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Ireland and the Bologna Process: recognition issues for higher education institutions

Paper delivered at the UK Bologna Conference, Recognition and the Bologna Process through Engagement with Employers, Croydon, 18/19 November, 2010

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Introduction

This paper looks at the implementation of the Bologna Process in Ireland in the period 1999 to 2010 and the challenges faced by Ireland in the continued implementation in the next decade. The particular focus of this paper is recognition issues for higher education institutions (HEIs) and thus not all aspects of the Bologna Process will be addressed. Those seeking a more general description of Ireland and the Bologna Process should see the paper Taking Stock; ten years of the Bologna Process in Ireland by Edwin Mernagh (2010) available on the Higher Education Authority website at www.eurireland.ie

Ireland was one of the 29 signatories to the Bologna Declaration in June 1999. Thus, we were part of the Bologna Process from its inception, though we were not a signatory of the Sorbonne Declaration in 1998 which was restricted to four large countries, France, Germany, Italy and the UK

The programme of actions proposed by the Bologna Process coincided with actions already underway in Ireland. For example, the Irish parliament enacted the Qualifications (Education and Training Act), 1999 which proposed actions regarding the development of a National Framework of Qualifications and arrangements for quality assurance which were to find echoes in the initiatives of the Bologna Process.

Key Bologna Initiatives

One of the earliest and most significant decisions of the ministers of education meeting in the context of the Bologna Process was that all countries should have a system of Bachelor and Masters Degrees. This was a major change for countries such as Germany, Finland and Italy that did not have Bachelor degrees but it caused no problem for Ireland which had historically operated a three-cycle system of awards at Bachelor, Masters and Doctoral level.

A second proposal in the Bologna Process was the adoption of a system of credits such as the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Again, this was not a problem for Ireland as all major public sector higher education institutions had agreed to adopt ECTS in the 1990s and all have implemented ECTS in the last decade.

The Bologna Process has sought to enhance the mobility of the European workforce through wider recognition of awards throughout countries in the Bologna Process. In

1997, two years before the signing of the Bologna Declaration, the Lisbon Recognition Convention was enacted but it had to be adopted countries. In Ireland's case, the convention was adopted by the government in 2004, paving the way for nationals of more European countries to have their qualifications recognised in Ireland. As part of the recognition process, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland was designated as the appropriate authority for the recognition of qualifications. NQAI has established Qualifications Recognition-Ireland with its own website and a staff of three. In 2009, the website was attracting 3,500 unique visitors per month and dealing with approx 140 formal applications per month. Each of these applications must be assessed and the outcome, if positive, is a formal letter giving a statement of comparability of the applicant's foreign qualification with a NFQ qualification and its level.

National Framework of Qualifications

One of the main tasks allocated to the NQAI in 2001 was the development and maintenance of a national framework of qualifications. This proved to be timely as the Bologna Process decided in 2003 that each country in the process should establish a national framework. NQAI was well advanced in the process of framework development when the ministers of education made that decision and thus were able to unveil a completed framework in October 2003. The speed of delivery of the framework, a matter of months after the decision by ministers of the need for such a framework, may have given hidden the extent to which extensive consultation had taken place between NQAI and employers, trade unions, educational institutions of all levels and student representatives. This consultation had taken place over a two-year period, 2001-03, and helped to ensure the widespread acceptance of the NFQ from its launch

The major changes introduced by the NFQ were

- new award titles
- a requirement that all awards should be based on learning outcomes and
- specific provision be made for access routes into and progression opportunities beyond each higher education programme

The new award titles affected the Certificate programmes which were changed to Higher Certificate awards and the Diploma awards which became Ordinary Bachelor Degrees (as opposed to Honours Bachelor Degrees). Thus the awards in higher education in ascending order were Higher Certificate, Ordinary Bachelor Degree, Honours Bachelor Degree, Masters Degree and Doctorate. In addition, there are minor, special purpose and supplementary awards. This new regime meant very little change for university awards as almost all programmes led to the award of Honours Bachelor Degrees or higher, apart from a small number of degree programmes previously titled Bachelor Degree (General). There was much more impact on Institutes of Technology which made a large number of awards at Certificate and Diploma level and had to adjust to new titles. In practice, it has not proved to be difficult for the HEIs to make the necessary adjustment but there have been some implications for holders of previous awards, for employers and for the international perspective on Ireland's awards. These three sets of issues are dealt with below.

When the NFQ was launched in October, 2003 the new award titles attracted the attention of holders of previous awards. In particular, some holders of Diploma awards felt disadvantaged that those who completed programmes similar to their own now received a degree, albeit an Ordinary Bachelor Degree. So there was a spate of letters to colleges from holders of Diplomas asking if they could swap their parchment for one of the newly titled awards. The response of colleges was that there was no provision for re-issuing awards but they sought to re-assure Diploma holders that their awards would sit alongside Ordinary Bachelor Degrees in the NFQ. There was a concerted effort of the part of awarding bodies to ensure that all legacy awards were quickly included in the NFQ and that seemed to satisfy Diploma holders.

