

IRISH PRESIDENCY CONFERENCE

8 MARCH 2004

Towards 2010

Common Themes and Approaches

across

Higher Education

and

Vocational Education and Training

in Europe

CONFERENCE REPORT

Report prepared by

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1. INTRODUCTION

A conference entitled *Towards 2010 - common themes and approaches in European policy development across higher education and vocational education and training* was held in Dublin Castle on 8 March 2004, during the Irish Presidency of the European Union. The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, on behalf of the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, hosted the conference. It was organised with the support of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education Authority. It was partly funded by the European Commission.

The conference was timed to coincide with meetings of the Directors General for Higher Education, the Directors General for Vocational Education and Training, and the Bologna Follow-up Group, to enable participants in these meetings to come together and interact formally for the first time.

Mary Harney, T.D., Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, extended a warm welcome to all the delegates and Noel Dempsey, T.D., Minister for Education and Science opened the conference.

AIMS OF THE CONFERENCE

The conference aimed to provide an opportunity for participants to examine some of the main common themes in European policy development across higher education and vocational education and training. It also aimed to facilitate an exchange of information on parallel developments in each area, so that they could inform each other of possible ways forward, and consider the possibility of joint action in the future. It aimed to provide a forum where participants' concerns, interests and views on the common themes could be heard. Finally, the conference aimed to consider new models and approaches that have begun to minimise the traditional distinctions between vocational education and training and higher education.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH FOR THE CONFERENCE

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland commissioned a research study to produce a background paper for the conference. The brief for the research was to identify and examine common themes in European policy development in higher education and vocational education and training, against the background of the changing political landscape that now supports greater integration of the two systems.

The research, undertaken by Cynthia Deane and Elizabeth Watters, found that the goal of promoting mobility of learners and workers throughout Europe has informed much recent European policy development in education and training. Because mobility is closely linked to the ways in which learning and competences are recorded and valued in different countries, the research focused on the area of qualifications and in particular on examining the themes of *transparency, credit transfer, quality and frameworks of qualifications*. The research reviewed European co-operation related to mobility and qualifications and analysed the past and present conditions, which led to the evolution of the themes under discussion. The research examined what has been achieved or is currently under way in relation to the four themes. It also identified some emerging issues concerning co-operation in education and training at the European level and the connections between European developments and national policy.

CONFERENCE THEMES

The research found that while the themes of quality, credit and the transparency and recognition of qualifications have been addressed in different ways within higher education and vocational education and training at European level, there is a gradual convergence of approaches in some areas. The theme of frameworks of qualifications, however, is relatively new and contested. This theme has begun to emerge as a proposal from a number of current European policy and development initiatives. It was hoped to use the opportunity of the Dublin conference to stimulate discussion on the possible purposes, features and implications of frameworks - for learners, for education and training systems and for the achievement of the Lisbon 2010 goals. In addition to the four research

themes, the theme of new models of vocational education and training and higher education was also explored at the conference.

THE CONFERENCE

Over 300 delegates from 37 countries attended the conference. As well as the Member States of the European Union, the ten States that will join the EU in May and EEA-EFTA States, a number of the Balkan States, the Holy See, Russia and Turkey were also represented. The representatives of one or more Ministries located in 31 countries joined delegates from Social Partners' organisations, teachers' and students' unions, universities and research institutes, qualifications authorities, quality assurance agencies and other interested bodies. In addition, the Council of Europe and the European Commission, together with its agencies: CEDEFOP and the European Training Foundation were represented as well as a number of European-level associations and networks for education and training.

The background research paper was made available to delegates in advance, to provide the basis for the discussions in the conference. The European Commission prepared a briefing note on new and emerging models in vocational education and training and higher education and this was also circulated to delegates.

The conference began with the keynote speeches of Noel Dempsey T.D., the Irish Minister for Education and Science, and the European Commission's Director General for Education and Culture, Nikolaus van der Pas. The timetable for the conference included three plenary sessions and four parallel working groups on the conference themes. Dick Langford, Chairperson of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland chaired the conference.

This report, prepared by the conference rapporteurs, Cynthia Deane and Elizabeth Watters, summarises the presentations made during the plenary sessions and the four workshops; the subsequent discussions as reflected in the reports of the rapporteurs, and the conclusions of the conference.

The conference background paper and the speakers' and rapporteurs' presentation texts and slides are available on this website.

2. PLENARY SESSION

Summary of presentations

Summary of opening address

Noel Dempsey T.D., Minister for Education and Science, Ireland

In his opening address, the Minister for Education and Science stressed the importance of a common approach to quality and qualifications policy across the further and higher education and vocational training sectors if mobility and quality for lifelong learners is to be assured. The Minister said that the goal is to achieve a real open market for workers and learners, and that “the future prosperity of the European Union is at stake and nearly 500 million of our citizens are expecting us to deliver.”

To achieve this objective, there is a need for improved arrangements for the transparency and recognition of qualifications, and of the “underpinning arrangements” in relation to programmes, quality assurance and credit accumulation and transfer.

In looking at the various themes raised in the research for the conference, the Minister highlighted three particular issues that would be critical in advancing the agenda on the transparency and recognition of qualifications:

- The Europass proposal for a common transparency framework is an important development, which the Minister hoped to see adopted by the Education Ministers in the near future
- Credit accumulation and transfer, is an important national and international policy issue, and the development of parallel and linked arrangements in higher education and vocational education and training is vital to open up the way in which learning opportunities are made available for diverse groups of learners.
- The development of the quality dimension in both vocational education and training and in higher education can be mutually informed and

supportive to build overall trust and confidence in all elements of education and training.

The Minister noted that one of the key issues to be addressed at the conference was the development of frameworks of qualifications. He acknowledged that this issue is a relatively new one for many people and that there is some degree of unease at the speed at which it is advancing. However, he urged all conference participants to consider actively the range of issues that have been raised in the research. He stated that he strongly supported the need to have an overarching framework of qualifications across all of Europe, to facilitate real comparison between the diverse national systems of qualifications and qualifications frameworks. It is not a question of adopting a harmonised approach, rather of making clear the similarities and differences between systems and qualifications. He called for a commitment from all countries in Europe to “think as Europeans” and to achieve a European framework of qualifications.

Concluding his address, the Minister said he was confident that the wide representation of organisations, agencies, government officials and practitioners participating in the conference provided a very useful platform to air the diverse interests, concerns and ideas on ways forward.

Summary of European Commission Presentation

**Nikolaus van der Pas, Director-General for Education and Culture,
European Commission**

“The development of a European qualifications framework is our major challenge for 2004”

In his presentation, Mr van der Pas thanked the Irish presidency for hosting this important conference. He said it was a momentous occasion because it was the first time that policy makers, professionals and practitioners from the fields of higher education and vocational education and training had come together at European level to discuss issues of common interest. He said that the timing could not be better, because the European Union Council of Ministers and the European Commission had delivered a strong message to Heads of State and Government through the recently adopted Joint Interim Report on “Education and Training 2010”. Decisive, concrete and joined-up action is needed urgently at national and European levels alike, to make a success of the Lisbon strategy. This means in particular that the pace of reforms of education and training systems must be accelerated.

Both higher education and vocational education and training are of central importance for the future prosperity, competitiveness and inclusiveness of Europe, and for the active participation in society of every European citizen. While progress in the higher education sector is in some respects more advanced than in vocational education and training, concrete results are now emerging from the Copenhagen process on enhanced co-operation in vocational education and training. For example, the proposal for a new Europass single framework for transparency of qualifications and competences has been put forward; a common quality assurance framework for vocational education and training has been established; common principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning, and common principles for lifelong guidance have also been developed.

Need for an integrated approach

Shaping a more coherent approach to education and training at the European

level with a lifelong learning perspective as a guiding principle, involves the building of bridges between different parts of education and training systems, and between the systems and the wider world of learning. Higher education and vocational education and training are, after all, the two main “producers” of qualified people for the European labour market. They share this common goal. There is too often a tendency to treat vocational education and training and higher education as though they take place at different levels. The reality is that vocational education and training regularly takes place in higher education institutions. This reality is shaping new approaches to higher vocational training in several countries. Learners now want flexibility of provision and diversity of learning pathways, and this places a greater emphasis than ever before on establishing bridges between higher education and vocational education and training.

