

Joint Quality Initiative – the origin of the Dublin Descriptors - short history

Origin

The Bologna declaration of European ministers of higher education, signed in 1999, called for a higher education system essentially built on two main cycles, and for easily readable and comparable degrees. For several countries, such as The Netherlands and Belgium, this meant that the one tier system directly leading to a master degree, or the old two tier system, had to be transformed into a new two tier system, in which first a bachelor degree is awarded, and further studies can lead to a master degree.

At the same time another transformation was foreseen: The quality assurance system developed and in use at the universities had been operational for three cycles of six years and in universities of applied sciences for ten years. It consisted of peer reviews of programmes and publicly available reports. It was felt that this system needed an impulse and therefore accreditation by an external organisation was being developed. Building on the cooperation between Dutch and Flemish higher education institutions regarding the quality assessment system, the Dutch and Flemish government also joined hands and were about to create the Accreditation Organisation of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO).

When preparing the actual accreditation and descriptors for quality, the question arose which requirements characterise the Bachelor's and how to describe the distinction between Bachelor's and Master's, in other words: where to draw the line between Bachelor's and Master's. This question was discussed with several other countries with comparable quality assurance systems.

It resulted in attention for this issue of the quality of higher education at the ministerial meeting in Prague, May 2001, which focussed on the follow-up of the Bologna declaration.

The Prague communiqué (2001) called upon various actors:

- to co-operate in quality assurance;
- to design scenarios for mutual acceptance of evaluation and accreditation/certification mechanisms;
- to collaborate in establishing a common framework of reference;
- to disseminate best practice.

At the Prague meeting the ministers of education of Flanders and the Netherlands announced to organise a conference on the issue of quality assurance. Immediately after the Prague meeting they jointly took up to consult countries with comparable quality assurance system on the question of which reference points to use for awarding a Bachelor degree and a Master degree. This was needed, because the degrees should be comparable, as agreed in the Bologna declaration of 1999. Thus the decision of one country would have impact on decisions in other countries and vice versa. A joint mission of Dutch and Flemish representatives of governments, and university quality assurance persons consulted quality assurance organisations and governments in six countries. Already they were in touch with the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency for higher education) in the UK which had just started introducing subject benchmark statements. During their consultations they agreed that we were facing the same challenge and should jointly work towards solutions. In September 2001 the outcomes of the consultation was studied in a joint meeting in Maastricht. There representatives of quality assurance agencies and of governments agreed that common problems were faced, that cross border activities in perspective of quality assurance should be

promoted and that an action programme was welcomed. Those present preferred action to words or paper. Progress was expected from pragmatic and practical projects designed on the principle of 'learning by doing'. A future agenda was to be drawn up and should exist of common projects that met the demands prompted by the needs of individual participants. At the same time it was considered important to be open about the actions to all parties involved in the Bologna process. That was the onset of the *Joint Quality Initiative*.

Mode of operations

Each country could propose to meet over a topic.

Invitations were open to all who were actively involved in quality assurance of higher education. Quality assurance agencies needed to have the consent of their respective governments, as, in the countries concerned, legislative reforms to enact the new cycles in higher education was a responsibility of governments.

Interested parties paid themselves for their own participation.

An e-mail circle of interested persons was established through which invitations, announcements and requests were circulated.

The Netherlands and Flanders jointly financed an independent website www.jointquality.org. Upcoming meetings and outcomes were publicly visible on a website including a list of those present and their function.

Meetings usually were of one day duration and took place in the fringe of other meetings, at easily accessible airports or university venues.

The coordinator quality assurance and internationalisation of the Department of higher education of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in The Netherlands acted as a driver, very much pushed by colleagues and quality assurance officials from QAA, German accreditation and quality assurance agencies and others.

Actions

Concept of accreditation (2001)

Actions undertaken included a comparison of concepts of accreditation as operating or proposed in Europe, a review of examples of cross border quality assessment of programmes, and comparison of existing and proposed descriptors, which resulted in a statement of shared descriptors for bachelor and master programmes. By focusing on what is shared, there appeared to be room for a common approach of the countries and agencies represented in the *Joint Quality Initiative*, with potential to grow into a European approach.

