systems and institutions are able to differentiate themselves more clearly by means of the constructs that are created to promote comparability and transparency. These different perspectives illustrate the significance of the Bologna Process for reflection on the development of principles for regional co-operation within SADC. The nature of convergence, the constructs and instruments by means of which it is promoted, the aspects of diversity that are seen as worth nurturing and the relationship between convergence and diversity, are important questions that need to be clarified in the development of a framework for regional co-operation.

### ***The complexity of reform***

For South Africa, and SADC in general, the Bologna Process provides a good example of what Neave and Maassen (2010) refer to as the concept of policy as a moving target, but also the disjuncture between stated intent within the political realm and the pace of actual reform. In terms of policy as a moving target, it is noticeable, but also not surprising, that the scope of the reform agenda has grown considerably. For instance, the Berlin Communiqué in 2003 included Doctoral degrees within the ambit of the common qualifications framework, clarified the different purposes of first and second cycle degrees and described the key elements that should be incorporated within qualification descriptors in order to promote comparability. In addition, the communiqué outlined common elements for national quality assurance systems, and called upon the ENQA to develop a set of common standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance (European Ministers Responsible for Education 2003). The Bergen Communiqué in 2005 elaborated on the nature of the common qualifications framework, with reference to aspects such as credit structures for the first two cycles and the development of generic qualification descriptors, and stressed the importance of developing effective mechanisms for the recognition of qualifications, including joint degrees (European Ministers Responsible for Education 2005). Clearly, the scope and implications of a reform process such as Bologna become clearer over time.

Various difficulties, which are all referred to by Adam in his paper, have meant that the practical implementation of the reform process has differed significantly from the declared political agenda. A primary problem is that the interconnectedness and interdependence of the various reform initiatives have not always been recognised. At

least initially, the intention of certain goals, such as the development of the ECTS, was formulated quite vaguely, which made it more difficult to understand its specific role in the development of the EHEA (Teichler 2007:213). A second challenge relates to the capacity and willingness of national systems and institutions to adapt to the reform process. There has been significant variation in this regard, due in part to the extent of the reform required within a specific national or institutional system, but also the weight of national traditions (Neave and Maassen 2010; Surssock and Smidt 2010). The variable response at national and institutional levels raises the question of the scope that there is for flexibility in interpreting and responding to the reform process without hindering the key goals of transparency and comparability.

A third factor concerns the support mechanisms that were put in place for the reform process. As Neave and Maassen (2010) point out, a striking aspect of Bologna is the absence of any special budget to assist universities in their adaptation to its initiatives. Projects such as the development of a revised degree cycle and new qualification structures require considerable financial support so that national systems, institutions and networks of academic staff may be able to conduct projects around curriculum design, articulation pathways, the development of qualification standards and the creation of robust quality assurance systems. They also necessitate a significant investment in staff development, so that staff may receive appropriate guidance and support in understanding and responding to the implications of the reform process. Financial support is also required to promote mobility within the EHEA. Clearly, both the scope and depth of the reform process, as well as the resources required to support it, were not fully appreciated, especially during its early phases.

A final matter concerns the involvement of stakeholders, and particularly academic staff and students. In this regard, it is interesting to note the 2012 report of Education International (EI) to the 2012 Bologna Ministerial meeting in Bucharest. EI represents some 700 000 higher education staff members from 137 member organisations in 45 countries across the EHEA. The most striking finding of the report is the generally neutral attitude amongst academic staff towards the Bologna Process, as well as the negative attitudes towards it amongst staff in some countries. The report acknowledges the progress that has been made in various areas, such as mobility and student-centred learning. However, at least some academics have reservations about the perceived



effects of Bologna upon the academic profession, in particular the erosion of academic freedom and the deterioration of working and teaching conditions, within a context of declining funding (EI 2012). Whatever the merits of these assertions, the report suggests that more needs to be done to involve academic staff in discussions and negotiations relating to the process and its implementation. Inadequate involvement will militate against the willingness of academic staff to participate in the essential processes of curriculum reform and pedagogical innovation that are crucial to the success of Bologna.

### ***Reform goals: The Bologna Process and the Lisbon Convention***

Running parallel to Bologna, since 2000 the EC has implemented the Lisbon Convention as a major initiative for managing the transition of the EU to a knowledge-based economy with the aim of making it 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (European Council 2000:1). While the Lisbon Convention did not initially refer to higher education specifically, the EC has, from 2004, systematically incorporated the Bologna Process within its Education and Training 2010 programme for the achievement of the Lisbon objectives (Gornitzka 2010). As a result, a shift in emphasis has occurred in the Bologna Process, from an initial concern that it should promote the cultural attractiveness of European higher education, to a clearer focus on its role in optimising the contribution of universities to the knowledge economy. As Neave and Maassen remark, 'implicitly the main aims of the Lisbon strategy, strengthening economic competitiveness and stimulating social cohesion, have become central to the Bologna Process as well' (Neave and Maassen 2010:143).

The changing nature of the Bologna Process raises important questions about its goals. The earlier interest in the cultural attractiveness of European higher education, while admittedly quite vague, maintains a broader role for universities that includes their contribution to socio-cultural development and the preservation of important national traditions and values. Such a view may also stress the manner in which they prepare students for lives of service, rooted in a sense of connectedness to collective spheres of responsibility, as well as their role as agents of independent critique with respect to key societal problems. By contrast, the economic rationale focuses on the contribution that universities make to regional and national competitiveness, by means of programmes

and research that are relevant and responsive to the needs of the knowledge economy, and the development of employability skills. Students assume the role of consumers, who view the value of higher education in terms of their individual needs for advancement. These two perspectives stand in considerable tension with each other, and yet both are relevant to understanding the role that higher education must play in contemporary society. Therefore, the reform of higher education systems, regionally or nationally, must strike an appropriate balance between them. The search for equilibrium seems to be apparent from the continuing references that the various Bologna communiqués have made to the social dimension of higher education.

The point is that as the SADC region works on the creation of a framework for higher education collaboration, it is essential that education leaders and other decision-makers should pay adequate attention to the goals and drivers of the reform process. While economic competitiveness clearly is dependent on the development of appropriate high-level knowledge and skills, choices must be made about the broader framework of values that guide the missions, priorities and education approaches of higher education systems and institutions. These choices will inform decisions that are fundamental to the reform of higher education within SADC, such as its purpose, the forms of institutional diversity that regional and national systems support, the funding provided to certain types of education and research programmes, the nature of curriculum reform, the aims of mobility programmes and the attributes that graduates should develop.

## **TOOLS FOR TRANSPARENCY, COMPARABILITY AND MOBILITY**

South Africa and SADC are in the process of developing a range of transparency tools that are very similar to those of the Bologna Process. Therefore, the second part of this paper will consider the extent to which the development of transparency tools in South Africa and SADC can learn from the Bologna experience. Attention will be paid to the higher education qualifications framework, the credit transfer scheme and quality assurance.

### ***The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework***

The discussion of the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) will focus on two issues, namely the design of QF-EHEA and its relationship to the EQF.

Before attending to these points, it may be noted that similar to the situation in Europe, relatively few countries in SADC, namely Namibia, Mauritius and South Africa, have fully developed NQFs. SADC approved the development of a regional qualifications framework, consisting of ten levels with level descriptors, in 2011, building on work that started as early as 2001. As is the case of the Bologna Process, the Southern African Development Community Qualifications Regional Framework (SADC RQF) may provide an enabling framework for the development of further NQFs – and possibly SADC could work with the EHEA in exploring the development of national frameworks within the context of a regional framework.