The NQAI and HEIs mounted a publicity campaign to ensure that employers became familiar with the new award titles and understood them. Workshops were held on a regional basis and a dedicated website was provided by NQAI in an attempt to reach as many employers as possible. Particular attention was paid to public sector recruitment agencies to ensure that the NFQ was used in making appointments.
It is the practice in Dublin Institute of Technology and all Institutes of Technology to include an employer representative on each programme validation panel and each school review board so this would have helped to ensure recognition by employers of the new award titles. At this juncture, seven years after the launch of the NFQ, there seems to be widespread acceptance of the new award titles.

The third aspect of recognition of the new award titles is the confusion caused internationally by the fact that the Irish NFQ involves two awards at Bachelor Degree level, the Honours Bachelor Degree and the Ordinary Bachelor Degree. One can imagine that this is particularly confusing in those continental countries that until recently had no bachelor degrees and are struggling to gain acceptance for their newly introduced bachelor degrees. In 2006, Ireland became the first country to seek to establish the compatibility of its NFQ with the Bologna Framework, and a panel charged with responsibility was established, which included two Continental European experts. The issue of the two sets of bachelor degrees was virtually the only issue that needed to be resolved but eventually the Continental experts were satisfied that the NFQ was fully compatible with the Bologna framework. Subsequently the compatibility of the NFQ with the EQF was also established.

The fourth and final aspect of recognition of the NFQ was its acceptance by learners who, according to NQAI, are at the heart of the NFQ. Considerable effort has been expended to ensure that programmes of study indicate the NFQ level whenever possible. Ireland operates a highly centralised system of application for entry to higher education in which a Central Application Office (CAO) handles all applications on behalf of HEIs, both public and private The NQAI sent postcards outlining the NFQ to all applicants to the CAO. It has been helpful that the CAO operates two lists of programmes, one which includes all Level 8 programmes (Honours Bachelor Degrees) and one which includes Level 7 programmes (Ordinary Bachelor Degrees). This helps to establish in learners' minds the differences between the programme levels. It has also helped that the there is a requirement for all programmes to develop and publicise progression opportunities and in the case of most Level 7 programmes the opportunities involve progression to a Level 8 programme.. Finally, the funding arrangements for students include "free fees" for undergraduate study and the rules allow a student who benefits from free fees for a

three-year Ordinary Bachelor Degree may continue to benefit from free fees if he/she progresses to an Honours Bachelor Degree. At this stage it may be concluded there is a clear recognition by students of the programme types introduced during the first ten years of the Bologna Process.

Learning Outcomes

The Bologna Process requires that all programmes are written in terms of learning outcomes. This was reflected in the NFQ launched in Ireland in 2003 so at this stage there has been seven years experience of its implementation. Two situations may be distinguished: the Dublin Institute of Technology and all HEIs that made awards under the aegis of HETAC were familiar with the need to prepare detailed programme documents for validation before programmes commenced. Whilst the new requirement to use Learning Outcomes (rather than Aims and Objectives) meant an important shift from an input approach to an output approach, this was taken on board readily and all programmes were re-designed using a Learning Outcomes approach within a couple of years.
The challenge to switch to a Learning Outcomes approach was much greater for the universities, mainly because they were not as accustomed to writing programme documents as institutes of technology were (universities based their quality assurance on the assessment of schools/departments rather than the assessment of programmes). To assist the move towards a Learning Outcomes approach, a Framework Implementation Network (FIN) was jointly established in 2007 by the universities and NQAI. At the end of 2009, FIN produced guidelines on key issues to NFQ implementation and designing programmes based on learning outcomes, including guidelines to designing appropriate assessments. When this stage of the work finished, a new phase was commenced on lifelong learning.

Student Mobility

The Bologna Process has sought to encourage greater mobility of students within the EHEA and this requires recognition by HEIs of study periods of abroad by their students and secondly, of the provision of statements of credits accumulated by students visiting from partner HEIs. Neither of these requirements has proved difficult for Irish HEIs. In a situation where almost all HEIs in Bologna countries are now using ECTS to record and transfer credits, Irish students going abroad can readily apply the credits they gain to their study programme in Ireland. And likewise, foreign students who study in Ireland can expect to receive an ECTS transcript of their credits earned which can be used in their home institution. This is not to say there are no problems involved; sometimes HEIs are slow to issue the relevant transcripts and there are certainly problems of translation of grades achieved because of differing approaches to marks allocated.

Ireland (and the UK) has suffered a continuing imbalance in regard to student mobility with more than twice as many coming to Ireland as are going out [because we teach through English]. There was an effort some years ago to get EU funding to compensate for the imbalance but to date it has not been successful.

Some Continental countries complain that it is now difficult to find space for a semester/year abroad in bachelor degree programmes since their move to 3-year

programmes but that has not been an issue for Ireland which traditionally had a mixture of 3-year and 4-year bachelor degrees.