Internationalisation of quality assurance in higher education

As announced during the ministerial meeting in Prague, the conference to focus on the internationalisation of quality assurance, as part of the Bologna process, was organised in Amsterdam, March 2002. The aim of the conference was to present various developments in quality assurance of higher education and its internationalisation in Europe, also in perspective of developments beyond the European higher education area.

At that conference the first tangible results of the *Joint Quality Initiative* were presented: the joint descriptors for a bachelor level, both giving access to a master study programme and relevant for the labour market - as indicated in the Bologna declaration - and joint descriptors for a master level degree. The significant distinctions between the two levels, step changes, were elaborated and presented as well.

Also presented at that conference was the EU-subsidized “Tuning” project. This project, in which universities from various countries participated, tried to seek common descriptors for study programmes in a particular subject.

The conference provided room to discuss these new developments in the perspective of the chosen theme *working on the European dimension of quality*. The descriptors for what knowledge and skills to be expected from a first cycle (Bachelor) graduate and from a second cycle (Master) graduate and the way to work towards subject specific descriptors was well received. In general there was consensus that outcome descriptors were relevant tools to enhance or assess the quality of higher education.

From that moment on, the Bachelor’ and Master’ degree level descriptors were publicly available and started being used in countries involved in the development. They appeared also to be welcomed by educational innovators in higher education institutions, to rethink or redesign the curriculum.

In 2004 one of the partners in the *Joint Quality Initiative*, asked the *Joint Quality Initiative* to develop descriptors for a doctoral degree. Furthermore, as the labour market favoured professionals progressing to higher education and a Bachelor’s degree might be too ambitious, in some countries it was felt important to award a degree for what is called a short cycle within the first cycle. The *Joint Quality Initiative* was also asked by the working group on qualifications frameworks of the Bologna Follow-up Group to elaborate descriptors for such a short cycle. And just as for the Bachelor and the Master qualifications, those present at the meeting jointly drew up descriptions that were considered adequate concerning knowledge, application of knowledge, communication skills, problem solving skills and learning skills for doctoral graduates and for graduates of a short cycle (at meetings respectively 23 March 2004 and 18 October 2004).

Dublin descriptors (2002-2004)

The descriptors for the first and second cycle have been drawn up in Dublin as all colleagues eager to participate could be present if a meeting was scheduled in Dublin following a national meeting there. As results of meetings tended to be identified by the meeting place (Amsterdam consensus, Dublin descriptors...) and the “Dublin” descriptors gained momentum, Dublin was also chosen as venue to draft descriptors for the doctoral and for the short cycle. Thus all descriptors for the higher education cycles are for short “Dublin descriptors”. The complete set of Dublin descriptors for a short cycle within the first cycle and for the first, second and third cycle is annexed below.

Operationalisation of the Bachelor and Master descriptors was taken up by the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) at meetings in 2003 in The Hague and Cordoba. Question of the higher education institutions was: are the Dublin descriptors, and on that basis newly to be formulated subject criteria, going to be used as reference points or as minimum standards. Some preferred it to be ambitious reference points; others preferred it to be minimum standards that have to be complied with.

Overarching qualifications framework (2004)

At the Berlin meeting of European higher education ministers (2003) was stated: “They (the ministers) also undertake to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area.” As a follow-up, being invited by the UK Universities (in association with the Department for Education and Skills, and the SCOP) and together with the QAA, the *Joint Quality Initiative* organised a meeting on the theme: Towards an Overarching Framework of European Higher Education Qualifications (6th February 2004).

The meeting demonstrated substantial support for the concept of a European Framework. It should not have any detailed alignment but should provide for compatibility between national systems/frameworks. It should have the following purposes: be transparent, which would build trust and, eventually, accountability. It should not have a regulatory function. It should assist regulation at the national level and the organisation of self-regulation. It should facilitate recognition and mobility.