There is a need to connect the instruments, principles and references that are developed at European level for vocational education and training and higher education. What is needed is a single framework to act as a common reference point for the huge diversity of actors, systems and sub-systems across Europe.

TOWARDS A EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

The time for this development is ripe and the political momentum is mounting thanks to the Bologna process and the recent Berlin Communiqué, advances made under the Copenhagen process, and the recommendation of the Joint Interim report. We have the ideas, the material and the political will. This conference offers an opportunity to begin making significant progress towards a blueprint of a European Qualifications Framework by the end of 2004.

The development of a coherent European qualifications framework for lifelong learning is the key to the recognition of qualifications and competences in Europe. The framework will be a tool for clarity and confidence: a common reference, which is enabling and not constraining; which simplifies and expands options, rather than adding new layers of complexity. The framework:

- must be flexible enough to accommodate different national approaches, and different learning pathways
- must not impose particular solutions at national level

- will have important implications for equal opportunities in the labour market and also for the development of European citizenship
- must be based on the needs of individual citizens rather than on institutions
- must facilitate the transfer of competences and qualifications within a lifelong learning perspective, valuing learning from a broad range of settings, both formal and non-formal
- must include all levels, from general education and initial vocational education and training, through to higher education and continuing training.

A TECHNICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK-ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS

As described in the background research report for the conference we need a European Qualifications Framework, which is both technical and conceptual. It must combine and integrate the qualifications framework being developed for the higher education area following the Berlin Communiqué, and the common reference levels being established for vocational education and training, following the mandate of the Copenhagen Declaration.

Other initiatives at European level that are essential components of a European Qualifications Framework are:

- quality assurance
- level descriptors from kindergarten via vocational education and training and higher education to lifelong learning
- credits linked to learning outcomes
- instruments such as the new Europass for transparency of qualifications and competences; the common principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning; and the common principles being developed for lifelong guidance.

In summary, progress towards a European framework of qualifications will be an interactive process, where national experience will inform the European blueprint, which will in turn provide a reference point for actors who want to draw up a new national or sectoral framework.

Urging participants to tackle head-on the broad array of issues involved in driving forward the Education and Training 2010 agenda, Mr van der Pas said that an overarching ambition and goal is necessary for the economic and social development of Europe as a whole.

Summary of Research Presentation

Cynthia Deane, Options Consulting

Elizabeth Watters, European Research for Intercultural Understanding

CONTEXT

The research took as its starting point a number of key words and phrases: European goals; vocational education and training and higher education; European co-operation and common themes under development at European level.

European goals

The research considers developments aimed at achieving three major European goals. Firstly, the European Union goal of becoming a world quality reference for education and training by 2010. Secondly, the goal that education and training will play a crucial role in ensuring that Europe is the most competitive and knowledge based economy in the world. Thirdly, the goal of removing obstacles to the mobility of learners and workers in the European Union.

Vocational education and training and higher education

Vocational education and training and higher education prepare individuals for direct entry into the world of work and consequently play a major role in achieving EU economic goals. The research points out that the changing needs of the economy, free movement of services and the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in education and training over the past two decades has resulted in far-reaching changes to learning provision and processes. There has been an increasing blurring of the distinction between higher education and vocational education and training provision. New needs and increased participation in tertiary level education over the same period have changed the vocational education and training and higher education landscape in terms of the range and diversity of providers. The research suggests that the profile and remit of different provider types in the higher education and vocational education and training sectors affect the potential for success of European developments.

Differences in the profile of different vocational education and training and higher education institutions, which need to be kept in mind when examining European developments include, at a general level: degree of autonomy, (public, private); size and mandate. Specific differences include:

- Universities, in the traditional sense, are autonomous institutions and international in outlook, expected to compete at this level for research, staff and students. Transnational inter-university study programmes are becoming more commonplace as are international partnership arrangements for quality management and assurance.
- Not all tertiary level institutions have the same degree of autonomy, “universal” outlook or international status. Many of these tertiary level institutions are closest to the interface with vocational education and training systems and provision.
- Non-tertiary vocational education and training providers vary considerably within countries and across Europe. They include enterprises, (small, medium and large) sector-specific vocational training centres, institutions that cater for learners with special needs, community-based vocational education and training provision and other less formal learning contexts. Many of these providers are locally focussed with little or no international outlook.

European co-operation in vocational education and training and higher education

The research found that mobility and the cross-border recognition of qualifications were primary driving forces behind European co-operation in vocational education and training and higher education.

Geographical mobility for learning and work purposes is a desired and increasingly necessary option for European citizens to gain international skills and for enterprises to match the availability of jobs in the European Union with the availability of a skilled and competent workforce.

Developing international skills and competences and valuing the learning that takes place in other European contexts, as well as the cross-border recognition of

qualifications, challenge traditional concepts related to the learning process and national/regional arrangements for validating learning. Co-operation in the development of policy and practice at European level to co-ordinate and add value to national advancements in these areas is of crucial importance.

The research presents a review of the history of European co-operation in vocational education and training and higher education related to mobility and the recognition of qualifications and considers its importance in relation to current developments. The inter-governmental Bologna (higher education) and the EU Copenhagen (vocational education and training) processes are the most recent contexts for co-operation that build on policies, processes and practices that have developed in these fields over a substantial period of time. Within the EU, for example, policy instruments have been adopted to promote mobility and the recognition of qualifications; EU Action Programmes have supported the mobility of learners and young workers in higher education and vocational education and training. EU-supported multinational pilot and action research projects have also contributed to the internationalisation of curricula and methods and the transparency of qualifications in an organic way. Transnational co-operation in Europe, including initiatives spearheaded by the Council of Europe UNESCO and OECD, has been relatively widespread at the practice level. In addition, European-level agencies, networks and non-governmental organisations have supported the development and dissemination of innovation at a “process” level.

Over time a critical mass of actors have gained familiarity with other European education and training systems, programmes and qualifications. The research suggests that this valuable resource of expertise, matched with political determination and a clear set of goals, provide solid foundations for the current developments. However, the research also suggests that whilst these factors may contribute to the speedy development of models and mechanisms, history has taught us that the dissemination of innovation takes time and significant degrees of support and resources.

Common themes

Both the Bologna and Copenhagen processes identified the need to strengthen co-operation at European level on the important themes of enhancing quality, improving the transparency and comparability of systems, programmes and

qualifications by building European credit transfer systems and establishing qualifications frameworks. These important themes were selected for the research and background paper for this conference.

The research also found that these common themes were under parallel development in the two processes, partly due to the different approaches adopted, for example on matters of governance, management, ownership, stakeholder involvement, and development mechanisms.

The research found that whilst the Bologna and Copenhagen processes were proceeding along parallel tracks, the sectors they represented were not as clearly demarcated and some providers could avail equally of the outcomes of both processes. The research questions whether this is an unnecessary duplication of efforts and resources that may lead to confusion, and whether the processes are concentrating on vocational education and training and higher education sub-sectors with the best potential for adapting to new European models.

The scope of the research

The aim of the research was firstly to map out European-level policy and practice that related to the selected themes, to consider outcomes in terms of their successes and to identify the issues that remain to be resolved. Secondly, it aimed to examine commonalities in approaches and results and indicate where, and how, to build on successes and identify the tensions between the two sectors and processes, which militate against the possibilities for convergence. The results are summarised in the following sections.

The research raised many questions and this was considered to be appropriate as the aim of the conference was to consider issues such as: whether policy is running too far ahead of practice; whether stakeholders have been given their rightful place in the developments; whether sufficient expertise, time and other resources are being allocated to support the proposed evolution, or even revolution, of EU vocational education and training and higher education provision and practices; whether adequate attention is being given to the need to test and evaluate emerging models and whether and how synergy between the processes could be managed.

