

IMPLEMENTING A FRAMEWORK FOR HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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"Strengthening Higher Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina"
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Introduction

The following recommendations refer to the implementation of a BiH framework for higher education qualifications. A proposal for this framework was produced from May 2006 to May 2007 by a working group of BiH experts, with the assistance of two international CoE experts, under a joint EC/CoE project "Strengthening Higher Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina"¹.

The working group meeting in May 2007 held with the participation of senior university leaders and Ministry representatives endorsed the draft framework for higher education qualifications and continued to outline a plan for the implementation process. The recommendations in this document are based on discussions with participants of this and prior meetings and are subject to endorsement by BiH stakeholders, in a first step by the project's Steering Board at its meeting on 5 June 2007.

The implementation of a framework for higher education qualifications has become all the more important as Ministers responsible for higher education met in London in May 2007 and reaffirmed their commitment to fully implement qualifications frameworks articulating against the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA as „instruments in achieving comparability and transparency within the EHEA and facilitating the movement of learners within, as well as between, higher education systems.“² This task represents one of the major challenges in BiH of joining the European Higher Education area in 2010.

As the relevant structures to fully and coherently implement the framework in BiH are incomplete, the following recommendations outline the first few steps for implementation and offer further guidelines for the whole implementation process to higher education institutions and the relevant authorities.

Completion of the proposed set of steps may take 2-3 years.

The following **implementation principles** are important to observe throughout the whole process:

- Long-term political commitment should be maintained for the whole duration of the process.
- Close cooperation and full involvement of stakeholders are a prerequisite for successful implementation.
- The implementation process of the qualification framework should be linked with implementing the two other components of the higher education reform project.

¹ Since January 2006, the CoE/EC joint project "Strengthening Higher Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina" is developing higher education reform tools in the areas of quality assurance, qualifications frameworks and the recognition of qualifications together with the BiH universities and relevant ministries. For further information, see <http://www.coe.ba/highereducation>.

² London Communiqué, see: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/bologna/uploads/documents/LondonCommuniqufinalwithLondonlogo.pdf>

- The implementation process should entail genuine curriculum change together with the development of appropriate teaching and assessment strategies in higher education institutions.
- Adoption of a state level higher education law including the concept of a qualifications framework for higher education is an urgent need.
- The procedures for linking qualifications to the framework should be transparent, properly documented and based on the Bologna guidelines.

Steps for Implementation

- I. **Consultation and dissemination with actors in the process** to raise awareness and develop knowledge and understanding of the purposes and functions of the framework, its place in the overall higher education reform process and the new approach towards describing qualifications.

The consultation process should address university leaders, the Rectors' Conference, senior university staff, student organisations, private higher education institutions and Ministries and other authorities having a responsibility for higher education. Other professional bodies to be involved are those concerned with accreditation and quality assurance as well as the recognition information centre (ENIC). Very important in the dissemination process would be the establishment of a website (e.g. with a FAQ section regarding the qualifications framework.) The Bologna Promoters should also be involved and informed at the very first stage of the process to be able to handle questions.

- II. **Information Campaign** with adequate information strategies (media campaign)

This phase should include an information campaign towards the larger public but also the wider stakeholder community and the social partners (employers associations, trade unions, chambers of commerce, employment bureaus). The wider life long learning community should also be addressed. It is very important to communicate the social, economic and employment implications of the introduction of the new framework and its advantages for more flexible movement within the higher education system and across the institutions.

- III. **Training of BiH Promoters (those who will work on further transfer of knowledge on the qualifications framework)**

This should include academic staff as well as the assignment of academic coordinators who will be responsible for taking the lead in applying the general framework to particular fields of study and possibly also in linking qualifications to the framework. The ECTS coordinators may also provide assistance.

The descriptors of learning outcomes at the different levels of the framework are necessarily expressed in general terms and as such are open to differing interpretations both within and between institutions. To assist in achieving common understanding it is suggested that a series of workshops be conducted for senior staff from different institutions (i.e. the future promoters of a qualifications framework) to explain the intentions of the various statements together with the discussion of examples that would illustrate the required standards of achievement at different levels. The training should include modules on writing learning outcomes, about curriculum development and reform and the vital linkages between teaching, learning and assessment. Participants of the workshop could then arrange for similar follow-up workshops within their institutions to achieve consistency.