It was suggested that the Dublin descriptors are useful external reference points. Development of descriptors for programmes, subjects or disciplines was not a matter for the overarching framework but for the disciplines or institutions themselves to elaborate.

Core elements of the overarching framework could anyhow be: three cycles, common language and a glossary. A number of principles were suggested for the development of the Framework:

- There should be broad “ownership” of the Framework by the higher education sector and its stakeholders, to ensure their identification with it.
- Qualifications and cycles should be described in terms of output criteria.
- It was suggested that ministers would “own” the Framework and other stakeholders “work with it” given that the proposal to elaborate a Framework was made by the ministers at the Berlin conference 2003.
- The Framework should be established on the basis of consensus including those who fund higher education: It should be realistic, recognising the “power of the purse”.
- It should be developed from the bottom-up.
- It should embrace the existing ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ tracks in higher education.
- Further principles included transparency, articulation with other levels of education, simplicity and a capacity to evolve.

A report of the meeting was also forwarded to the Bologna Follow-Up Group, to ensure that the consensus, which was evident at this meeting, could be built on by the stakeholders in the period to May 2005, when the Bergen (Norway) ministerial meeting was scheduled.

At that meeting in Bergen a proposal on the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area had been developed, in which the entire set of “Dublin” descriptors was taken up as an appendix (appendix 8 of). From this set the ministers adopted the three cycle descriptors as reference for all countries. Use of the short cycle descriptor was at that time left to individual countries, until 2015, when ministers meeting in Yerevan committed themselves to include short cycle qualifications in the overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA), based on the Dublin descriptors for short cycle qualifications... .

The Bologna Follow-Up Group, in short the BFUG, consists of persons representing the participating countries, and who are in their countries involved in realisation of the objectives formulated in the Bologna declaration and subsequent outcomes of ministerial meetings. The BFUG had become important in 2004 as by that time, stimulated by the Norwegians who provided a secretariat for the first time, it had taken up responsibility for realising the actions laid down by the ministers in their communiqués. This context, of a secretariat to the BFUG facilitated by the country responsible for the next ministers’ meeting, further stimulated the process of cooperation in higher education, generated by the Bologna declaration, which had become known then as the Bologna process.

Two frameworks in the EU?

The EU-Commission showed interest in the process towards a qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) and hinted the possibility of EU-Socrates project financing.

Inspired by these developments in European higher education, also in the EU context of the Lisbon Process an overarching qualifications framework for vocational education and training for lifelong learning was envisaged. While being developed it expanded to a framework also encompassing general education and higher education.

The EU was asked to ensure that this European qualifications framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LLL) would be in line with the qualifications framework for Higher Education adopted in the Bologna process. But, though the proposal had been amended, the final EU-Commission proposal contained descriptors for higher education which differed from the QF-EHEA descriptors. Though the frameworks had many purposes in common, the Commission emphasized the different purposes: For the EQF-LLL to enable persons to have their learning appraised and to move on to next levels. For the QF-EHEA to have reference points for the end of cycle qualifications, awarded by higher education institutions.

The higher education community was bewildered on how to deal with the two frameworks. No one had asked for two frameworks for higher education. And also the ministers had not intended differences in frameworks for higher education. Though the two frameworks were considered “not incompatible”, the institutions were at that time faced with two sets of descriptors for higher education.

The *Joint Quality Initiative* organised a meeting on the situation (5 October 2006). After a series of introductions, in which also various subject descriptors for higher education degree awards were presented, it was concluded that countries taking part in the Bologna Process were committed to implement the overarching framework for higher education. The implementation of the QF-EHEA has at that time already had a substantial impact on curriculum design and assessment, probably more so as it was developed as a result of innovations preceding it. The EQF-LLL had yet to become a reality next to this.