THEME 1: TRANSPARENCY

The research found that transparency and recognition of qualifications was considered an important enabling condition for the achievement of free movement of labour, a key principle in EU policy since the Treaty of Rome. Other factors that influence the growing need for increased transparency include the single market, the globalisation of business and industry, and the establishment of multinational corporations and conglomerates. One of the main obstacles to mobility is the problem of transferring qualifications from one country to another.

The research report outlined:

- three strategies that have been adopted to remove obstacles to mobility;
- recent Community action on transparency and recognition of qualifications;
- a gradual convergence of approaches and policies vocational education and training and higher education;
- the emergence of the Europass single framework for transparency of qualifications;
- the main tensions observed in the different approaches to transparency and recognition of qualifications.

Of the instruments to promote transparency of qualifications, the new Europass single framework was seen as representing a gradual convergence of approaches and policies in vocational education and training and higher education. It will initially include the European CV, certificate and diploma supplements, the common European framework of reference for languages and Europass-Training (MobiliPass), with provision for the addition of other instruments and documents at a later stage.

The added value of Europass is that it creates a co-ordinated portfolio of documents, making a stronger communications impact than separate documents. For citizens, it provides a coherent, effective, accessible, visible and user-friendly communications tool to make their qualifications and competences more easily understood. For national systems, it links information services and systems, and improves internal transparency. For the Community, the open architecture of Europass will promote new and dynamic approaches to assessing, validating and recording learning in the future.

The research suggested that progress on achieving transparency of vocational education and training qualifications was at least partly attributable to the working methodology of the European Forum, which

- mainstreamed successful practice from projects
- linked separate initiatives at national, sectoral and project level
- built on experience of the diploma supplement
- integrated the technical and political aspects of transparency
- achieved strong consensus among Member States, promoted mutual understanding and trust, and created a positive climate for progress.

Some of the issues in management and delivery of transparency instruments that were identified by the research included:

- the number of different agencies and networks involved, both at national and European level
- the tensions between approaches to transparency in higher education/ vocational education and training, for example
 - individual/ collective approach
 - focus on system/ focus on individual learner
 - focus on inputs/ process/ outcomes.

THEME 2: EUROPEAN CREDIT TRANSFER SYSTEMS

European co-operation on credit transfer systems evolved as a response to the need to recognise learning achievements acquired in cross-border education. The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), developed for the higher education sector with support from the EU Erasmus/Socrates programme, has undergone a 15-year development phase. Putting ECTS into operation requires quite intensive inter-university co-operation, which has facilitated both awareness raising and appreciation of other systems, practices and provision and as such ECTS has helped to increase the transparency and build trust. Currently, the higher education sector is investigating the potential of ECTS as a credit accumulation scheme within the context of the Bologna process. It is believed that this will increase the flexibility of higher education provision, support lifelong learning and facilitate more widespread mobility and the further development of the European higher education area.

The research indicates that the processes and procedures that support the ECTS can inform the strengthening and further development of mechanisms for the cross-border recognition of qualifications and thereby support worker mobility. Policy-makers and the Social Partners are faced with mounting pressure to remove barriers to mobility. They need a fast solution with the best chances for success, and they aim to exploit the potential of the ECTS.

One consequence of this was to set about investigating the possibility of developing a similar European credit transfer system for vocational education and training in the context of the Copenhagen process and a technical working group was appointed and given the mandate to carry out this task. This group recommended that the European Credit Transfer System for vocational education and training (ECVET) should develop in parallel with the evolving ECTS scheme for the: national and transnational transfer of learning outcomes and the accumulation and mutual recognition of learning activities, or qualification units. The group is currently investigating national approaches to credit systems in vocational education and training; reference levels for vocational education and training qualifications and competences; the role of "zones of mutual trust", and a common typology of knowledge, skills and competences.

The research found that the success factors for ECTS included its responsiveness to the needs of the higher education sector and its learners; the relatively homogenous character of HE; academically-orientated educational exchanges and a critical mass of learners availing of long-term mobility opportunities; its bottom up development and its testing over a substantial period of time; the holistic developmental approach (the use of common tools, joint development of curricula and assessment procedures, peer review of quality management), and the autonomy of universities in decision-making with regard to qualifications.

ECVET is at the conceptual stage and the emerging models have yet to be tried and tested at the level of practice.

The research identified a set of questions to be discussed at the conference, including:

- Who owns European credit transfer systems?
- Who should resource them and how?
- How desirable/feasible are they, for whom and under what circumstances?
- What are the major concerns of stakeholders?

- How can stakeholders be encouraged to actively engage in their development?
- What has yet to be done at national/regional/sector level to accommodate credit systems and ensure their functionality?
- How can the ECTS experience inform the further development of ECVET to increase the chances of complementarity and synergy between the two schemes and the relevance, usefulness and acceptability of ECVET?

THEME 3: QUALITY

Improving the quality of learning processes, practices and outcomes is at the core of the European developments examined in the research. Efforts to increase the transparency of systems, programmes and qualifications also facilitate the comparative analysis of their quality. Dialogue is encouraged and supported in both vocational education and training and higher education sectors on matters such as the meaning attached to quality principles, criteria and standards; how quality is managed and assured in different jurisdictions; what successful models and methods exist, and how European co-operation can aim to improve quality standards in education and training throughout Europe. Quality is also considered a priority action in the Bologna and Copenhagen processes.

The research found that at surface level the goals set by policy-makers, and carried through to the “process” level in Bologna and Copenhagen to improve quality, are similar. Higher education and vocational education and training experts have been called upon at European level to agree on comparable criteria and methodologies for improving quality in their respective sectors. Both sectors are concerned with improving the quality of learning inputs and outputs and the management of quality itself. Both sectors are addressing the issue of external accountability. Both sectors consider the same methods: self-assessment, customer assessment, peer review and the publication of reports. Scenarios for the mutual acceptance of evaluation and accreditation mechanisms, a common framework of reference and a set of standards, procedures and guidelines, are under preparation within the Bologna process. Vocational education and training experts have produced a proposal for a common quality assurance framework and a set of quality indicators within the Copenhagen process.

With regard to improving the quality of inputs - curricula, teaching and learning contexts - a number of wide-scale European-level projects have been undertaken in the higher education sector, such as the Tuning (Educational Structures in Europe), the Transnational European Evaluation Project and the Quality Culture Project. These are complemented by smaller-scale projects supported by the Socrates programme. Similarly, small-scale transnational projects supported by the Leonardo da Vinci programme in the vocational education and training sector aim to improve quality and broaden perspectives by raising awareness of how quality is known and understood in different contexts.

The research findings suggest that while policy goals for the improvement and management of quality may be similar for both higher education and vocational education, and training and quality concepts may be shared centrally at the "process" level in Bologna and Copenhagen, the impact of European developments at the level of practice is minimal in the case of the latter, and more significant in the case of the former. Possible explanations for this include: differences in needs (motivation); different stages of development (timing); differences in approaches (top-down, bottom-up) and differences in networking and channelling information. The research highlights issues for consideration such as:

- How to evaluate whether the successful practices in higher education should or could be adapted and transferred to enhance the European dimension in quality matters in the vocational education and training sector?
- How effectively could "one-fit-for-all" models and mechanisms meet the needs of the diverse vocational education and training providers and programmes at national and European levels?
- How could regional, national and sectoral diversity in vocational education and training be best represented in European developments to maximise their relevance and suitability?
- How could emerging products and practices be tested and evaluated on a wide scale in vocational education and training?

The research questions whether data are available on co-operation between higher education and vocational education and training on quality matters at national level and whether practices could be evaluated in terms of their potential for transfer at the European level. These data may emerge in the research underway in preparation for the Maastricht conference planned for the end of

2004. The research also suggested a number of possible bridging initiatives between higher education and vocational education and training at national and European levels.

THEME 4: QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

The research found that frameworks of qualifications already exist at national, sectoral and transnational levels. The suggestion to establish a framework of qualifications at European level is emerging from a number of sources, notably from the Bologna process, from the Joint Interim Report, from working groups that are part of the future objectives work programme, and from some sectoral initiatives.

