



# The Bologna Qualifications Framework



introducing

National Framework of Qualifications  
Creatoibre Náisiúnta na gCáilíochtaí



# introduction



The Bologna Process was initiated in 1999. It now involves 45 countries. In 2003, Ministers with responsibility for higher education gathered in Berlin to review progress in the Bologna Process, and called on each participating country to develop a national framework of qualifications, as well as for the elaboration of an overarching Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. For the purposes of brevity, this Framework will be referred to as the *Bologna Framework*. Subsequently in Bergen in 2005 Ministers adopted the Bologna Framework. This leaflet aims to introduce readers to the principal elements of the Bologna Framework.

## RATIONALE AND PURPOSE OF THE BOLOGNA FRAMEWORK

There are a number of countries with national frameworks of qualifications already in place or being put in place, each reflecting national structures and policy priorities. Some of these relate to all education and training while others just to higher education. All countries in the Bologna process plan to have national frameworks in place by 2010.

The rationale for the Bologna Framework is to provide a mechanism to relate national frameworks to each other so as to enable:

- (a) International transparency – this is at the heart of the Bologna process and while devices, such as the Diploma Supplement, have a role to play in this objective, it is difficult to ensure that qualifications can be easily read and compared across borders without a simplifying architecture for mutual understanding.
- (b) International recognition of qualifications – this will be assisted through a framework which provides a common understanding of the outcomes represented by qualifications for the purposes of employment and access to continuing education.
- (c) International mobility of learners and graduates – this depends on the recognition of their prior learning and qualifications gained. Learners can ultimately have greater confidence that the outcomes of study abroad will contribute to a qualification sought in their home country. A framework will also be of particular help in supporting the development and recognition of joint degrees from more than one country.

## THE BOLOGNA FRAMEWORK IN DETAIL

The first, second and third cycles established in the Bologna Process are the key elements of the overarching framework. These cycles can be best understood by reference to internationally acceptable descriptors which have been developed jointly by stakeholders across Europe – the so-called “Dublin descriptors” (see Appendix). These were developed by a group of European higher education specialists, and cover all three cycles, in addition to a short-cycle qualification (within or linked to the first cycle). They are of necessity quite general in nature. Not only must they accommodate a wide range of disciplines and profiles but they must also accommodate, as far as possible, the national variations in how qualifications have been developed and specified. Qualification descriptors are usually designed to be read as general statements of the typical achievement of learners who have been awarded a qualification on successful completion of a cycle.

## BUILDING TRUST

The success and acceptance of the Bologna Framework depends on trust and confidence amongst all stakeholders. This is to be achieved through a 'self-certification' process in each participating country seeking to link its national framework to the Bologna Framework.

This 'self-certification' process requires more than a mere expression of qualifications by the competent national body. National frameworks and their associated quality assurance arrangements must satisfy a series of criteria and procedures, including the designation of competent bodies responsible for the maintenance of the Framework by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education, a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the Bologna Framework, the existence of national quality assurance systems for higher education consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent communiqué agreed by Ministers in the Bologna Process. Furthermore, the national framework, and any alignment with the Bologna Framework, is to be referenced in all Diploma Supplements.

## IRELAND AND THE BOLOGNA FRAMEWORK

Following the Bergen Ministerial meeting, Ireland responded to an invitation to undertake a pilot project of the self-certification of the compatibility of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Bologna Framework.

This is a joint endeavour by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and Irish awarding bodies – the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Irish Universities Association and the Dublin Institute of Technology. Representatives from these organisations have established a steering group and have co-opted two international experts to join the group – Robert Wagenaar (University of Groningen and joint co-ordinator of the Tuning project) and Sjur Bergan (Head of the Department of Higher Education and History Teaching, Council of Europe). The group published a draft report in June 2006 and is consulting on this in summer 2006. The work is expected to be completed by October 2006.

## EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

Parallel to these developments, there is a second overarching European Framework for Qualifications under development at this time – the European Qualifications Framework. The European Commission published a consultative document on this Framework in July 2005 and the Commission has been consulting on this proposal since that time. The Commission plans to publish a further proposal in Autumn 2006. The aim is that the European Qualifications Framework which will contain 8 levels, will relate to all education and training awards in Europe, including those aligned with the Bologna Framework, and that its framework will be fully compatible with its Bologna counterpart.

Diagrammatically, the relationship between the Irish Framework and the proposed European models may be tentatively illustrated as follows:

Draft EQF Levels	Bologna Framework	Irish Framework Levels	Irish Major Award-Types
1		1	Level 1 Certificate
		2	Level 2 Certificate
2		3	Level 3 Certificate, Junior Certificate
3		4	Level 4 Certificate, Leaving Certificate
4		5	Level 5 Certificate, Leaving Certificate
5	Short Cycle within First Cycle	6	Advanced Certificate*, Higher Certificate
6	First Cycle	7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree
		8	Honours Bachelor Degree, Higher Diploma
7	Second Cycle	9	Masters Degree, Post-Graduate Diploma
8	Third Cycle	10	Doctoral Degree, Higher Doctorate

*\*The Advanced Certificate is a further education and training award at level 6 and is not to be aligned with the Bologna Framework. The Higher Certificate is a higher education and training award at that level.*

Whilst the Commission is scheduled to publish a further proposal in the latter part of 2006, it is unlikely to alter the general shape of the above diagram.

## CREDIT

Credits have also been assigned to each higher education major award-type from levels 6-9 in the Irish Framework in line with existing ECTS conventions and current practice in the Irish higher education system as follows:

Level 6 Higher Certificate	=	120 credits
Level 7 Ordinary Bachelor Degree	=	180 credits
Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree	=	180-240 credits
Level 8 Higher Diploma	=	60 credits
Level 9 Masters Degree (Taught)	=	60-120 credits
Level 9 Postgraduate Diploma	=	60 credits

## CONCLUSION

The strength of European higher education is the cultural richness and diversity, as represented by the 25 EU members or the 45 participating countries in the Bologna Process. This is an advantage for European students and an attraction for students from outside Europe. However, removing the barriers to mobility and the creation of a common language for qualifications is central to making the most of this.

Ireland has made an important contribution to date in developing the Bologna process and will continue to have a role in setting and assuring the high standards which are critical to building trust between systems in Europe.



# APPENDIX Dublin Descriptors

SHORT CYCLE QUALIFICATION (within or linked to the first cycle)	FIRST CYCLE	SECOND CYCLE	THIRD CYCLE
<p><i>Qualifications that signify completion of the higher education short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) are awarded to students who:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks; such knowledge provides an underpinning for a field of work or vocation, personal development, and further studies to complete the first cycle;</li> <li>■ can apply their knowledge and understanding in occupational contexts;</li> <li>■ have the ability to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems;</li> <li>■ can communicate about their understanding, skills and activities, with peers, supervisors and clients;</li> <li>■ have the learning skills to undertake further studies with some autonomy.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Qualifications that signify completion of the first cycle are awarded to students who:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study;</li> <li>■ can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study;</li> <li>■ have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues;</li> <li>■ can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences;</li> <li>■ have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Qualifications that signify completion of the second cycle are awarded to students who:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with the first cycle, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research context;</li> <li>■ can apply their knowledge and understanding, and problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study;</li> <li>■ have the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements;</li> <li>■ can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously;</li> <li>■ have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Qualifications that signify completion of the third cycle are awarded to students who:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field;</li> <li>■ have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity;</li> <li>■ have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication;</li> <li>■ are capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas;</li> <li>■ can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise;</li> <li>■ can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge based society.</li> </ul>