### ***The design of the QF-EHEA***

The QF-EHEA is designed around the three-cycle degree structure, consisting of Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degrees. According to the *Trends 2010* report, 95% of institutions have implemented the degree structure, compared to 82% at the time of the *Trends V* report (Sursock and Smidt 2010; Crosier, Purser and Smidt 2007). However, considerable work still needs to be done on the properties of each cycle, as well as the manner in which they relate to each other. The status of the Bachelor's degree as a qualification in its own right remains a matter of contention, as there continues to be a strong view in some countries amongst students, academics and employers that the Master's degree should constitute the basic entry to employment (Sursock and Smidt 2010). If the Bachelor's degree is merely the first phase of a programme that is completed at Master's level, it may not be designed as a discrete qualification in its own right. One implication may be, and is the case in some countries, that students are less inclined to pursue further study at other institutions or in other countries within the EU, as the curriculum of the Bachelor's degree gains its coherence through its linkage to the Master's degree. A second matter concerns the possibility of accommodating different tracks, namely a general academic and professional track, within the different cycles of the degree structure. In this regard, there is considerable interest in clarifying the nature of professional Master's and Doctoral programmes and how they differ from traditional programmes at these levels (Sursock and Smidt 2010). The exploration of this issue holds implications for curriculum design as well as the development of articulation routes between qualifications with different curricular properties (Teichler 2007). Thirdly, attention is being paid to approaches to doctoral education, such as the development

of more structured programmes, the creation of doctoral schools and the embedding of transferable skills (Sursock and Smidt 2010:43-44). Finally, there continues to be significant variation in the implementation of the three-cycle structure in terms of the length of each cycle and their credit values. The question is whether such variability has a negative impact on student mobility or not.

In South Africa, an NQF, as well as a HEQF, gazetted in 2007 and implemented from 2009, are in place. A revised sub-framework for higher education qualifications, the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), was gazetted on 2 August 2013. The development of the HEQF constitutes a significant achievement in the vision for the creation of a single, co-ordinated higher education system as set out in the *National Plan for Higher Education* (Department of Education 2001). The framework integrates the previously separate qualification systems for the universities of technology (formerly called technikons)<sup>25</sup> and university sectors into one structure, describes the purpose and credit values of each qualification type and stipulates the possibilities for progression and articulation between qualifications. Each qualification is linked to a specific level on the NQF, which contains level descriptors that provide an outer framework for qualification design. The most important development within the HEQSF is that it introduces professional Master's and Doctoral degrees, and also provides for a clearer distinction between general and professional Bachelor's degrees.

Of course, the HEQSF remains a work in progress, and much research is needed on various projects in order to realise its full potential in the development of coherent qualifications and programmes, as well as articulation routes that promote flexible learning pathways in a responsible manner. Some of this work might benefit from exchanges with specific Bologna member states rather than the Bologna Process itself. Two pertinent examples come to mind – the learning pathways leading to a Master's degree, and the admission routes into higher education. With respect to the former, the HEQF and the HEQSF allow for three pathways to a Master's degree, namely i) the Diploma – Advanced Diploma – Postgraduate Diploma (or Honours degree); ii) three-year Bachelor's degree – Honours degree; and iii) Four-year Bachelor's degree. The relationship between these routes, and the extent to which they prepare students

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25 The former technikons were reconstituted as universities of technology in 2003 (Du Pré 2010).

adequately for Master's study, requires further work. Consultation with member states in the Bologna Process could help shed light on this matter, if only by means of comparison with articulation routes to Master's level of study in their context. In terms of the second matter, countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) and other member states could provide important perspectives on various admission routes into higher education, and thereby contribute to the clarification of the relationship between the National Senior Certificate and the National Certificate (Vocational) as entry routes to higher education in the South African system.

In other respects, the Bologna Process could provide useful collaborative possibilities for the further development of the HEQSF. The nature of professional qualifications, in terms of the types of knowledge on which they draw and their implications for curriculum design as well as articulation, is an aspect of common interest. More specifically, as the South African higher education system introduces the new professional Master's and Doctoral degrees, it could learn from work on the characteristics of such qualifications within the Bologna Process. The work on Doctoral qualifications within the Bologna Process, in terms of their design and the structures that support Doctoral education, presents another area for productive collaboration.

### ***Relationship between the QF-EHEA and the EQF***

One of the challenges of the Bologna Process is the relationship between the EQF, which is a product of EU's Lisbon strategy, and the QF-EHEA, a product of the Bologna Process (Gornitzka 2010:166). The EQF has a much wider scope, covering primary, secondary, vocational and higher education. As Adam states, the development of the EQF has caused confusion and overlap with the QF-EHEA, and it is clear that this matter requires further attention. A similar challenge exists in South African higher education. The NQF accommodates three sub-frameworks, namely the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF), Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) and the HEQSF. In order to clarify the relationship between the sub-frameworks, and to provide a basis for principled decisions around progression and articulation, two key issues must be addressed. The first concerns the existence of qualifications at NQF levels five and six in the OQSF and HEQSF, as well as the argument for the inclusion of a level five qualification on the GFETQSF. The second

matter is whether the OQSF should provide for occupational qualifications at NQF levels 7 to 10.

These are complex and contested questions, which demand careful consideration with respect to the types of knowledge on which different types of qualifications at similar NQF levels draw, as well as their specific purposes. As far as occupational qualifications on the NQF are concerned, there are strong expectations within the labour movement around the possibilities for progression to more advanced levels of study and the portability of qualifications. In order to address some of the complexities around the relationship between the three sub-frameworks, SAQA has constituted a reference group which will oversee the development of a policy framework for CAT. For this project to be successful, it is vital that the scheme should take into account the curricular focus or logic of specific qualification types. Vocational, professional and general or formative qualifications are informed by different curricular logics, in terms of the mix of theoretical and practical knowledge that they contain. Learners who have achieved a certain level of competence in one learning pathway cannot simply move to another pathway, without ensuring that they are able to cope with the cognitive demands as well as practical skills that it requires.

Work on the development of the CAT scheme will necessitate practical projects that explore the interface between the various formal education sectors - secondary education, further education and training (FET) and higher education- as well as their collective relationship to occupational work-based training. As it seems that the Bologna Process must address the relationship between the EQF and the QF-EHEA, South Africa could benefit appreciably from collaborative work that explores the relationship between different types of qualifications and qualification pathways within and between its various qualification sub-frameworks.

### ***Credit accumulation and transfer***

In statistical terms, the EHEA has made considerable progress in the development of the ECTS, with 88% of the institutions surveyed in the *Trends 2010* report confirming that they use the system for credit accumulation for all Bachelor's and Master's programmes, and 90% use it for credit transfer (Sursock and Smidt 2010). However,

the validity of some of the CAT systems that form part of the survey is open to question. *Trends 2010* echoes the findings of previous trends reports with regard to the uneven implementation of the ECTS within institutions and national systems. In particular, it notes the continuing confusion around the development of learning outcomes for courses and modules and their correlation with credit values. Without progress in this regard, the application of the ECTS risks remaining a superficial exercise with little substantive connection to the demonstrable achievement of learning outcomes (Sursock and Smidt 2010). Significantly, the most recent Bucharest communiqué calls for the meaningful implementation of learning outcomes, linked to study credits and assessment procedures (EHEA Ministerial Conference 2012). It should be recognised, though, that the effective implementation of an ECTS is a long-term project, and that at least there are encouraging signs that institutions are investing in the strategies that are necessary to support it, including the transition to a more student-centred learning approach, and the introduction of a modular organisation of study programmes (Sursock and Smidt 2010:46-49). The Tuning Project, in terms of which various disciplines collaborated across Europe to define their learning outcomes, constitutes a valuable resource for the further development of the ECTS.

As already stated in the previous section, work on the development of a CAT scheme that supports lifelong learning and flexible learning pathways is underway in South Africa. Referring specifically to higher education, the South African Higher Education Quality Committee is conducting a project for the development of qualification standards. The research recognises that qualification standards require a level of specificity that goes beyond the broad statement of level descriptors on the NQF, or even the qualification descriptors that are provided in the HEQSF. The determination of qualification standards, and the learning outcomes and assessment criteria that are linked to them, must account for the curricular logic of a qualification type (i.e. its focus on vocational, professional or general education) and, at least to some extent, its disciplinary nature. Clearly defined qualification standards are a prerequisite for the refinement of articulation pathways and arrangements for CAT, as they should constitute the basis for the specification of learning outcomes and the validation of their achievement.

There are various ways in which collaboration with the EHEA could assist further work on CAT in South African higher education. Arguably, the challenges that beset the

development of the ECTS are equally applicable to our national context. Thus, while all qualifications and programmes are required to have learning outcomes, it does not necessarily follow that outcomes are always appropriately related to credit values or that they adequately express the knowledge, skills and attitudes that learners should achieve. Furthermore, supportive mechanisms for the ECTS, such as the transition to a student-centred learning approach, linked to suitable strategies for teaching and assessment, require considerable further work. Therefore, there is scope for South African higher education to learn with and from the experience of the Bologna Process in terms of CAT.