In the long run and to avoid divergence between the two frameworks, one should aim at a better understanding between the two, to ensure that they really are compatible and that the QF-EHEA fits together with the EQF-LLL not only because the footnotes (*'s) accompanying the higher levels in the EQF-LLL say so, but because it is thus understood. The details which might differ should be made explicit in this context as well.

Transverse to these overarching frameworks for qualification levels, there may be a need for ongoing learning lines per subject; in other words subject frameworks that would articulate the levels for various subjects. This could especially be needed if these levels are related to professions and salaries. Some professions are already doing this, with EU-support.

Such encompassing aims however run risks of overregulation. Quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions should play a role in this.

The best way forward is to share experiences with implementation of descriptors cross sectors, to be able to cross fertilize concepts prevailing in different contexts, to come to a shared understanding and to avoid confusion which can have negative effects on transparency and hinder progress towards shared goals.

Higher education must have a greater impact and larger discussion platform in the debate on and future implementation of the EQF-LLL.

After this meeting two other meetings took place that were important to avoid confusion in higher education institutions:

- The BFUG (12/13 October 2006, Helsinki) was very clear on continuation of commitment to the QF-EHEA.

- In the EU Education Committee (20 October 2006) the EU-Cie expressed that it was understood that higher education institutions have the right to use the concepts and terminology of the QF-EHEA, also once the EQF-LLL is adopted. The references to the ministers meeting in Bergen have been made more explicit in ANNEX II of the EQF-LLL proposal.

Actions being taken over

The meeting organised in 2006 turned out to have been the last meeting organised by the *Joint Quality Initiative*.

In the actions described above it became already clear that other actors were taking over actions that had been started by the *Joint Quality Initiative*.

Towards the ministers meeting in Bergen in 2005, the Norwegian government offered a kind of Secretariat to the BFUG. It was accepted with reluctance, but it facilitated coordinating actions by the Bologna Follow-Up Group and turned out to be very much appreciated. Thus after the Bergen meeting, also the UK and subsequent hosts were asked to provide for a Secretariat. The BFUG thus became much more active than in the first years of the Bologna Process.

Persons involved in quality assurance met in various contexts and networks. The European Network of Quality Assurance agencies (ENQA) took up to elaborate on the role of descriptors in quality assurance. And also the European University Association (EUA) the newly established European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) and the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) organised meetings that had to do with quality criteria for degree programmes or higher education institutions. ECA for instance states as its aim:

- to achieve mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions; to enhance the conditions for such mutual recognition, especially for joint programmes
- to provide a platform for mutual learning and disseminating experiences with accreditation and accreditation-like practices
- to provide transparent information on quality and to facilitate the internationalisation of institutions and students.

Moreover the EU-Commission started also to subsidize activities needed to make progress in the Bologna Process; regarding the Qualifications Frameworks they facilitate regular joint meetings of those involved in the frameworks for better understanding and cross-fertilization. Another important change had been the permanent website of the European Higher Education Area, established in 2010, when the Bologna Process celebrated its decade of achievements.

Thus in 2011, when pressure was exerted by the Dutch Ministry of Education to discard websites outside the domain of the government and also because so many actors had taken over what the *Joint Quality Initiative* had started, it was felt appropriate to end the website of the *Joint Quality Initiative* and incorporate the main documents thereof in the Archives of the European Higher Education Area website (www.ehea.info). They can be found there by selecting **EHEA Archives**, then select **Folder Browsing**, then select **1999-2003** and find the *Joint Quality Initiative*. Documents saved there also provided input for this short history.

Reflecting on the *Joint Quality Initiative* one can conclude that the initiative taken by the Dutch and Flemish ministers to advance co-operation in the field of quality assurance and accreditation, also resulted in a self-help project of all those who had a stake in it. In the early days of the Bologna Process, when the organisation was not as established as the EHEA is today and subsidies were not available, actions were jointly and eagerly taken up because a need was felt to do so.