The European Commission in particular is making the case for a European framework of qualifications very strongly. It is envisaged that such a framework will:

- facilitate mobility for learners and workers
- make education and training systems and qualifications more transparent
- be based on national frameworks
- build on Bologna and Copenhagen processes
- include vocational education and training and higher education
- build on mutual trust and quality assurance.

Some of the common conceptual, political issues and technical issues that have been encountered in implementing existing qualifications frameworks were outlined.

Conceptual issues: definitions, purpose, scope, core principles and philosophies.

Political issues: ownership and control, involvement of stakeholders, roles and responsibilities, linkages.

Technical issues: levels; criteria and standards; procedures for access, transfer and progression for learners; arrangements for credit, quality assurance and validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Other issues that were identified in the research as important in developing a European framework of qualifications include:

- relationships between national framework and an overarching framework
- ownership and control of an overarching European framework
- responsibility for its development, support and updating
- “bottom-up” versus “top-down” development
- level of detail required in the framework: “loose” or “tight”
- achieving balance between simplicity of use and comprehensiveness of coverage
- focus on inputs or outcomes
- definition of core elements or building blocks of the overarching framework.

The research posed the question: *“Is there a platform for the development of a common European qualifications framework?”* The conclusion reached was that at the conceptual and technical levels, there was still quite some way to go, while at the political level, there is clear indication of strong support, for a number of reasons:

- A common framework can be a powerful driver of progress towards many of the key Lisbon objectives.
- In particular, it can help make the lifelong learning concept a reality.
- It can help to remove some of the major obstacles to mobility, between levels of education and training, between different learning contexts, between jobs and sectors, and between countries.
- Many of the enabling conditions are already in place, or are at an advanced stage of development, including quality assurance, credit transfer, and transparency.

However, the research also indicated that implementing strategy is never easy, quick or cheap, and that there is a need to build political support in Member States, many of whom might be described as agnostic, sceptical or unsure about this development. The importance of consultation and communication was stressed, together with the need to build the readiness and capacity of stakeholders for the changes ahead. It was noted that when strategic change fails, it is more often because of a failure to communicate properly with stakeholders than because of a fault in the strategy itself.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

The research set out to show

- whether convergence has been achieved in relation to the selected themes
- how some important polarities have been managed
- the challenges and issues that remain unresolved.

The key messages from the research were summarised as follows:

- There is a lot happening in pursuit of the education and training 2010 goals in higher education and vocational education and training.
- On first examination, the activity may appear fragmented, unfocused, slow, complex, difficult and unproductive.
- However, examined in more detail it provides examples of good practice, and many important and successful outcomes.
- There is an opportunity to build on the success in the Bologna and Copenhagen processes, in the future objectives work programme, and in transnational projects.
- It is a good time to take stock, reflect and consolidate, and to begin working to forge an improved new strategy for the future with an emphasis on an integrated approach.

The research found that positive outcomes have been achieved as a result of:

- connecting European policy, process, and practice
- ensuring that stakeholders have ownership of developments
- allowing for necessary resources
- providing the time for experimentation and evaluation
- building consensus, mutual trust, common understanding
- shared goals, purpose, vision
- partnership, respecting and celebrating diversity
- valuing different perspectives and traditions
- creating a climate for change, especially through the European programmes and projects
- creating an imperative for change, through the Lisbon 2010 goals.
- linking developments to the European social agenda
- enabling the infiltration of ideas from other fields: e.g. employment, trade, and fiscal policy.

The main polarities that need to be managed, or dilemmas that need to be faced in education and training are similar to those faced on policy making in any field, for example striking a balance between

- national/European
- employability/academic values
- diversity/collective approach
- top down/bottom up
- integration/fragmentation
- competitiveness/cohesion
- protection/partnership
- voluntary/legally based frameworks
- flexible/rigid
- empowerment/control
- state/market
- system focus/learner focus
- access/quality
- revolution/evolution.

The vision is to make Europe into the world's leading knowledge economy by 2010. The important question for this conference was: *"How do we get from here to there?"*

3. WORKING GROUPS

Summary of presentations and reports

WORKING GROUP 1: ENHANCING QUALITY

Chaired by **Don Thornhill**, Higher Education Authority, Ireland

Rapporteur: **Madlen Serban**, Ministry of Education and Research, Romania

*Summary of presentation by **Christian Thune**, European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).*

Thune's presentation began by setting out the shared visions of the Bologna and Copenhagen processes. He characterised these as a common desire to assure and increase quality in vocational and higher education, to foster comparability of education across Europe, to increase transparency and to enhance mobility. However, he argued that they are underpinned by very different approaches: Bologna being "bottom-up" and Copenhagen being "top-down".

Thune also argued that the Copenhagen process could benefit from adopting successful methods and practices that have been tried and tested in the Bologna process. He expressed his reservations regarding the Copenhagen methodology, in which models for reform in quality assurance and other areas are being built by 'quasi-ministerial' expert groups. He did concede in passing, however, that Copenhagen was more successful than Bologna in allowing a stronger role for the social partners.

He concluded by arguing that there was some scope for enhanced co-operation in terms of focus and method, and that both processes could learn important things from each other. He also believes that it is important that the two sectors should break down barriers between themselves both at the national and European levels. However, he believes that this co-operation should be organic and avoid the creation of new bureaucratic structures to bring the two processes together, which would be costly and add little value.

*Summary of presentation by **Jürgen Horschinegg**, Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture, Austria.*

Horschinegg presented a description of the aims, process and achievements of the Technical Working Group on Quality in European vocational education and training, established under the Copenhagen process. During his presentation Horschinegg stressed that a strong interplay between European policy and national activities was a pre-condition for the success of European developments and he cited the approach taken in Austria as an example.

Towards the end of his presentation Horschinegg began to explore the interface between the Bologna and Copenhagen processes. He argued that vocational education and training is a very variegated system – there is a large variety of national vocational education and training systems across Europe and a great deal of variation within these national systems. Thus, there is a much more complex structure of ‘ownership’ than is the case in HE, and it is characterised by strong localism in terms of culture and tradition, and therefore lacks an international orientation. In this context, then, vocational education and training can learn from higher education and the Bologna process, particularly in relation to the shaping of strategies to bring strong and independent organisations into the process, the use of peer review as a tool to enhance quality, and the way higher education uses a mixture of internal and external assessment in Quality Assurance.

Horschinegg posed the question whether vocational education and training could benefit from the establishment of an organisation like ENQA and considered the value of stronger co-operation with other “supranational” organisations like OECD and UNESCO on quality matters.

Issues raised in discussion and reported in the plenary session

Diversity in higher education at European level: The Bologna process is attempting to find the ‘optimal point of balance’ for the 40 countries who have signed up to the process, which is no easy task given that each country has its own distinct higher education tradition.

Diversity in vocational education and training: It was argued that the diversity that exists in the provision of vocational education and training, both at the national and European levels, is a good thing. This diversity should be

preserved, and the development of common approaches to quality assurance should not impose an artificially homogenised system on European vocational education and training. It was considered that a single QA system for vocational education and training might result in difficulties for different parts of the vocational education and training family.

Essential differences between higher education and vocational education and training: These permeate all aspects of the Bologna and Copenhagen processes. The Bologna process has broad overarching objectives, which allow diverse contributors to participate. This is clearly visible in relation to quality assurance, which is a relatively independent process across Europe that does not have to 'look back' to ministers/civil servants. The Copenhagen process commences with the reports of "quasi-ministerial" Technical Working Groups followed by specific projects. In contrast, Bologna proceeds on the basis of various pilot projects, which ultimately feed into the communiqués of the higher education ministers. There was some disagreement with the 'quality indicators' approach that is a part of the quality activities underway within the context of the Copenhagen process.

Structures to allow common discussion between stakeholders from the two sectors: A number of contributors argued that new structures needed to be established, both nationally and at the European level, to allow a proper discussion to take place between stakeholders from the two sectors about quality assurance and other areas of mutual interest. Such an approach will increase transparency, which many feel is the 'route way' for building confidence across the sectors.

Transparency: Some contributors felt that the remarkable diversity and complexity of higher education and vocational education and training in Europe can and will defeat transparency: there is simply too much to make visible. Others were less pessimistic: at an abstract level, higher education and vocational education and training have to deal with the same subjects and same problems, and should therefore be able to develop some common approaches. The big question is how the two sectors can be brought together. Some comfort was drawn from the fact that individual countries are addressing these issues at national level (through national qualification frameworks in particular). The outcomes of the engagements between higher education and vocational

education and training at national level will point the way forward for the development of common approaches at the European level.

Beginning of a process of engagement: Both sectors can learn from each other in respect of quality assurance. Vocational education and training providers, for example, can learn much about taking ownership and responsibility for their own quality assurance from their higher education colleagues. Conversely, higher education institutions can learn much from their vocational education and training counterparts in relation to allowing greater stakeholder involvement in quality assurance in their sector. The process of engagement between higher education and vocational education and training has just begun, and too much should not be expected at this juncture in terms of developing common approaches. It was suggested that not enough was known about the vocational education and training sector across Europe as a whole, and many countries would still not know internally whether they actually wanted a genuine engagement between the two sectors. However, proper quality assurance systems across both sectors would be essential in terms of building confidence and trust between them.

WORKING GROUP 2: BUILDING CREDIT SYSTEMS AND IMPROVING TRANSPARENCY

Chaired by **Séamus Puirseil**, CEO, Higher Education and Training Awards Council, Ireland

Rapporteur: **Caroline Egerton**, Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, Northern Ireland

*Summary of presentation by **Isabelle Le Mouillour**, University of Kassel, Germany: Functions and Expectations on Credit Systems in Training and Education.*

In her paper, Le Mouillour outlined the expectations of different stakeholders in credit systems: learners, employers, and provider institutions. She addressed the issue of mobility and the role of credit systems in promoting it; the challenges of recognition and transparency, and of establishing equivalence for the purposes of academic or occupational mobility; the potential for synergy between vocational education and training and higher education. She also proposed answers to some of the questions raised in the background research paper.

In her presentation, Le Mouillour said that credit systems are complex and have to meet the challenges of enhancing the transparency of education and training systems, meeting learner mobility and employment mobility needs, promoting flexible delivery and recognising all learning activities and outcomes. She outlined the two major credit systems that are currently at different stages of development: the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) that was introduced in 1989 for the Higher Education sector (HE), and the ECVET (European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training), which has been under development for Vocational Education and Training since the end of 2002.

Different stakeholders have different expectations of mobility and credit systems. For learners, employability is usually the main incentive for being mobile. For employers, competitiveness by innovation acts as an incentive. Employees are experiencing greater mobility, internal and external to the enterprise, geographical and occupational, and they need to maintain and improve their competence and qualification levels. Credit systems will enable these varied expectations to be met, Le Mouillour suggested.

She also argued that credit systems will need to include both transfer and accumulation functions to serve three types of mobility: geographical mobility; vocational/occupational mobility, both vertical and horizontal; and mobility between the informal/non-formal sector and the formal education and training sector. For credit systems to work as a means of transfer and accumulation, course programmes and assessment need to be sub-divided into a number of smaller parts. There is also a need for effective quality management and zones of mutual trust, especially within ECVET because there is a wider range of learning locations and activities than in higher education. National qualifications frameworks and the proposed common European reference framework for the recognition of qualifications also have an important role to play in facilitating credit transfer and accumulation systems.

Le Mouillour suggested that there is some convergence between ECTS and ECVET in that the ECTS is moving from a transfer system to a transfer and accumulation system, and it is beginning to take account of both workload and learning outcomes. However there is still a need for ECVET to be defined in its own right, while ensuring that it is compatible with ECTS to facilitate transfer across lifelong learning.

Issues raised in discussion and reported in the plenary session

Most of the discussion in the group focussed on the theme of credit, with transparency being briefly addressed by a number of speakers towards the end of the session.

Value of a unified credit system for vocational education and training and higher education: There was general support for the development of a comprehensive credit system linking existing credit systems at higher education and in vocational education and training. Most contributors stressed that there should not be two systems, however it is recognised that linking the two would be complex. Ideally there should be only one system for credit accumulation and transfer across all of lifelong learning, taking account of the different concerns at different levels and sectors. It was pointed out that an effective credit system could provide access to learning for people who have been failed by the system. It was also stated that it was important to ensure the inclusion of sectoral

frameworks within credit systems, to get them recognised by the formal education and training system.

Some issues and concerns in implementing credit systems: It was pointed out that there is a difference between academic recognition and occupational recognition, and that it is difficult to establish one credit system that includes both. Some contributors argued that it was difficult to define levels without first having defined workload and outcomes, and the work profile that attaches to various qualifications.

Enabling conditions for a single system: It was argued that a “common currency” for credit based on trust and quality is what is required. It is necessary to be pragmatic in developing a combined system: it is not useful if it is too general or if it is too specific. It was agreed that there is a need to set out basic principles in clear commonly understood language. We also need to set short-term goals, and attempt to make progress step-by-step. If a credit framework is agreed, transparency is made easier.

Develop a set of common principles: It was agreed that common principles should be established for credit transfer systems in higher education and vocational education and training, including for example:

- a focus on the learner
- outcomes based, but taking account of the learning process
- achieve a balance between being simple, with a small number of levels, and yet being comprehensive, including enough detail to be useful
- provide recognition for small units or modules.

Transparency: In the brief discussion on transparency, there was nevertheless widespread support for the Europass decision, and political acceptance was encouraged. It was very strongly recommended that the Europass brand should be retained for a long time to give everybody an opportunity to get used to it and to implement it fully. Participants also urged that attention should be paid to communicating with all of the relevant stakeholders about the benefits and use of Europass. It was pointed out that there are currently a lot of discrepancies in implementing existing transparency instruments in the Member States. These need to be addressed as soon as possible, or Europass will not work.

WORKING GROUP 3: NEW AND EMERGING MODELS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Chaired by **Peter Rigney**, Irish Congress of Trades Unions and Vice-President of the Management Board of CEDEFOP

Rapporteur: **Aviana Bulgarelli**, Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, Italy

*Summary of the **European Commission** paper: Discussion note on new and Emerging models in vocational education and training and higher education*

In his presentation of the Commission paper that was prepared for discussion at the conference, **Jens Bjornavold** focussed on the closer links and bridges between tertiary education and training and gave examples that indicate possible pathways of vocational education and training models at tertiary level. He said that vocational education and training cannot be limited or have a perceived ceiling, for example second level vocationally orientated education or apprenticeship. Increasingly vocational education and training is provided at tertiary level, so it has a place at all levels of education and training.

The paper also suggested that a combination of theory and practice is integral to vocational education and training. This model is the basis of apprentice-based learning, and of new approaches combining academic studies and company training, for example in the German "Fachhochschulen" and the Finnish and Swedish Polytechnic systems. The main question is: "*How can we bridge traditional academic education and newer vocational pathways?*" These paths have always been unnecessarily segregated and divided, but some countries have recently begun to bridge the gap by adopting new models of integrated delivery.

*Summary of presentation on the Tuning project by **Robert Wagenaar**, University of Groningen, the Netherlands.*

Wagenaar presented the Tuning methodology, which focuses on learning outcomes formulated by academic staff and competences attained by the learner. The Tuning project examines the success of higher education in adapting to vocational education and training models. Wagenaar suggested that the idea of integrating vocational education and training into higher education was not new,

but that there were many obstacles and it was not yet clear whether it was successful.

He noted some of the current general tendencies in higher education: the move from a staff-oriented approach to a student-centred approach; less specialised academic education in the first cycle; more flexibility in first and second cycle programmes; the introduction of new approaches regarding teaching, learning and assessment, including internship, apprenticeships, dual models and combinations of teaching and learning. He said there was now a blurring of distinctions between traditional sectors of education and training and he suggested that the approach of the Tuning project could offer a way of bridging higher education and vocational education and training.