As far as SADC is concerned, while the Arusha Convention on the recognition of qualifications dates back to 1981, work on a formal CAT scheme is at an early stage within the context of the SADC RQF. It would be useful for the region to learn how Europe's long experience with respect to the ECTS, which was introduced in 1989 within the context of the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (Erasmus) exchange programme (Huisman and Van Vught 2009) could be translated into regional strategies that may inform arrangements for CAT.

### ***Quality assurance***

As Adam points out, the integrity of national and institutional quality assurance systems is central to the achievement of the overarching goals of the Bologna Process. The *Trends V* report noted various encouraging developments with respect to internal quality assurance systems, with over 95% of surveyed institutions stating that they conducted internal programme evaluations, and 70% confirming that they did so on a regular basis. It also pointed to the increasing involvement of students in institutional quality assurance processes, as well as the greater participation by external experts in various forms of review and evaluation. However, fewer institutions have introduced a process for the regular evaluation of student learning services (Crosier, Purser and Smidt 2007). The *Trends 2010* report largely confirms these findings, but observed that while there are signs that a quality culture is taking firmer root in many institutions, there are still concerns about the depth of staff engagement in quality assurance processes, including a lack of understanding of the importance of student participation. Furthermore, as a result of the introduction of new external quality assurance processes, in some cases



internal quality assurance procedures lean towards a compliance culture (Sursock and Smidt 2010).

The South African higher education sector has made good progress in the implementation of a robust national external quality assurance system. The system for programme accreditation and the national reviews promote consistency of standards and the level of trust that can be placed in the achievement of learning outcomes across institutions. The first cycle of institutional audits helped institutions to develop more systematic arrangements for assuring the quality of their core academic activities, and to appreciate how strategic planning, overarching institutional plans and policies, and structural arrangements contribute to an effective institutional quality management system. Of course, much remains to be done, especially in terms of the development of institutional quality cultures. In this regard, the introduction of the second cycle of quality assurance, and especially the proposals with respect to the system of institutional reviews, holds significant promise. The intention of the review process is to focus on a range of factors that impact on the quality of undergraduate education and therefore the ability of institutions to develop graduates who are well prepared to address the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century society. As such, the reviews could assist institutions in creating effective communities of practice in which academic and support staff, as well as students, consider how best to create conducive conditions for effective learning and teaching.

At a regional level, there is as yet no common framework for quality assurance that is comparable to the ESG and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). SADC member states are at various stages of designing and implementing external quality assurance systems, while it seems plausible that there is significant variation in the extent to which institutions have developed effective internal quality assurance arrangements. The Higher Education Quality Management Initiative for Southern Africa (HEQMISA) is contributing to the facilitation of processes for developing external and internal quality systems. It would seem that the experience of the EHEA in the creation and implementation of the ESG and the EQAR, especially the manner in which the EUA is taking the project on institutional quality cultures forward, could provide valuable insights to SADC in the development of quality assurance architecture for the region.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Higher education in South Africa and SADC has much to learn from, but also to contribute to, the Bologna Process. As Adam points out, the regions face a range of common challenges relating to globalisation and the development of knowledge societies and economies. As far as South Africa is concerned, this paper has attempted to illustrate the strong correspondence between the transparency instruments that have been introduced at a national level with those of the EHEA. In some respects, the country has made remarkable progress over the past 20 years in designing constructs that promote consistency and comparability, and that contribute to lifelong learning and student mobility. These include the NQF, the HEQSF and an external quality assurance framework. On a regional level, much remains to be done to develop a robust framework for the co-ordination of reform processes that are responsive to the challenges facing higher education. There are many opportunities for collaborative projects between SADC and the EHEA in order to take this work further.

This paper has also attempted to point out that regional reform in SADC can learn much from the Bologna Process about the relationship between convergence and diversity, the complexity of reform and, importantly, about the goals of higher education reform. SADC has a distinctive contribution to make to the manner in which the global debate on higher education is shaped and should ensure that it realises this potential by doing exactly what Adam suggests – participating in the establishment of zones of mutual trust and confidence in which the perspectives and approaches of all regions are valued.

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# The role of national and Europe-wide qualifications frameworks in promoting articulation

*Padraig Walsh*

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at articulation routes to higher education and examines the role that qualifications frameworks play in promoting better articulation. The recent development of meta-frameworks of qualifications in Europe and their role in the promotion of mobility and the contribution of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in Ireland in improving the rate of access, transfer and progression (ATP) to higher education from non-traditional routes is described.

## THE BOLOGNA PROCESS AND THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

As the main objective of the Bologna Process since its inception in 1999, the establishment of the EHEA was meant to ensure more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe. Between 1999 and 2010, a significant effort on the part of the Bologna Process member countries was targeted to creating the EHEA that was officially launched in March 2010. The number of countries that have subscribed to the Bologna Process has increased from the initial 29 members in 1999 to 47 members by 2010. The reporting of progress in the Bologna Process since 2001 is through Ministerial meetings. These have been held in 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2010 and most recently in Bucharest (Romania) in 2012. The next Ministerial meeting will be held in Yerevan (Armenia) in 2015. It is noteworthy that the Bologna Process is a voluntary inter-governmental process of 47 countries across the wider European continent, which extends beyond the 29 member political and economic EU bloc.

One of the primary aims of the Bologna Process is to promote mobility within Europe: mobility of students (both within and between study programmes); and mobility of graduates between the participating countries. Increased mobility is only possible when

there is trust and understanding from both the education systems and labour markets of the qualifications arising from the member countries, hence the need for comparability, compatibility and coherence in the educational systems.

With the implementation of the Bologna Process, higher education systems in European countries are meant to be organised in such a way that it is easy to move from one country to the other (within the EHEA) – for the purpose of further study or employment, so that the attractiveness of European higher education is increased and so that many people from non-European countries come to study and/or work in Europe. The EHEA is intended to provide Europe with a broad, high-quality advanced knowledge base, and to ensure the further development of Europe as a stable, peaceful and tolerant community. It is also envisaged that there will be a greater convergence between the United States of America and Europe as European higher education adopts aspects of the American system.

The Bologna Process has involved changes for many countries in their traditional degree structures which have meant a move to the Anglo centric system (typical of the UK, Ireland and the United States of America's three-cycle system [Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degrees]). In much of continental Europe, higher education was previously modelled on the German system, in which there is a clear difference between vocational and academic higher education. Typically, this involved a long (five years or more) first-cycle degree.

The re-orientation of the long first-cycle into (mostly) a three-year Bachelor programme followed by a two-year Master's degree has not been without difficulty. In many countries, there has been resistance from the labour market to Bachelor graduates and for many professions (engineering, for example), the Master's degree had become the entry level to the profession. In many cases, students move straight from the Bachelor programme onto a Master's programme (often at the same institution). There is some recent anecdotal evidence, however, of greater student mobility (within the same country) between the Bachelor's and Master's degrees with students taking these programmes at different institutions. The willingness of the labour market (including the state as employer) to accept Bachelor graduates requires more engagement between the state, the higher education community and professional bodies.

The comparability between programmes has been facilitated by a general convergence of the credit system in most Bologna signatory countries, with the now almost universal adoption of the ECTS. This has meant that the typical three-cycle system largely consists of:

- Bachelor's degree of 180-240 ECTS (three-four years of full-time study)
- Master's degree of 90-120 ECTS (one-two years of full-time study)
- Doctoral degree (not less than three years of full-time study).

Progress in the Bologna Process is reported at the (usually) bi-annual Ministerial meetings. These are informed by national country reports which are submitted in advance of the Ministerial meetings and are published in English on the EHEA website (EHEA 2012).

The national country reports are accompanied by a stock-taking exercise whereby self-reporting is required against specified Bologna "action lines" such as progress with the country's national quality assurance and qualifications frameworks. The reports are also published on the EHEA website. The most recent stock-taking report is for 2012 (Eurydice 2012). The reporting takes the form of a modified traffic-light system and has facilitated the emergence of a stock-taking scorecard in the form of a league table whereby "progress" is judged by the level of dark-green and "lack of progress" by the level of bright red against the various indicators. Crude as this system is, it constitutes a driver for action at the level of the individual countries which is probably necessary in a process that is essentially a voluntary inter-governmental agreement. A simple example of progress arising from the stock-taking system is the increased level of student involvement in external quality assurance processes. More students are now represented on governing boards of external quality assurance agencies and there has been a significant increase in the number of countries that include students as full members of teams undertaking quality evaluations of HEIs.