IV. Seek approval of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications for BiH from relevant governmental authorities at various levels.

All relevant authorities should have adequate understanding of the purposes and functions of the framework, its role in the reform process and take the necessary measures for adopting the framework and supporting implementation.

Pilot project for applying the general framework to particular fields of study

This phase would link existing/new qualification to the qualifications framework and be carried out in short and effective pilot project of a year maximum. It should be undertaken with selected BiH qualifications, in order to place these on the proposed Framework using the specific tools developed (levels, descriptors based on learning outcomes). The subjects for the pilot need to be chosen with care and address issues such as: 3 or 4 year programmes of a similar nature; progression issues (levels); credit issues.

To assist in achieving common understanding in different fields it is desirable to bring together groups of academic staff familiar with the details of the framework and with selected academic disciplines, to prepare documents similar to the UK subject benchmark statements³, and which could help others developing programmes in these fields to understand how the framework should be applied to their field. Such consultations should involve representatives of the relevant employers, particularly those responsible for requirements of professional practice in the relevant fields. It is suggested that such statements be prepared initially in a few fields of study as a pilot project before being extended to other fields.

This process would initiate real curriculum reform – and lead to the development of new qualifications based on learning outcomes that really articulate with the EHEA overarching framework and meet the demands of the 21st century. One of the main aims of the pilot project is to help train staff in the process of curriculum development in the context of a qualifications framework and external reference points thus contributing to developing a core group of technical experts in qualifications and qualifications frameworks.

The project would ensure common standards and a coherent approach and comparable outcomes. Experiences and lessons from other Bologna countries as well as the European Commission's Tuning Project⁴ would also be helpful in the process. The pilot project would have a coordination function which ideally would be assumed by the **BiH Rectors' Conference**. It could also link the implementation of the qualifications framework with

³ Subject benchmark statements set out expectations about standards of degrees in a range of subject areas. They describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills needed to develop understanding in the subject.

For further information, go to <http://www.gaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/default.asp>.

⁴ "Tuning educational structures in Europe" was a pilot project undertaken by a group of European universities, with support by the European University Association (EUA) and the European Commission from 2000 to 2004 and a growing number of partners. It addresses several of the Bologna action lines, notably the adoption and application of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, based on two cycles and the establishment of a system of credits; by identifying points of reference for 1) generic competences, 2) subject-specific competences, 3) the role of ECTS as an accumulation system and 4) the role of learning, teaching, assessment and performance in relation to quality assurance and evaluation.

For further information got to <http://www.relint.deusto.es/TuningProject/index.htm>,
<http://www.let.rug.nl/TuningProject/index.htm>)

programme accreditation as suggested by the Recommendations for the Implementation of Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina and provide the basis for linking qualifications to the framework in a transparent manner with adequate quality assurance mechanisms. Such a process of linking may require a separate 'Protocol'.

- V. **Legislation:** the lack of relevant legislation could seriously hinder the implementation process and the momentum created by the joint EC/CoE project "Strengthening Higher Education in BiH" may be lost unless the relevant legislation at state level is passed without further delay.

Recommendations:

- The above list may be regarded as a set of sequential steps in the process; however most of the activities may be implemented side by side, which would certainly speed up implementation.
- An active participation of BiH institutions in regional and international workshops and other activities aimed at assisting the Bologna countries in designing their qualifications frameworks would enhance the level of technical assistance and encourage exchange of information.
- A possible extension of the joint EC-Coe project beyond June 2007 may be used to provide further technical support for implementation.

Under the joint EC/CoE project “Strengthening Higher Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina” a working group of BiH experts prepared a proposal for the Framework of Higher Education Qualifications in BiH in 2006 and 2007. Two international CoE experts, Eva Gönczi, Programme Director of the Collegium Budapest, Hungary and Stephen Adam, from the University of Westminster, United Kingdom assisted the group in the drafting process.

These recommendations for the implementation of the Framework of Higher Education Qualifications in BiH were prepared by Eva Gönczi and Stephen Adam and are based on discussions and consultations with the BiH working group.