The Tuning approach to designing, planning and implementing curricula is based on the definition of academic and professional profiles and learning outcomes, and on identifying generic and subject specific competences to be developed through output-oriented curricula. Wagenaar argued that the Tuning methodology and model is appropriate for new types of education and training in a lifelong learning context, especially those that combine theory and practice such as vocational education. He concluded that vocational education and training in higher education will profit from the shift of paradigm in higher education (from staff to student orientation), and from the growing use of learning outcomes and competences based on well-designed profiles. Furthermore, vocationally-oriented education and training in higher education will promote the use of the learning outcomes/competence concept, and the attainment of generic and subject specific competences by students.

Issues raised in discussion and reported in the plenary session

There was productive discussion among participants, who included ministry representatives, awarding bodies, learner representative organisation, universities and other higher education institutions, professional bodies and CEDEFOP.

Integrating vocational education and training and higher education:

There was recognition of the increased importance of vocational education and training models at tertiary level, and it was agreed that many elements of vocational education and training are relevant to general academic education, and

vice versa. There is a need for teaching and learning approaches that are competence-based, that combine theory and practice and that differ from the traditional academic model.

Co-operation with stakeholders: Participants argued that the need to open up higher education and vocational education and training systems can be hindered by rigid institutional frameworks and called for closer co-operation with stakeholders, including learners, graduates, social partners, sectors, branches and enterprises. There is a need to build a structure for stakeholder involvement: from listening, to consultation, to commitment, to decision making. However, it was suggested that independence is important in the area of qualifications and that it is not advisable for industry to be too closely linked to the validation of qualifications.

Recognition of learning outcomes and competences: It was noted that higher education institutions often offer vocationally-orientated higher education, which combines theoretical and practically-based modes of learning, and often includes work placement. They may also offer short cycle tertiary education, which provides an opportunity for adult learners to undertake continuing professional development. These courses need to be included in a framework for recognition of qualifications. Structures are needed for the assessment of non-formal learning and work experiences in higher education. A clear focus on learning outcomes and competences will help to achieve clearer labelling of education and training programmes. This will make it easier for learners to choose programmes appropriate to their needs, and will enhance the status and attractiveness of vocational education and training.

Action at European Level: In response to the question of what action can be taken at European Level, participants said that while society seems ready to support the linking of vocational education and training and higher education, there is a need to take into account diverse national cultures. The importance of education for citizenship and democracy as well as for employment and competitiveness was stressed, and it was suggested that both learners and society benefit from focussing on clear outcomes of education and training. There was support for the idea of one single process to bridge vocational education and training and higher education, and also for the Europass framework.

A common framework: The discussion concluded that there is a high level of diversity among national education and training systems, and there is also

commonality, which provides a basis for the development of shared frameworks. Competences need to be defined in a broad way, and to include transferable skills as well as specialised job-related skills. A single unified framework for higher education and vocational education and training would begin to bridge the traditional divide and make both systems stronger. There is a need for common platforms and structures for stakeholder liaison in higher education and in vocational education and training, and for the development of competences and professional profiles as a basis of learning outcomes and curricula.

WORKING GROUP 4: IMPROVING COMPARABILITY - FRAMEWORKS OF QUALIFICATIONS

Chaired by **Seán Ó Foghlú**, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

Rapporteur: **Mike Coles**, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, UK

*Summary of presentation by **Stephen Adam**, University of Westminster UK: Frameworks of qualifications - What role do they have or might they play at national and European level?*

Adam's presentation set out to answer some of the questions posed in the background research paper. He began by considering the importance of the role of frameworks of qualifications in offering synergy, increasing transparency, improving access and enhancing recognition and mobility. He considered that comparability could only come about by creating a shared basis for understanding qualifications. Whilst he acknowledged the strong political will for a European framework of qualifications (EFQ) he felt that this would only become a reality if there was massive stakeholder involvement.

Adam considered that the philosophy and principles underlying the Bologna and Copenhagen processes and the Lisbon Recognition Convention could underpin the EFQ, but must be agreed by the different parties. He proposed that national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) were pre-requisites for the EFQ but must be "new style" (for example being credit-based, learning outcomes-based, having levels descriptors). Ideally, the EFQ would develop in tandem with emerging NQFs.

He suggested that the main obstacles to an EFQ were mutual distrust, fractured educational systems, the vocational education and training/higher education divide, the complexity of the task, timescale, cost and the diversity and number of stakeholders. He also felt that in order for an EFQ to work it would be necessary to focus on and challenge the specific barriers between vocational education and training and higher education (philosophical, conceptual, historical, practical, and educational). He argued against the concept of "zones of mutual trust", and their role in developments in the Copenhagen process, stating that trust had to be earned.

Adam stressed the importance of recognising that qualifications were nationally/institutionally owned and designed in the light of local, regional and national priorities. Accordingly, detailed information would always be owned and reside with national qualifications frameworks.

Adam concluded by posing the question whether the EFQ should be minimalist or an elaborate overarching credit and qualifications framework, which would be the difficult route requiring profound changes.

Issues raised in discussion and reported in the plenary session

The driving force behind the EFQ: There was full acknowledgement of the strong political desire for a European Framework of Qualifications. A number of delegates expressed the opinion that European politicians have agreed that the EFQ is the best way forward and it is now up to those given the mandate to develop it, at conceptual and technical levels, to ensure that it is relevant, workable and useful.

The need for a vision: It was noted that the EFQ needed an inspiring vision behind it to enthuse stakeholders. The vision should focus on the contribution the EFQ could make to providing new and improved opportunities for citizens: learning, employment and mobility, opening new markets for educational services, attracting international expertise, and facilitating closer European integration. The vision for, rather than the technical features of, the EFQ needed to be widely promoted.

Involving the stakeholders: Who the stakeholders were and how they could be brought together was discussed. Would the EFQ cover general and adult education? Who would take the lead? How could decisions be taken about the involvement of representatives of professions? It was argued that more widespread debate on the concept of the EFQ was required in order to thrash out the issues, air the problems, consult and build up a community of trust and engagement to champion the project.

Common terms, common meanings: It was suggested that a common terminology needed to be agreed for the EFQ that took into account national and

sector concepts and the terms used to describe them, for example: qualifications, qualifications frameworks, competences, recognition. It was pointed out that definitions agreed at the outset of a current OECD project on qualification frameworks mutated over time to reflect different sector and national understandings of terms.

Reference levels: There was some discussion on the need to negotiate complementary reference levels for vocational education and training and higher education. Reference levels have been agreed and adopted for university degree-level awards in Europe, other frameworks exist such as ISCED, the European levels and ISCO but there are no universally agreed and applied reference levels specifically for vocational education and training at the European level. Reference was made to current QCA research in this area, under the auspices of the Copenhagen process, which aims to define reference levels for European vocational education and training drawing on examples from national systems, sector systems, the business world and theory. The results so far indicate that there should be few levels but many sub-levels to reflect all that is going on in vocational education and training in Europe.

Motivation and timing: There was some indication that Ministers had moved too fast without the necessary intensive and extensive consultation that needed to take place. However, a number of delegates referred to the strong university support for a European Framework of Qualifications for higher education, the motivation is there and the conditions and timing are right. Delegates queried whether the same conditions applied in the vocational education and training sector. A number of delegates considered that the speed at which the plans for the EFQ for higher education were progressing would leave vocational education and training behind and militate against the development of an EFQ for lifelong learning.

National qualifications frameworks: Delegates from a number of countries presented outline descriptions of new and emerging qualifications frameworks. Where national qualifications frameworks exist at all, the tendency, as reported from the floor, is to develop separate frameworks for vocational education and training and higher education (e.g. Denmark, Italy, Holland) or regional variations of combined models (e.g. UK). A number of NQFs are at the conceptual stage, particularly in the accession countries. The challenge for the EFQ would be to take account of and accommodate all of this diversity.

The interaction between NQFs and an EFQ: It was suggested that the debate on an EFQ facilitated debate on the “pros and cons” of qualifications frameworks at the national level, which may otherwise not occur. There was some discussion on the differences between opting for a mini (qualifications and levels) or a maxi (credits, lifelong learning) framework at both national and European levels and how this would affect synergy. Some contributors felt that the EFQ could guide the development of NQFs but to do so it must be well thought through and based on successful practices of existing qualifications frameworks “we cannot afford to make mistakes”. It was suggested that a “handbook” might be developed by stakeholders to track the evolution of the EFQ and the NQFs in terms of meeting needs, making linkages, addressing obstacles etc. This would engage the stakeholders and help to quickly identify the pressures.

Conclusions

“New style” qualifications frameworks, as defined by Adam, are considered the best way forward to support the concept of lifelong learning. This may require a “quantum leap” at the national level, in relation to changing mind-sets, bringing the different stakeholders on board and implementing necessary reforms.

The EFQ must not be rigid or restrain national needs The EFQ could be an aspiration for NQFs, help to solve local problems and act as a tool for reform. The EFQ should cover all higher education and vocational education and training qualifications. More clarity was required with regard to the ownership of the EFQ and the Bologna and Copenhagen plans needed to be reconciled. Whether the EFQ would evolve in tandem with NQFs, follow their development or precede them would require very different approaches to strategic planning, promotion and stakeholder involvement.

Considerable work needed to be accomplished at the conceptual and technical levels to develop a workable model for an EFQ. This would require wide-ranging expertise and include widespread representation of all the stakeholders from the participating countries, sufficient time for consultation, testing and evaluation and the investment of necessary resources.

COMMENTS FROM THE FLOOR FOLLOWING THE RAPPORTEURS' PRESENTATIONS

A number of speakers made brief contributions from the floor after the rapporteurs delivered the reports of the working groups. These comments served to illustrate some of the areas of consensus and contention that may be faced in moving forward with development of the conference themes. One speaker expressed the concerns of some practitioners in two key questions: "*How will we get to where we are going? How fast can we get there?*" Other speakers raised a variety of issues of relevance to the conference themes, making the following main points:

- Is it wise to have a single framework for vocational education and training and higher education? Will this offer the best solution for quality in both sectors?
- There is a need for concrete approaches at this stage, with clear structures on how to involve stakeholders including teachers, professors and institutions as well as industry. Old habits and practices need to be changed, and people need support to help them get ready for these changes.
- Credit-based systems should respond to the needs of those who were failed by current education and training systems.
- Most university education is vocational, so unnecessary distinctions should be eradicated.
- The European qualifications framework should be based on learning outcomes. It should focus on the needs of learners rather than on institutions.

4. PANEL DISCUSSION

Summary of inputs by speakers

General points

The speakers agreed that the conference, which had brought together higher education and vocational education and training policy-makers and practitioners to discuss common themes and advance common understanding, was a very good idea and that the practice of holding joint events should be continued. They stressed the importance of involving stakeholders in future developments. They considered communication with all stakeholders a priority. They advocated the need to work with the social partners, learners and teachers and prepare them for the changes in systems and qualifications. They advised that diversity should be embraced. They expressed the need to move fast, but not too fast, in implementing new developments.

A selection of points made by individual panel speakers

Johan van Rens (CEDEFOP) underlined the strong support of Ministers for the initiatives that are underway with the goal of creating a European Qualifications Framework. He stressed the importance of agreeing conceptual elements and defining a typology for skills/competence/knowledge. The process of co-operation between the vocational education and training and higher education sectors needed to be speeded up so that each can influence the other in a two-way process. He acknowledged the strong message that stakeholders needed to play a more significant role in developments, especially in vocational education and training where there are numerous stakeholders with specific responsibilities.

He called for a more active engagement of the Member States with the instruments/tools set up to support the attainment of the Lisbon goals. In particular, Member States must promote Europass and increase their involvement with ReferNet, which is gradually becoming the European “fabric of learning”. He offered the services of CEDEFOP to continue supporting European developments and stated that the European Training Village (<http://www.trainingvillage.gr/>) and the virtual communities (<http://cedefop.communityzero.com/>) offer a platform for

enhanced communication and co-operation, also between the vocational education and training and higher education sectors.

Sjur Bergan (Council of Europe) commended the conference organisers for bringing together various strands of education and training, normally separated by national orientation and systems. He noted that the initiatives spearheaded at European level were fragmented and that there needed to be more co-ordination of developments at this level. He felt that continual dialogue was needed to accommodate positive diversity and eliminate negative diversity.

He stressed the importance of the European Qualifications Framework for transparency and mobility. In tandem, policies that restrict mobility would still have to be tackled. Education and training policy needed to be related to other policies, for example immigration and labour laws. He warned against surrounding the EQF with bureaucracy, which would impede progress.

Peter Thiele (Ministry for Education and Research, Germany) recommended enhanced co-operation between the Bologna and Copenhagen processes, which should take the form of structured dialogue. He suggested that the Bologna and Copenhagen groups should hold joint meetings, exchange information and good practice and where possible engage in joint actions.

He stated that just as there was not a one-to-one match between the two processes neither was there between the higher education and vocational education and training sectors. Higher education is relatively homogenous and universities have engaged in international co-operation for hundreds of years. Vocational education and training is characterised by its diversity. There is far less mobility in the vocational education and training sector than in the sector. On the international scene vocational education and training has to make up for lost time. He suggested that there should be a more coherent approach to European policy making for higher education and vocational education and training.

He also queried whether the developments were going too fast for stakeholders, suggesting that to go “over their heads” would have negative results. He reminded the audience that other related initiatives needed to be consolidated before moving forwards with the plans for the EQF: for example, Europass had yet to be implemented. The EQF is only at the conceptual stage. What might it

be? What is its added value for citizens? In his opinion, on no account should an EQF be presented as a "*fait accompli*" without first consulting with stakeholders, addressing their concerns and securing agreement.

Heikki Suomalainen (UNICE) informed the audience that whilst UNICE would like to see greater coherence between the Bologna and Copenhagen processes, there is consensus that it is too early for one single process, or indeed one single Action Programme for education and training. What was needed at this point in time was synergy between the two processes.

He agreed with the goal of establishing a single process or a framework for the recognition of qualifications but warned against rushing to get there. He advised that there was a need for concrete work to be undertaken in small practical steps.

He pointed out that there was a serious absence of enterprises in discussions, working groups and activities and he warned that without the forging of stronger links with the world of work these developments would not succeed. He reminded the audience that industry was moving ahead in this area to meet urgent needs. He informed the audience that the annual report produced in the context of the Social Partners' Framework on Competences and Qualifications has been available since 5 March 2004. It reports on the vast range of activities underway at the sector level.

Petri Lempinen (Finnish Confederation of Salaried Employees) stated that unions have a keen interest in lifelong learning. He felt that the EQF developments had to be considered in relation to other priorities. He queried how the EU could become the world's leading knowledge-based economy by 2010 unless measures were taken to reduce the numbers of early school leavers and workers without qualifications. In this regard unions prioritised the need for instruments at the national level to validate non-formal and informal learning and provide access to education and training for adults for personal and professional development

He agreed with his Finnish colleague that it was too soon for a single process or a single programme for higher education and vocational education and training as there was still so much work to be done in every Member State to enhance the quality and relevance of initial and continuing vocational training. He feared that

higher education would “trample on” vocational education and training should any merging of processes and programmes take place. He felt that much had been spoken of the successes of the Bologna process but felt it important to know of and learn from the failures.

He still needed to be convinced of the usefulness of the proposed EQF for workers. He warned that the response would be negative unless they and employers were consulted and catered for in the developments. He advised that a balance needed to be met between a framework that was either too general or too detailed

Torben Kornbech Rasmussen (Ministry of Education, Denmark) stressed the importance of the political will and support for the initiatives under discussion. He felt that the roles of the NGOs in the Bologna process and the Social Partners in the Copenhagen process added vigour and potency to both processes. He considered that the biennial Ministerial Conferences in place for the Bologna process provided an excellent means of “keeping the process on track” and the discipline of producing national reports for these events assisted national governments to evaluate and build on progress. He applauded the role of the Bologna follow-up group, the national secretariat and the active engagement of students and other stakeholders and asked whether the Copenhagen process could benefit from taking a similar approach. He considered that both processes could profit from structured co-operation.