## **QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN EUROPE**

Qualifications frameworks are important instruments in ensuring more comparable and compatible qualifications. A qualifications framework encompasses all the qualifications

in a higher education system – or in an entire education system if the framework is developed for this purpose. It shows what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on the basis of a given qualification – that is, it shows the expected learning outcomes for a given qualification. It also shows how the various qualifications in the education or higher education system interact; that is how learners can move between qualifications – a process we might understand as articulation. Qualifications frameworks facilitate the recognition of qualifications and they are important for those who make use of qualifications, in particular learners, employers and HEIs.

In Europe, qualifications frameworks are found at two levels: NQFs (based on nation states or countries) and meta-frameworks, such as the EQF for lifelong learning (European Commission 2013) in the 27-member EU region or at the level of the larger 47-member EHEA, commonly known as the Bologna framework (EHEA 2012). The challenge is to create a European qualifications structure that facilitates the connection between national frameworks of qualifications in order to provide the basis for introducing more precision to the relationship between different higher education qualifications within Europe.

An effective overarching framework for qualifications of the EHEA is necessary for many reasons. Primarily, it should help the Bologna Process establish real transparency between existing European systems of higher education through the development of a shared basis for understanding these systems and the qualifications they contain. This should improve the recognition of foreign qualifications, enhance the mobility of citizens and make credential evaluation more accurate. The overarching framework should also provide guidance to those countries developing their national frameworks. Last, but not least, it should provide a context for effective quality assurance.

The Ministers responsible for higher education in the countries participating in the Bologna Process established the overarching framework for qualifications of the EHEA in 2005 (Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation Denmark 2005) and each EHEA member is required to verify that its NQF is compatible with the EHEA framework. In 2005, the Ministers committed themselves to elaborating national frameworks for qualifications compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA by 2010. The overarching EHEA framework sets the parameters within which



each country will develop its own national framework, and it is the national framework that most directly affects study programmes. The rationale for the EHEA framework is to provide a mechanism to relate national frameworks to each other so as to enable international transparency, international recognition of qualifications and international mobility of learners and graduates.

Furthermore, all 27 EU member states are also required to verify that their NQF is compatible with the other European meta-framework, the eight-level EQF. Ireland was the first country to complete this process in 2009 (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland [NQAI] and the Department of Education and Science [DES] 2009). An update on the current status of the referencing process of national frameworks to the EQF was recently published (CEDEFOP 2012a).

Not surprisingly, the early adopters of NQFs tended to be countries (like Ireland and the UK) that already had in place largely “Bologna-compliant” higher education systems that encompassed the three-cycle Bachelor’s, Master’s and Doctoral system.

The 2010 Ministerial aspiration for the EHEA framework proved to be over ambitious and by that date, not all countries had national frameworks in place and where there were frameworks in place, not all countries had certified that they were compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA.

Ireland was the first country to self-certify its NQF (Irish NFQ) against the Bologna (EHEA) framework in 2006 (NQAI, 2006a). It has since been followed by Denmark, England/Wales and Northern Ireland (UK), Flanders (Belgium), Germany, the Netherlands, Malta, Portugal, Romania and Scotland (UK), a total of 10 countries. By 2012, a further 13 countries had included their qualifications in an NQF. A further group has the NQF described in legislation. Only five countries are a long way from meeting their commitments.

The most recent Ministerial meeting in Bucharest in 2012 reported comprehensively on the state of development of NQFs compatible with the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA (Eurydice 2012).

## **MOBILITY IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA**

The promotion of student and staff mobility has been reiterated in all Ministerial communiqués arising from the Bologna Process. In their 2009 meeting in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve, the Ministers gave a new boost to mobility in the form of a target to be reached by the EHEA countries. By 2020, at least 20% of those graduating in the EHEA should have had a study or training period abroad. The target includes the two major forms of mobility: degree mobility, whereby a student takes a full degree programme in another country; and credit mobility, whereby a part of a student's study programme is undertaken in another country.

In terms of progress towards this 20% benchmark, Cyprus and Liechtenstein have outward degree mobility rates of more than 50%, with Iceland, Ireland, Slovakia and Malta having between 10% and 14%. The vast majority of EHEA countries, however, reach values of less than 5%, well below the 20% target (Eurydice 2012).

The above figures only concern degree mobility and credit mobility is not covered. The only significant source of data concerning credit mobility is currently the EU's Erasmus programme, which is undoubtedly the most widely used instrument of European credit mobility. Erasmus student exchange in the academic year 2009/10 increased to 7.4% and if this trend continues, the 1987/88 target of three million students will be reached by the end of the academic year 2012/13 (Eurydice 2012). The majority of countries highlight persisting problems with recognition and overloaded study programmes which often prevent students from being able to take advantage of opportunities to study abroad.

## **ARTICULATION (ALTERNATIVE ACCESS) TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA**

The objective of increasing the number and diversity of the student population goes hand-in-hand with the need to create an institutional environment that values the recruitment of non-traditional learners and pays particular attention to student retention in the higher education system. This has been recognised by the Ministers responsible for higher education who highlighted, within the 2007 London Communiqué, that the

social dimension in higher education should include efforts to create more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education.

The objective of the social dimension action line of the EHEA is to extend admissions criteria so that all those who have a capacity to follow higher education studies would be provided with the opportunity to do so, regardless of their prior formal learning achievements.

Non-traditional (or alternative) access routes to higher education are commonly understood as access routes targeting higher education candidates who do not comply with traditional entry requirements. This is either because the students followed a short upper secondary vocational path (i.e. a programme which does not allow access to higher education) or because they did not complete education to upper secondary level.

One of the most important characteristics of many upper secondary systems is the absence of a clear boundary between academic and vocational paths. This means that vocational upper secondary programmes often lead to a standard qualification allowing access to higher education studies. Overall, this can be seen as a positive trend that contributes to parity of esteem and equality of different education choices and pathways. However, such permeability between general and vocational education does not yet exist in all EHEA countries.

The current situation in the EHEA with regard to alternative access routes to higher education is that the EHEA can be divided into two groups. The first one includes countries where the traditional upper secondary school leaving certificate (general or vocational) is not the only way to enter higher education, and where at least one alternative path into higher education exists. The second group comprises countries where the standard upper secondary school leaving qualification remains the only way to embark on higher education studies.

Out of the 47 higher education systems for which data is available (Eurydice 2012), 22 higher education systems have already established at least one alternative route to higher education, whereas in 25 systems, the access to higher education is conditioned by the possession of an upper secondary school leaving certificate. Overall, the

countries of Western Europe are characterised by higher flexibility in terms of their entry qualification requirements, as opposed to other EHEA countries.

Alternative entry to higher education can take different forms and can be based on a range of methods and approaches. Most commonly, alternative entry involves the recognition of the knowledge and skills that prospective non-traditional students acquired outside formal learning contexts (i.e. through various non-formal learning activities, professional experience, volunteering, etc.). It can also involve the enlargement of the scope of higher education entry qualifications, which means that short vocational programmes (or other “non-traditional” programmes/qualifications) can also qualify for higher education entry. In some countries, candidates who lack the knowledge and skills necessary for higher education study are provided with the possibility to follow specific preparatory programmes allowing access to higher education.

In addition to different approaches to alternative access to higher education, it is also important to examine the extent to which these alternative options are used in practice. For instance, in Turkey, Slovakia, Romania, Poland, the Netherlands, Latvia, Italy and Croatia, all students entering higher education are in possession of a traditional upper secondary school leaving certificate (Eurydice 2012). This confirms that these countries do not have systematic mechanisms that make it possible to enter higher education without a standard upper secondary school leaving qualification.

At the other end of the spectrum are Finland, Ireland, the UK (England and Wales) and Sweden, where between 70% and 80% of higher education students enter the system through traditional access routes, whereas the rest of the student population takes an alternative entry pathway (Eurydice 2012). All of these countries have already established at least one alternative access route to higher education, namely access based on the recognition of the knowledge and skills acquired outside formal learning contexts (Finland, Ireland, Sweden and the UK) or preparatory courses for non-traditional higher education candidates (Ireland and the UK).

The majority of the countries situated in the middle of the spectrum, namely France, Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, Norway, Malta, Spain and Portugal, report that they have a systematic policy approach to alternative entry routes for non-traditional

learners. In these countries, alternative access routes represent between 2% and 15% of all admissions, which indicates that this option is being used in practice to different degrees.

Eurostudent (a project that collates comparable data on the social dimension of European higher education) research also provides information on characteristics of those entering higher education through non-traditional access routes (Orr *et al* 2011). The data reveals that students belonging to the category of delayed transition students and students characterised by a low education/social background, frequently use non-traditional access routes. In Finland, Ireland and Sweden more than one in three students characterised by a low education/social background or delayed transition have taken an alternative access route to enter higher education. This confirms that the theme of alternative access to higher education ought to be seen as a key component of debates relating to the social dimension of higher education.

## **THE IRISH NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS AND ITS ROLE IN PROMOTING EDUCATION ARTICULATION**

### ***Development of an Irish National Qualifications Framework***

This paper will now outline how the Irish NFQ interacts with the European frameworks and also how the NFQ can enhance articulation between the sectors of education and training, with a particular emphasis on the movement between Further (Vocational) Education and Training (FET) and Higher Education.

The qualifications landscape in Ireland in the 1990s was confusing. The responsibilities for education and training policy and funding were divided among a number of different government departments. Provision was largely focused on young people and on transition from school to training or to higher education. The qualifications system was disconnected with many qualifications not understood by the public or the labour market and consequently many education and training *cul-de sacs* existed. The actions at European level to promote individual mobility and transparency of qualifications influenced policy in Ireland.

The rationale for the development of an NFQ was to develop a coherent and inclusive qualifications system, to promote comparability and understanding of qualifications, to support lifelong learning, to encourage flexibility, to ensure quality and to support the portability of qualifications across sectors and countries.

In 1999, the Irish government passed the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (Government of Ireland 1999) which established the NQAI that was charged with overseeing the development of an NFQ.

A national 10-level framework incorporating general, further (vocational) and higher education was established in 2003 (NQAI 2003a). The 1999 Act also established a Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), a body that was charged with trying to bring cohesion to what was a largely unfathomable array of post-secondary vocational education and training awards made previously by a variety of state bodies. The 1999 Act also established a Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) charged with developing standards and making awards in the Irish NFQ in the higher education system outside of the university sector.

It is important to note the terminology of the Irish framework, in that it is an NFQ. This is understood to mean a framework of qualifications made to learners in the state and therefore provides mechanisms to incorporate qualifications made to learners studying in Ireland by awarding bodies other than those established by the Irish state. This includes the long-standing awards of many overseas (mainly UK) awarding bodies, largely in the post-secondary vocational area.

This approach to the development of the Irish framework differentiates it from the more common NQFs which have largely been developed to accommodate the range of qualifications made by national or state authorities in a nation state. The Irish framework is also a single framework for general, vocational and higher education. Other countries have pursued separate NQFs for general and vocational education.

### ***The Irish Education System***

Ireland has a high completion rate for secondary education, with almost 89% of boys and 92% of girls who entered secondary school in 2005 and 2006 sitting the national school

leaving examination (Leaving Certificate) in 2012. Of those who completed secondary school in 2012, the vast majority completed the Leaving Certificate (established) programme (52589; 94%) with a much smaller number (3226; 6%) completing the more vocationally-oriented Leaving Certificate Applied programme (Higher Education Authority [HEA] and National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA] 2011).

In a 2009 study of the distribution of medium-level (15-34 years old) graduates by education orientation in 30 countries, Ireland had the lowest participation rate in a VET-oriented education with 22% compared to over 84% to 85% in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria (CEDEFOP 2012b).

Ireland currently has one of the highest participation rates in tertiary education in the world with over 65% of the school-leaving cohort moving to third-level institutions in 2010 (HEA and NCCA 2011). The same study shows that 48% of Irish 25-34 year olds have a third-level qualification (the EU average is 33%). Entry to HEIs is largely based on a common application system, through the Central Applications Office (CAO 2012) which has been operating since 1977. A common scoring system for the Leaving Certificate and recognised scoring systems for the UK A-level system (a number of student from Northern Ireland enter the Irish higher education system each year) means that school-leaving pupils do not have to apply separately to different HEIs.

### ***Higher Education in Ireland***

Ireland has a binary higher education system, consisting of the university sector (seven public universities that also make awards in linked, mainly teacher training colleges) and 14 Institutes of Technology (formerly Regional Technical Colleges). There are also a number of private (both not-for-profit and for profit) HEIs that offer largely vocational programmes in business and computing.

The universities mainly offer the traditional (Honours) Bachelor's (level eight in the Irish NFQ), Master's (level nine) and Doctoral (level ten) degree programmes, whereas the Institutes of Technology traditionally recruited students mainly at levels six and seven in the Framework (the two-year Higher and Advanced Certificates and three-year Ordinary Bachelor's degree programmes). Increasingly, the Institutes of Technology now also

offer programmes at levels eight-ten: four-year (Honours) Bachelor's degree, post-graduate diploma, Master's and Doctoral programmes.

Of those entering higher education in Ireland, 80% come through the established secondary school system, with the remaining 20% entering on the basis of a combination of further education (mainly FETAC) qualifications, mature age access (over 23 years old), the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR scheme) and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE scheme) (HEA and NCCA 2011).

The high level of initial compliance of Ireland with the Bologna (EHEA) framework and the early (2003) establishment of the NFQ has facilitated the increasing participation rate in higher education. In 2011, there were 193187 students enrolled full-time in state-aided HEIs: 114807 (59%) in the university sector and 78380 (41%) in the Institute of Technology sector respectively (HEA, 2012). Of these, 5944 (15%) were mature students. There were 11500 (7%) international students in full-time enrolment in Irish HEIs, of which 34% came from other EU countries (*Ibid.*).

Of the 45,671 full-time new entrants to higher education in 2011, 22,030 (48%) entered the university sector — universities and linked (mainly teacher training) colleges where the universities make the awards, and 18,719 (41%) entered the Institute of Technology sector (HEA 2012). In addition, there were 4922 (11%) new full-time entrants to private HEIs.

The majority (28,341 or 72%) of those entering higher education as full-time students are registered on Honours Bachelor's (level eight) programmes with 7,856 (20%) on Ordinary Bachelor's (level seven) and 3,156 (8%) (mainly apprentices in training) on level six (certificate) programmes. The equivalent figure for private HEIs was 4,922 new entrants to undergraduate programmes (62% of which were at level eight) (HEA, 2012).

The financial crisis of 2008 has, however, had a devastating effect on the Irish economy with overall Gross National Product falling by 12% from 2007 to 2009 (World Bank 2013) and unemployment rising from 4% to 15% between 2008 and 2012 (Central Statistics



Office [CSO] 2013). Ireland now has the fourth highest graduate under-utilisation rate<sup>26</sup> in the 27-member EU bloc at close to 30% (Economic and Social Research Institute [ESRI] 2012).

### ***Further Education in Ireland***

Prior to the establishment of FETAC, the further education system consisted of a bewildering array of awards from a variety of awarding bodies, mainly consisting of post-secondary awards from 33 regionally-based Vocational Education Committees (VECs), the national training and employment authority (*Foras Áisenna Saothair*), the national tourism development agency (*Failte Ireland*), the national sea fisheries agency (*Bordlascaigh Mhara*) and the national agricultural and food development agency (*Teagasc*). With the establishment of FETAC in 2001, the awards of the above-named bodies were all consolidated into FETAC awards.

The establishment of the Irish NFQ in 2003 and the establishment in 2001 of FETAC and HETAC have facilitated greater articulation from the further to higher education systems.

### ***Articulation in Irish Education***

The establishment of the NFQ has significantly improved articulation to and within the higher education systems, with many high-performing students in the Institute of Technology sector moving from level six to level seven programmes and then onto level eight programmes either within the Institute of Technology or the university sectors.

The NFQ is now the single mechanism for recognising all education and training in Ireland. One of the main objectives of the framework is to provide flexibility for learners to take up education and training opportunities at any stage throughout their lives. The opportunities should be appropriate to the person's ambitions, commitment and abilities and the person should receive due recognition for the qualifications they achieve. NQAI

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<sup>26</sup> Measured as the percentage of the working population with a higher education qualification employed in a position that does not require such a qualification.

has put in place various policies to assist with achieving a lifelong learning society in Ireland. These policies relate to access to programmes of education and training, transfer between programmes of education and progression from one programme to another programme at a higher level on the NFQ. These policies are collectively referred to as access, transfer and progression (ATP) (NQAI 2003b).

Furthermore, the 1999 Qualifications Act (Government of Ireland 1999) enshrined the principle of education articulation in legislative terms with NQAI charged in the Act with the responsibility “to promote and facilitate access, transfer and progression”.

The Irish framework was one of the first national frameworks in the EHEA to be developed and has now reached its first decade. This provides an opportunity to see how the framework has been implemented and if it has achieved its goals, including the goal of improving both the understanding and practice of “articulation” or ATP.

### ***Non-traditional access to higher education***

Both FETAC and HETAC were required to develop awards based on NFQ standards which then became awards in the framework. The 1999 Act also required the main public HEIs outside the university sector (known as Institutes of Technology) to develop and implement policies for ATP so as to facilitate the entry of students through routes other than from the traditional academic secondary school system and including those with further education qualifications.

The inclusion of the awards of the universities in the NFQ was a more complex task, as was the development of articulation policies into university through non-traditional routes. In discussions on the implementation of the policies on ATP for learners, the funding agency for higher education (the Higher Education Authority [HEA]), the universities’ representative body (the Irish Universities Association [IUA]) and NQAI identified arrangements for transfer and progression of those with FETAC or equivalent awards, and UK vocational education and training awards (made following programmes completed in Ireland) into undergraduate programmes leading to university Honours Bachelor’s degree awards as being a key aspect of the enhancement of transfer and progression.

An important report on alternative access to university was launched at University College Dublin on 20 November 2006, revealing the very small numbers of students other than school leavers entering Irish universities (NQAI 2006b). The research on which the report is based was carried out by Mclver Consulting on behalf of the HEA, IUA and NQAI.

The research (NQAI, 2006b) showed that in 2006, the number of non-school-leaver students entering Honours Bachelor's degree courses (level eight in the NFQ) in universities was low in comparison with those progressing on the basis of the national terminal school examination, the Leaving Certificate. In the academic year 2004/05:

- Just over 4% of entrants to university were admitted on the basis of FET qualifications (at levels five and six in the NFQ)
- Less than 4% of entrants were transferring or progressing to university with HETAC or similar awards (at levels six and seven in the NFQ).

In 2006, these figures were low in comparison with most other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.

The Mclver study (NQAI 2006b) concluded that there appears to be a limited likelihood of significant increases in the level of transfer from HETAC qualifications (at levels six and seven) to courses in the university sector leading to Honours Bachelor's degrees (level eight). Existing transfer mechanisms have in most cases been in place for a number of years, and it is only in narrow areas that pressure exists for them to be extended. The study found that there was greater scope to increase progression from FETAC qualifications (at levels five and six of the NFQ).

The report (NQAI 2006b) made a number of recommendations for the development of progression and transfer into the university sector in the future. These included the regular gathering of broader data so that transfer and progression trends can be more easily monitored, widening the scope for acceptance of further education qualifications for university entry and recommendations on how to diversify the range of students progressing into areas such as healthcare and teacher education courses.

A more recent 2008 study has shown that the proportion of students accepting places in higher education with a FETAC level five and six award (under the Higher Education Links Scheme) has grown significantly in recent years, from 3% (1041) in 2005 to 10% (4,300) in 2008 (HEA's National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2009). A HEA analysis of trends among 3035 entrants (9%) with FETAC awards to 27 HEA institutions in 2007 estimates that 70% of this group progressed to programmes in the Institutes of Technology sector; 20% to universities and 10% to other colleges (*Ibid.*).

The above data must be treated with some caution, however, as it has proved to be very difficult to disaggregate. There is no comprehensive way of separating students who gain entrance to higher education *solely* on the basis of a FETAC qualification from those who possess FETAC qualifications but who may have gained access on other grounds, such as access status or mature age or who may have sat (all or part of) the Leaving Certificate examination for a second time, having taken a FETAC programme in the meantime.

In 2008, the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education set a target to increase entry through 'non-standard' routes to 30% of all entrants by 2013 through further diversification of entry routes by:

- Strengthening the interface between further and higher education
- Developing a national policy for higher education access courses
- Reforming and extending access routes (e.g. HEAR)
- Developing a national plan for the recognition of prior learning.

The participation of mature (over 23 years of age) students in Irish higher education has also improved steadily from a situation in 1998 where they accounted for 4.5% of new entrants to the most recent figures which show that mature students accounted for 15% of new entrants (to undergraduate programmes) in 2010/11 (HEA 2012). The attractiveness of part-time flexible provision for mature learners is reflected clearly in the fact that 92% of part-time undergraduate new entrants were mature students in 2010/11 (*Ibid.*).

This data now places Ireland as one of the better performing systems for articulation from non-traditional routes to higher education (22% of the entering group, according to a 2011 Eurostudent survey [Orr *et al* 2011], bettered only by the UK and Sweden in a 22-country study). Eight of the countries in the study provide no access to higher education other than through a regular upper secondary qualification.

### ***Implementation and impact of the NFQ***

The inclusion of the requirement for ATP in the 1999 legislation has certainly facilitated a greater focus on articulation to higher education from non-traditional routes. This vision was articulated at the time of the establishment of the NFQ in 2003 (NQAI 2003a:i), noting that:

The learner should be able to enter and successfully participate in a programme, or series of programmes, leading to an award, or series of awards, in pursuit of their objectives. The NFQ and associated programme provision should be structured to facilitate learner entry and to promote transfer and progression, so that learners are encouraged to participate in the learning process to enable them to realise their ambitions to the full extent of their abilities.

In Ireland, the policies, action and procedures for ATP have focused on four themes: credit, transfer and progression routes, entry arrangements and information provision. The level of engagement of the various actors has also been important, namely NQAI as custodian of the framework, the Awards Councils (FETAC and HETAC) and the individual higher education providers.

In 2009, NQAI published a Framework Implementation and Impact Study (FIIS) (NQAI 2009) that assessed the first five years of the NFQ and particularly the impact of articulation (ATP) policy.

Some key findings of FIIS were that policies and guidelines for ATP were in place, there are an increased number of pathways between qualifications (programme-to-programme across further and higher education and training) and there is increased communication of pathways (e.g. between craft qualifications and higher education qualifications).

The study also showed that there has been an increase in applications from and acceptances of learners with non-school awards into higher education but those efforts have largely been focused on the transition from further to higher education with limited progress in relation to transition from non-traditional school routes directly to higher education.

Restrictions due to statutory data protection provisions have limited the amount of quantitative and qualitative data to track the movement of students through the framework (there is no unique single identifier for students or a national database). There is also no comprehensive list of all pathways through qualifications.

### ***The establishment of Quality and Qualifications Ireland***

A further step forward was recently achieved when in November 2012 a new integrated qualifications and quality assurance authority, QQI, was established under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act (Government of Ireland 2012). This legislation amalgamated NQAI, FETAC and HETAC while also incorporating the functions of the Irish Universities Quality Board, the body with responsibility for the external quality assurance of the seven Irish universities.

QQI is now responsible for the NFQ and the quality assurance of all Irish post-secondary education. As part of its functions under the 2012 Act, QQI has the responsibility to establish 'policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners' (Government of Ireland 2012: 13). All providers (public further education colleges, training entities and HEIs, including the self-awarding universities and any private education and training entities that wish to access QQI awards) must establish procedures for ATP. These procedures must be approved by QQI (except in the case of the universities). Furthermore, the procedures must 'include procedures for credit accumulation, credit transfer and identification and formal assessment of the knowledge, skills or competence previously acquired by learners' (*Ibid.*). Once approved, the provider must publish the procedures (including on the internet).

QQI is required to review a provider's procedures for ATP at least every seven years and QQI is required to publish the report arising from any such review and may direct the

provider following any recommendations arising from the review. If QQI finds that ‘there are serious deficiencies’ in the implementation by the provider of procedures for ATP, QQI may withdraw ‘its approval of the procedures’ (Government of Ireland 2012: 28) and this may ultimately lead QQI to withdraw its awards from the provider concerned.

The 2012 Act therefore strongly increases the obligation on education and training providers to effectively and publicly promote the issue of articulation within Irish education. In its development of new policies and procedures, QQI will be strongly guided by the experience of ATP in the 10 years since the establishment of the Irish NFQ.

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## **Annexure: Bucharest Communiqué**

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### **Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area**

We, the Ministers responsible for higher education in the 47 countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have met in Bucharest, on 26 and 27 April 2012, to take stock of the achievements of the Bologna Process and agree on the future priorities of the EHEA.

### **Investing in higher education for the future**

Europe is undergoing an economic and financial crisis with damaging societal effects. Within the field of higher education, the crisis is affecting the availability of adequate funding and making graduates' job prospects more uncertain.

Higher education is an important part of the solution to our current difficulties. Strong and accountable higher education systems provide the foundations for thriving knowledge societies. Higher education should be at the heart of our efforts to overcome the crisis – now more than ever.

With this in mind, we commit to securing the highest possible level of public funding for higher education and drawing on other appropriate sources, as an investment in our future. We will support our institutions in the education of creative, innovative, critically thinking and responsible graduates needed for economic growth and the sustainable development of our democracies. We are dedicated to working together in this way to reduce youth unemployment.

### **The EHEA yesterday, today and tomorrow**

The Bologna reforms have changed the face of higher education across Europe, thanks to the involvement and dedication of higher education institutions, staff and students.

Higher education structures in Europe are now more compatible and comparable. Quality assurance systems contribute to building trust, higher education qualifications are more recognisable across borders and participation in higher education has widened. Students today benefit from a wider variety of educational opportunities and are increasingly mobile. The vision of an integrated EHEA is within reach.

However, as the report on the implementation of the Bologna Process shows, we must make further efforts to consolidate and build on progress. We will strive for more coherence between our policies, especially in completing the transition to the three cycle system, the use of ECTS credits, the issuing of Diploma Supplements, the enhancement of quality assurance and the implementation of qualifications frameworks, including the definition and evaluation of learning outcomes.

We will pursue the following goals: to provide quality higher education for all, to enhance graduates' employability and to strengthen mobility as a means for better learning.

Our actions towards these goals will be underpinned by constant efforts to align national practices with the objectives and policies of the EHEA, while addressing those policy areas where further work is needed. For 2012-2015, we will especially concentrate on fully supporting our higher education institutions and stakeholders in their efforts to deliver meaningful changes and to further the comprehensive implementation of all Bologna action lines.

### **Providing quality higher education for all**

**Widening access** to higher education is a precondition for societal progress and economic development. We agree to adopt national measures for widening overall access to quality higher education. We will work to raise completion rates and ensure timely progression in higher education in all EHEA countries.

The student body entering and graduating from higher education institutions should reflect the diversity of Europe's populations. We will step up our efforts towards underrepresented groups to develop the **social dimension** of higher education, reduce inequalities and provide adequate student support services, counselling and guidance, flexible learning paths and alternative access routes, including recognition of prior

learning. We encourage the use of peer learning on the social dimension and aim to monitor progress in this area.

We reiterate our commitment to promote **student-centred learning** in higher education, characterised by innovative methods of teaching that involve students as active participants in their own learning. Together with institutions, students and staff, we will facilitate a supportive and inspiring working and learning environment.

Higher education should be an open process in which students develop intellectual independence and personal self-assuredness alongside disciplinary knowledge and skills. Through the pursuit of academic learning and research, students should acquire the ability confidently to assess situations and ground their actions in critical thought.

**Quality assurance** is essential for building trust and to reinforce the attractiveness of the EHEA's offerings, including in the provision of cross-border education. We commit to both maintaining the public responsibility for quality assurance and to actively involve a wide range of stakeholders in this development. We acknowledge the ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE (the E4 group) report on the implementation and application of the "European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance" (ESG)<sup>27</sup>. We will revise the ESG to improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness, including their scope. The revision will be based upon an initial proposal to be prepared by the E4 in cooperation with Education International, BUSINESSEUROPE and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), which will be submitted to the Bologna Follow-Up Group.

We welcome the external evaluation of EQAR and we encourage quality assurance agencies to apply for registration. We will allow EQAR-registered agencies to perform their activities across the EHEA, while complying with national requirements. In particular, we will aim to recognise quality assurance decisions of EQAR-registered agencies on joint and double degree programmes.

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<sup>27</sup> European Association for Quality Assurance (2011): "Mapping the Implementation and application of the ESG"

We confirm our commitment to maintaining public responsibility for higher education and acknowledge the need to open a dialogue on **funding and governance** of higher education. We recognise the importance of further developing appropriate funding instruments to pursue our common goals. Furthermore, we stress the importance of developing more efficient governance and managerial structures at higher education institutions. We commit to supporting the engagement of students and staff in governance structures at all levels and reiterate our commitment to autonomous and accountable higher education institutions that embrace academic freedom.

### **Enhancing employability to serve Europe's needs**

Today's graduates need to combine transversal, multidisciplinary and innovation skills and competences with up-to-date subject-specific knowledge so as to be able to contribute to the wider needs of society and the labour market. We aim to enhance the **employability** and personal and professional development of graduates throughout their careers. We will achieve this by improving cooperation between employers, students and higher education institutions, especially in the development of study programmes that help increase the innovation, entrepreneurial and research potential of graduates. Lifelong learning is one of the important factors in meeting the needs of a changing labour market, and higher education institutions play a central role in transferring knowledge and strengthening regional development, including by the continuous development of competences and reinforcement of knowledge alliances.

Our societies need higher education institutions to contribute innovatively to sustainable development and therefore, higher education must ensure a stronger link between **research**, teaching and learning at all levels. Study programmes must reflect changing research priorities and emerging disciplines, and research should underpin teaching and learning. In this respect, we will sustain a diversity of doctoral programmes. Taking into account the "Salzburg II recommendations"<sup>28</sup> and the Principles for Innovative Doctoral Training<sup>29</sup>, we will explore how to promote quality, transparency, employability

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28 European University Association (2010): "Salzburg II Recommendations"

29 European Commission (2011): "Report of Mapping Exercise on Doctoral Training in Europe – Towards a common approach"

and mobility in the third cycle, as the education and training of doctoral candidates has a particular role in bridging the EHEA and the European Research Area (ERA). Next to doctoral training, high quality second cycle programmes are a necessary precondition for the success of linking teaching, learning and research. Keeping wide diversity and simultaneously increasing readability, we might also explore further possible common principles for master programmes in the EHEA, taking account of previous work<sup>30</sup>.

To consolidate the EHEA, meaningful implementation of **learning outcomes** is needed. The development, understanding and practical use of learning outcomes is crucial to the success of ECTS, the Diploma Supplement, recognition, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance – all of which are interdependent. We call on institutions to further link study credits with both learning outcomes and student workload, and to include the attainment of learning outcomes in assessment procedures. We will work to ensure that the ECTS Users' Guide<sup>31</sup> fully reflects the state of on-going work on learning outcomes and recognition of prior learning.

We welcome the progress in developing **qualifications frameworks**; they improve transparency and will enable higher education systems to be more open and flexible. We acknowledge that realising the full benefits of qualifications frameworks can in practice be more challenging than developing the structures. The development of qualifications frameworks must continue so that they become an everyday reality for students, staff and employers. Meanwhile, some countries face challenges in finalising national frameworks and in self-certifying compatibility with the framework of qualifications of the EHEA (QF-EHEA) by the end of 2012. These countries need to redouble their efforts and to take advantage of the support and experience of others in order to achieve this goal.

A common understanding of the levels of our qualifications frameworks is essential to recognition for both academic and professional purposes. School leaving qualifications giving access to higher education will be considered as being of European Qualifications Framework (EQF) level 4, or equivalent levels for countries not bound by the EQF,

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30 European University Association (2009): "Survey of Master Degrees in Europe"

31 European Commission (2009): "ECTS Users' Guide"

where they are included in National Qualifications Frameworks. We further commit to referencing first, second and third cycle qualifications against EQF levels 6, 7 and 8 respectively, or against equivalent levels for countries not bound by the EQF. We will explore how the QF-EHEA could take account of short cycle qualifications (EQF level 5) and encourage countries to use the QF-EHEA for referencing these qualifications in national contexts where they exist. We ask the Council of Europe and the European Commission to continue to coordinate efforts to make the respective qualifications frameworks work well in practice.

We welcome the clear reference to ECTS, to the European Qualifications Framework and to learning outcomes in the European Commission's proposal for a revision of the EU Directive on the recognition of **professional qualifications**. We underline the importance of taking appropriate account of these elements in recognition decisions.

### **Strengthening mobility for better learning**

**Learning mobility** is essential to ensure the quality of higher education, enhance students' employability and expand cross-border collaboration within the EHEA and beyond. We adopt the strategy "Mobility for Better Learning"<sup>32</sup> as an addendum, including its mobility target, as an integral part of our efforts to promote an element of internationalisation in all of higher education.

Sufficient financial support to students is essential in ensuring equal access and mobility opportunities. We reiterate our commitment to full **portability** of national grants and loans across the EHEA and call on the European Union to underpin this endeavour through its policies.

Fair academic and professional **recognition**, including recognition of non-formal and informal learning, is at the core of the EHEA. It is a direct benefit for students' academic mobility, it improves graduates' chances of professional mobility and it represents an accurate measure of the degree of convergence and trust attained. We are determined to remove outstanding obstacles hindering effective and proper recognition and are

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32 Bucharest Ministerial Conference (2012): "Mobility for Better Learning. Mobility strategy 2020 for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)"



willing to work together towards the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees, building on the tools of the Bologna framework, as a long-term goal of the EHEA. We therefore commit to reviewing our national legislation to comply with the Lisbon Recognition Convention<sup>33</sup>. We welcome the European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual<sup>34</sup> and recommend its use as a set of guidelines for recognition of foreign qualifications and a compendium of good practices, as well as encourage higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies to assess institutional recognition procedures in internal and external quality assurance.

We strive for open higher education systems and better **balanced mobility** in the EHEA. If mobility imbalances between EHEA countries are deemed unsustainable by at least one party, we encourage the countries involved to jointly seek a solution, in line with the EHEA Mobility Strategy.

We encourage higher education institutions to further develop **joint programmes and degrees** as part of a wider EHEA approach. We will examine national rules and practices relating to joint programmes and degrees as a way to dismantle obstacles to cooperation and mobility embedded in national contexts.

Cooperation with other regions of the world and **international openness** are key factors to the development of the EHEA. We commit to further exploring the global understanding of the EHEA goals and principles in line with the strategic priorities set by the 2007 strategy for “the EHEA in a Global Setting”<sup>35</sup>. We will evaluate the strategy’s implementation by 2015 with the aim to provide guidelines for further internationalisation developments. The Bologna Policy Forum will continue as an opportunity for dialogue and its format will be further developed with our global partners.

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33 Council of Europe/UNESCO (1997): “Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region”

34 NUFFIC, Netherlands Organisation for International Cooperation in higher education (2012): “European Area of Recognition Manual”

35 London Ministerial Conference (2007): “European Higher Education in a Global Setting. A Strategy for the External Dimension of the Bologna Process”

### **Improvement of data collection and transparency to underpin political goals**

We welcome the improved quality of data and information on higher education. We ask for more targeted data collection and referencing against common indicators, particularly on employability, the social dimension, lifelong learning, internationalisation, portability of grants/loans, and student and staff mobility. We ask Eurostat, Eurydice and Eurostudent to monitor the implementation of the reforms and to report back in 2015.

We will encourage the development of a system of voluntary peer learning and reviewing in countries that request it. This will help to assess the level of implementation of Bologna reforms and promote good practices as a dynamic way of addressing the challenges facing European higher education.

We will strive to make higher education systems easier to understand for the public, and especially for students and employers. We will support the improvement of current and developing transparency tools in order to make them more user-driven and to ground them on empirical evidence. We aim to reach an agreement on common guidelines for transparency by 2015.

### **Setting out priorities for 2012-2015**

Having outlined the main EHEA goals in the coming years, we set out the following priorities for action by 2015.

*At the national level, together with the relevant stakeholders, and especially with higher education institutions, we will:*

- Reflect thoroughly on the findings of the 2012 Bologna Implementation Report and take into account its conclusions and recommendations;
- Strengthen policies of widening overall access and raising completion rates, including measures targeting the increased participation of underrepresented groups;
- Establish conditions that foster student-centred learning, innovative teaching methods and a supportive and inspiring working and learning environment, while continuing to involve students and staff in governance structures at all levels;

- Allow EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies to perform their activities across the EHEA, while complying with national requirements;
- Work to enhance employability, lifelong learning, problem-solving and entrepreneurial skills through improved cooperation with employers, especially in the development of educational programmes;
- Ensure that qualifications frameworks, ECTS and Diploma Supplement implementation is based on learning outcomes;
- Invite countries that cannot finalise the implementation of national qualifications frameworks compatible with QF-EHEA by the end of 2012 to redouble their efforts and submit a revised roadmap for this task;
- Implement the recommendations of the strategy “Mobility for better learning” and work towards full portability of national grants and loans across the EHEA;
- Review national legislation to fully comply with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and promote the use of the EAR-manual to advance recognition practices;
- Encourage knowledge-based alliances in the EHEA, focusing on research and technology.

*At the European level, in preparation of the Ministerial Conference in 2015 and together with relevant stakeholders, we will:*

- Ask Eurostat, Eurydice and Eurostudent to monitor progress in the implementation of the Bologna Process reforms and the strategy “Mobility for better learning”;
- Develop a system of voluntary peer learning and reviewing by 2013 in countries which request it and initiate a pilot project to promote peer learning on the social dimension of higher education;
- Develop a proposal for a revised version of the ESG for adoption;
- Promote quality, transparency, employability and mobility in the third cycle, while also building additional bridges between the EHEA and the ERA;
- Work to ensure that the ECTS Users’ Guide fully reflects the state of on-going work on learning outcomes and recognition of prior learning;

- Coordinate the work of ensuring that qualifications frameworks work in practice, emphasising their link to learning outcomes and explore how the QF-EHEA could take account of short cycle qualifications in national contexts;
- Support the work of a pathfinder group of countries exploring ways to achieve the automatic academic recognition of comparable degrees;
- Examine national legislation and practices relating to joint programmes and degrees as a way to dismantle obstacles to cooperation and mobility embedded in national contexts;
- Evaluate the implementation of the “EHEA in a Global Setting” Strategy;
- Develop EHEA guidelines for transparency policies and continue to monitor current and developing transparency tools.

The next EHEA Ministerial Conference will take place in Yerevan, Armenia in 2015, where the progress on the priorities set above will be reviewed.

## Acronyms

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ATP	Access, Transfer and Progression
BFUG	Bologna Follow-Up Group
CAO	Central Applications Office
CAT	Credit Accumulation and Transfer
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CEDEFOP	European Centre for Development of Vocational Training
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DES	Department of Education and Service
EAR	European Area of Recognition
EC	European Commission
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EI	Education International
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENIC	European Network of Information Centres
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ERA	European Research Area
ESG	European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ESU	European Students' Union
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
EUA	European Universities Association

EURASHE	European Association of Institutions of Higher Education
FET	Further Education and Training
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
FIIS	Framework Implementation and Impact Study
GFETQSF	General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework
HEA	Higher Education Area
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEQF	Higher Education Qualifications Framework
HEQMISA	Higher Education Quality Management Initiative for Southern Africa
HEQSF	Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework
HESA	Higher Education South Africa
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
IUA	Irish Universities Association
MOOC	Massive Open Online Courses
NARIC	National Academic Recognition Information Centres
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications (Ireland)
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OQSF	Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework
QF-EHEA	Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SADC RQF	Southern African Development Community Regional Qualifications Framework

SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNESCO-CEPES	UNESCO European Centre for Higher Education
UNICE	Business Europe
USA	United States of America
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
VET	Vocational Education and Training









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