References:

www.ehea.info/EHEA Archives/Folder Browsing/1999-2003/Joint Quality Initiative

Including:

Working on the European dimension of Quality; Outcomes of a seminar 2002-3-12/13, published 2003-2-14

Publication of the NVAO (Netherlands Flemish Accreditation Organisation) using the newly developed bachelor and master descriptor for quality assessments of existing higher education programmes.

The Hague, June 2015,

Marlies Leegwater

(Driver of the *Joint Quality Initiative*,
acknowledging the energetic stimulation of Nick Harris of the QAA,
the co-operation with Noel Vercruyse, Flemish Ministry of Education and Training
and the backing by the Dutch government and later on also by the NVAO)

ANNEX The full set of “Dublin descriptors”

Qualifications that signify completion of the higher education short cycle (within the first cycle) are awarded to students who:

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks; such knowledge provides an underpinning for a field of work or vocation, personal development, and further studies to complete the first cycle;
- can apply their knowledge and understanding in occupational contexts;
- have the ability to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems;
- can communicate about their understanding, skills and activities, with peers, supervisors and clients;
- have the learning skills to undertake further studies with some autonomy.

Qualifications that signify completion of the first cycle are awarded to students who¹:

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon and their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study;
- can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional² approach to their work or vocation, and have competences² typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study;
- have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues;
- can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences;
- have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.

Qualifications that signify completion of the second cycle are awarded to students who:

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with Bachelor’s level, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research³ context;
- can apply their knowledge and understanding, and problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study;

¹ Alternative title as proposed by the Joint Quality Initiative Meeting, in Dublin, on 23 March 2004

² Defined in Glossary 1.

- have the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements;
- can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously;
- have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.

Qualifications that signify completion of the third cycle are awarded to students who:

- have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field;
- have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity;
- have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication;
- are capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas;
- can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise;
- can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge based society;

Glossary

1. The word ‘**professional**’ is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense, relating to those attributes relevant to undertaking work or a vocation and that involves the application of some aspects of advanced learning. It is not used with regard to those specific requirements relating to regulated professions. The latter may be identified with the profile / specification.
2. The word ‘**competence**’ is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense, allowing for gradation of abilities or skills. It is not used in the narrower sense identified solely on the basis of a ‘yes/no’ assessment.
3. The word ‘**research**’ is used to cover a wide variety of activities, with the context often related to a field of study; the term is used here to represent a careful study or investigation based on a systematic understanding and critical awareness of knowledge. The word is used in an inclusive way to accommodate the range of activities that support original and innovative work in the whole range of academic, professional and technological fields, including the humanities, and traditional, performing, and other creative arts. It is not used in any limited or restricted sense, or relating solely to a traditional 'scientific method'.

Differentiating between cycles

Cycle	Knowledge and understanding:
1 (Bachelor)	[Is] supported by advanced text books [with] some aspects informed by knowledge at the forefront of their field of study ..
2 (Master)	provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing or applying ideas often in a research* context ..
3 (Doctorate)	[includes] a systematic understanding of their field of study and mastery of the methods of research* associated with that field..

	Applying knowledge and understanding:
1 (Bachelor)	[through] devising and sustaining arguments
2 (Master)	[through] problem solving abilities [applied] in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts ..
3 (Doctorate)	[is demonstrated by the] ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research* with scholarly integrity .. [is in the context of] a contribution that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work some of which merits national or international refereed publication ..

	Making judgements:
1 (Bachelor)	[involves] gathering and interpreting relevant data ..
2 (Master)	[demonstrates] the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete data ..
3 (Doctorate)	[requires being] capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas..

	Communication
1 (Bachelor)	[of] information, ideas, problems and solutions ..
2 (Master)	[of] their conclusions and the underpinning knowledge and rationale (restricted scope) to specialist and non-specialist audiences (monologue) ..
3 (Doctorate)	with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general (dialogue) about their areas of expertise (broad scope)..

	Learning skills ..
1 (Bachelor)	have developed those skills needed to study further with a high level of autonomy ..
2 (Master)	study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous..
3 (Doctorate)	expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement ..