

Bologna Process

The Bologna Process is a reform process initiated in 1999 when Higher Education ministers of 29 countries gathered in Bologna and signed the Bologna declaration, with the overarching aim of creating a **European Higher Education Area (EHEA)** based on international cooperation and academic exchange. This EHEA would be attractive to and promote mobility of staff and students on a European and international scale.

Objectives (1999 - 2010)

The original objectives set out in the Bologna declaration were to:

- promote a system of credits, such as ECTS;
- adopt a system of easily comparable and compatible degrees, based initially on a three cycle framework: bachelor, master, doctorate;
- promote mobility of students and staff;
- promote European co-operation in Quality Assurance;
- promote a European Higher Education Area.

These would be aided by the implementation of a number of tools – some of which were already in use in some institutions, such as learning outcomes and ECTS. Since the declaration was first signed in 1999, the number of signatories has increased to 47, 27 of which are EU member states. The HE ministers of signatory countries meet every two years at ministerial conferences, organised by the Bologna Follow-up Group, to take stock of progress, revise priorities and action lines. The original declaration was focused towards a completion date of 2010, and many Bologna related reforms have already been implemented in signatory countries.

Post 2010

At the 2009 ministerial meeting attention was firmly focused on taking stock of progress to date and setting objectives for the next decade up to 2020. Because not all of the original objectives have been fully achieved, the original objectives and policies developed since 1999 are still valid. A number of priorities have been defined for the coming decade:

- social dimension: equitable access and completion;
- lifelong learning;
- employability;
- student-centred learning and the teaching mission of higher education;
- education, research and innovation;
- international openness;
- mobility;
- data collection;
- multidimensional transparency tools;
- funding.

Objectives (2010 - 2012)

The Bologna Follow-up Group prepared a work plan to address the priorities from 2010 to 2012, and seven working groups were established to focus on: Social Dimension; Qualifications Frameworks; International Openness; Mobility; Recognition; Reporting on the Implementation of the Bologna Process; and Transparency Mechanisms.

The Bologna Process in Ireland

At an October 2010 conference focusing on the impact of the Bologna Process to date in Ireland and the challenges/priorities for Irish Higher Education for the coming years it was noted that while many reforms are under way, specifically implementation of the 'tools' of the Bologna Process, many have not yet been fully implemented:

- widespread and informed use of ECTS;
- introduction of programme level and module level learning outcomes;
- automatic issue of the Diploma Supplement for graduates;
- commitments to the recognition of prior learning (RPL);
- commitments to lifelong learning.

However, two Bologna Process objectives have been fully implemented and in fact Ireland are among the early leaders in terms of the establishment of a National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and widespread Quality Assurance systems.

Future Practices in Ireland

In order to focus on the priorities of the Bologna Process, we must ensure the *tools* to aid implementation are in place. Focus can then shift to the wider issues of mobility, employability, social inclusion etc.

Areas requiring attention to ensure Ireland's HE system is more fully Bologna compliant include, for example:

- learning outcomes written for all programmes and modules, and fully aligned to the National Framework of Qualifications;
- an ECTS system based on student workload and learning outcomes;
- issue of the Diploma Supplement to all graduates, automatically and free of charge;

→ joint degree programmes.

Workplan (2012 - 2015)

A detailed implementation report was compiled for the 2012 communique. At that communique, it was concluded that “the vision of an integrated EHEA is within reach”, but effort was needed to consolidate and build on the progress to date. In particular, it was agreed that there needs to be more coherence between policies, especially concerning ECTS, the Diploma Supplement, qualifications frameworks and the definition and evaluation of learning outcomes.

A workplan is now in place for the 3-year period 2012 – 2015. The main objective for this period is to increase the transparency, visibility and effectiveness of the process, as well as ensure coherence between the priority areas outlined in Bucharest communiqué (2012).

Those priority areas are:

- widening access;
- quality assurance;
- enhancing employability;
- strengthening mobility for better learning.

The national level priorities identified include:

- strengthening policies of widening overall access and raising completion rates, including targeting of underrepresented groups;
- establishing conditions that foster student-centred learning, innovative teaching methods and a supporting learning environment;
- enhancing employability, lifelong learning, problem-solving, and entrepreneurial skills through improved cooperation with employers, and ensuring that qualification frameworks, ECTS and Diploma Supplement implementation are based on learning outcomes;
- working towards full portability of national grants and loans across EHEA;
- promoting the use of the European Areas of Recognition (EAR) manual to advance recognition practices;
- encourage knowledge-based alliances in the EHEA focusing on research and technology.

Glossary

Bologna Follow-up Group: The Bologna Follow-up group is composed of representatives from each of the Bologna signatory countries, the European Commission, and eight consultative members including representatives from European quality, student, university, and higher education associations. The group meets every 6 months to oversee progress on work programmes designed to meet the Bologna action lines.

Diploma Supplement: A document that accompanies students’ transcripts outlining the nature, level, context,

content and status of the studies completed. It should be free of charge and issued automatically to students graduating with a higher education award.

ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System): ECTS prior to Bologna were used solely as a credit transfer system as part of the ERASMUS programme. Due to their widespread implementation as part of the ERASMUS programme, ECTS were adopted as the Bologna credit system, for both transfer *and* accumulation. Those signatory countries whose credit system differs to ECTS, have agreed to ensure compatibility between their credit systems and ECTS.

National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ): A qualifications framework that was set up to aid the development, recognition and awarding of qualifications. The NFQ is a single framework that encompasses all awards made in the State by bodies such as the Department of Education and Science, FETAC, HETAC, DIT and the universities.

The Framework comprises ten levels, with each level based on specified standards of knowledge, skill and competence. These standards define the outcomes to be achieved by learners seeking to gain awards at each level, and are expressed in terms of learning outcomes.

Additional resources and support are available from CELT.