He stressed that the agreement reached on the three-cycle reference levels for higher education was an extremely important milestone for the Bologna process. Only with common reference levels could the Copenhagen process make further progress especially in relation to transparency.

He acknowledged that due to the enormous degree of diversity in vocational education and training this would not be an easy task. He suggested that ENIC/NARIC and the NRP Network could be joined up as a first step towards synergy. He considered that there should be more opportunities for teachers and trainers to participate in cross-border exchanges, as this would pave the way for increased transparency.

George Asseraf (Ministry of Education France) stressed that the employability of European citizens must be at the heart of developments. He stated that vocational education and training is managed nationally to be responsive to local employment needs and qualifications are referenced to these needs. He posed the question as to whether vocational education and training qualifications could meet European needs and whether they have currency at European level.

In response to his own question he described an innovative approach adopted in the European "*Professionalisation Durable*" project, launched by France with eight other countries. The aim of this project is to be responsive to the international skills needs of industries by adopting an international methodology for programme development. Programmes developed in the context of this project are credit and competence based (level of mastery of the trade). Descriptive certificate supplements document the holder's competences. This helps to improve the profile and visibility of qualifications and helps to build mutual trust. He suggested that the project could be compared in some ways with the Tuning project in the universities.

Lesley Wilson (European University Association) suggested that organisations "sandwiched" between policymakers and practitioners in the process layer have an important role to play in European developments, for example the European qualifications framework, to bring the policy down to the every-day-life of the institution. The European University Association and other networks/associations have been involved with the Bologna process from the outset.

Wilson noted the shift in priorities in the higher education sector, that the lifelong learning debate was having a broad influence and that higher education was becoming more learner-centred and outcomes-based. She stressed that as change affects the everyday life of teachers and students vocational education and training and higher education as it is they who have to take on board the results of the European level developments they have the right to be fully engaged in the processes. She felt that change is more sustainable when practitioners are involved.

Wilson also considered that the NGOs and networks operating at European level could play an important brokerage role between the Bologna and Copenhagen

processes and the two sectors. She queried whether such bodies operated within the Copenhagen process and on what basis partnerships could be forged.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Nikolaus van der Pas, Director General for Education and Culture, European Commission

In his closing remarks at the end of the conference, Nikolaus van der Pas said that there was a clear message from the conference that we must succeed in achieving the Lisbon goal of making Europe a world-class reference for education and training by 2010. To do this, we must make sense of diversity, seeing it not as a weakness, but as a strength. We must also accept each other's systems, finding the bridges between them rather than maintaining barriers. He said he was very pleased to hear the positive messages from the workshops, and that he was taking a number of important conclusions away from the conference.

- 1. There is an urgent need for more co-operation and communication between the main actors in vocational education and training and higher education, in the context of Education and Training 2010.*

Successful initiatives should be brought together from the Copenhagen and Bologna processes in order to promote mutual learning and greater compatibility. Networks can be further developed, and further steps can be taken to bring existing groups together to make more concrete links between higher education and vocational education and training.

The issue of stakeholder involvement in the Copenhagen process needs to be addressed. A better link must be established between policy and practitioners – this is important for the credibility of the process and for effective implementation at the national level.

There is an important role for Member States, who must take responsibility for implementation: some good initiatives have not yet been implemented at national level.

2. There is a need for a common platform for exchange and mutual learning about quality assurance in higher education and vocational education and training.

We are not aiming for a single European system for quality assurance in higher education and vocational education and training, but for the development of common methodologies and criteria. The creation of trust provides a sound basis for development in this area. Practical proposals would be

- to establish regular co-operation between networks of agencies for quality assurance in higher education and vocational education and training at European level. Such co operation could focus on the development of common methodologies and criteria;
- to organise peer review in which both sectors are represented.

3. The ultimate aim should be to have a single system of credit transfer and accumulation for lifelong learning.

This means that from the outset the mechanics of credit transfer (based on notional workload and the use of credit) need to be compatible across both higher education and vocational education and training. At the same time, the specific needs of each, for example in relation to reference levels and stakeholders, need to be addressed.

An important starting point would be to develop common principles for credit transfer, which are applicable to both higher education and vocational education and training. These principles are crucial in relation to ensuring compatibility between the systems, and in securing stakeholder acceptance.

4. It is crucial to aim for a single qualifications framework for lifelong learning at European level.

This is essential for the development of the European labour market. A comprehensive framework is of course more difficult to implement, but makes more sense in the long run from the learner's point of view.

In many countries stakeholders are calling for such a European framework of qualifications in order to mobilise and guide reform and the development of new national frameworks, while not imposing responsibilities on Member States. The development of a European framework of qualifications should draw on the experiences of those countries that already have national frameworks. In this way, developments at national and at European level can interact with each other.

The European framework of qualifications should at least provide the skeleton on which national frameworks can build. This means that we need agreement on reference levels as a first step. Agreement by the end of 2004 on common reference levels for vocational education and training, based on learning outcomes, is essential.

A specific working group, representing both higher education and vocational education and training within the Education and Training 2010 work programme, should be given the responsibility to develop a blueprint for the European qualifications framework as soon as possible.

5. We need to focus more on the vocational aspects of higher education.

Since vocational education and training already plays an important role in the tertiary sector, the higher education/vocational education and training distinction is therefore not always valid, for example in relation to the development of qualifications and competences at sectoral level. A new focus on the vocational aspects of higher education is essential in order to make higher education more relevant to the European labour market.

This means that at higher education level a shift in perspective from providers to learning outcomes and competences is essential. The Tuning project has moved in this direction, as have a number of initiatives in vocational education and training: these experiences have to be brought together.

It is important to ensure the participation of social partners in the definition of learning outcomes at higher education level: traditionally these are determined by academics from an institutional perspective.

In summary, Nikolaus Van der Pas said he was confident that the time was right for Europe to start taking the next important steps forward, and that this conference had been important in agreeing a general direction for future development.

6. CONFERENCE RAPPORTEURS' CONCLUSIONS

The conference rapporteurs, Cynthia Deane and Elizabeth Watters, offer the following brief observations in response to the presentations and discussions at the conference.

THE WAY FORWARD IS THROUGH JOINT ACTIONS

Contributors and participants generally agreed that this was a very worthwhile conference. It achieved its aims: people had an opportunity to exchange information and to have their views and concerns heard. There was lively debate about possible ways of making further progress on the conference themes of transparency, credit transfer, quality and qualifications frameworks in the future. In particular there was a very strong consensus that the way forward was through joint action, at European and member state levels, across all of lifelong learning, including higher education and vocational education and training, focused on developing common approaches to transparency and recognition of qualifications, credit transfer and a European framework of qualifications. Some questions were raised about the feasibility of common approaches in the area of quality.

MAKE SENSE OF DIVERSITY

A recurring theme throughout the conference was that of diversity. The goal for the future, it was repeatedly stated, was to make sense of diversity, regarding it as a strength and not a weakness in European terms. Positive diversity should be fostered and supported, while the negative aspects of fragmentation should be eliminated. It was also clear that while there are substantial differences between higher education and vocational education and training, there is much to be gained from dialogue between the sectors.

BUILD BRIDGES

A common metaphor used by speakers throughout the day was the building of bridges, not only between vocational education and training and higher education pathways, but also between policy and practice, between different groups of stakeholders and between developments at the national and the European level.

WORK WITH STAKEHOLDERS TO PREPARE FOR THE CHANGES AHEAD

Many contributors spoke of the importance of building readiness among stakeholders, to prepare them for the changes ahead. Particular attention needs to be paid to the cultural and political aspects of change, and to the process of communicating effectively with stakeholders at all levels.

The conference laid the foundations for new forms of partnership between the representatives of vocational education and training and higher education in Europe at policy, process and practice levels. Building on these foundations is the way forward.