The new target of 20% of all students to have studied outside their home country will provide a major challenge for Irish HEIs

Diploma Supplement

At the Bologna meeting of the ministers of education in Berlin in 2003 there was agreement on a Diploma Supplement which would serve as a standard transcript for graduates of all Bologna country universities. As well as agreeing the format of the Diploma Supplement, it was agreed that it would be issued to all graduates "automatically and free of charge". Irish HEIs have struggled to implement this aspect of the Bologna Process. Whilst some HEIs have developed mechanisms to issue DS automatically and free of charge, some others issue the DS only when requested. To some extent the failure to deliver on this promise is due to a lack of interest among graduates and their employers. If there was widespread demand for the DS, all Irish HEIs would have concentrated resources on ensuring that DS is issued with each parchment. As it is, HEIs which operate a policy of issuing DS when requested find that less than 5% of all graduates do so.

Progress Reports: Stocktaking and EUA Trends

Progress on the implementation of Bologna Process objectives is measured every two years and reported upon in a series of stocktaking reports to ministerial conferences. The reports of 2007 and 2009 showed Ireland as a leading performer
In 2007, stocktaking involved measuring progress on the implementation of the Degree System, Quality Assurance, Recognition (Diploma Supplement, Lisbon and ECTS), Lifelong Learning and Joint Degrees. Ireland was deemed fully compliant in all aspects apart from Access to the degree system. If this were the Eurovision Song competition, Ireland would have won first prize, followed by Denmark and Scotland. England/Wales/NI was deemed deficient in regard to aspects of Quality Assurance, Diploma Supplement and ECTS.

In 2009, Scotland came out in top place followed by Ireland with England/Wales/NI continuing to show the same deficiencies as in 2007.Overall, the main deficiencies were in respect of NQF (most countries having failed to deliver) and RPL.

The European Universities Association (EUA) has issued a series of reports on the implementation of the Bologna reforms, starting in 1999. Generally, these reports coincided with the two-yearly cycle of ministerial meetings in the Bologna Process but Trends 2010 was different in that it sought to analyse and summarise the progress made over the ten years of the Bologna reforms. The report is based on questionnaires to HEIs and national rectors' conferences. The 2010 report found HEIs to be positive about the Bologna reforms which they viewed as beneficial to students and institutions. A large majority (95%) have implemented the Bologna degree structure with some progress in shifting to learning outcomes and ECTS. The percentage of institutions issuing the Diploma Supplement to all students was 66% but there was considerable variety in structure and layout (which raises questions as to whether these qualify as Diploma Supplements).

Ireland and the UK are well ahead of their continental counterparts in regard to both RPL and Lifelong Learning:
In regard to RPL, 85% of Irish, 75% of UK (E/W/NI) and 92% of Scottish institutions allow applicants to gain access to higher education on the basis of RPL, as against 30% throughout the Bologna area
Similarly, Lifelong Learning strategies have been developed in 60% of Irish, 64% of English/Welsh/NI-69% of Scottish institutions as against an EUA average of 39%.

Bologna Process 2010 - 2020

When the ministers of education met in Leuven/ Louvain-la-Neuve in April, 2009, they reviewed progress to date on the development of the European Higher Education Area but they also looked ahead to the decade from 2010 to 2020. Whilst noting that some objectives had not yet been completed, they defined a series of high level objectives for the decade ahead. These included a Social Dimension: equitable access, Lifelong learning, Employability, Student centred learning and the teaching mission of universities, Education, research and innovation, International openness, Mobility, Data collection, Multidimensional transparency tools, Funding (public funding but with more attention to diversified sources).
The new Bologna objectives are non-specific but this was the pattern of objectives set in 1999 and 2001; as the years went by, ministers made the objectives more specific.

Ireland is currently addressing some of these issues. It has established a National Access Office which sets targets for access of under-represented groups; it has recently (2010) published a policy on internationalisation. A major review of higher education is underway and its report is expected before the end of 2010; this report will address issues of mission and funding.
There are some areas where Ireland may struggle to attain Bologna objectives:
Mobility: the target for mobility is now set at 20% of all graduates to have studied part of their programme outside their home country. Ireland currently falls far short of that target and the new target is likely to prove very challenging.
Student-centred learning: whilst individual HEIs may be taking steps to ensure that teaching is student-centred there is no central co-ordination of such efforts and no published policy on it.
Lifelong learning with flexible learning paths and NFQ; Ireland has developed its NFQ but not all HEIs have developed the kind of flexible pathways and the use of RPL that is envisaged by the Bologna Process
Employability through work placements embedded in study programmes: this will be difficult during the current period of economic recession
Close co-operation between governments, employers and HEIs: to make HEIs more responsive to employer needs and employers more understanding of educational perspectives. But in Ireland there is no mechanism in place to achieve these objectives.
Higher education institutions with government agencies to improve career advice and employability guidance for students and alumni. But current reductions in funding for higher education make it more likely that careers services will be reduced rather than expanded.

Conclusion

Ireland has been to the forefront in the first decade of the Bologna Process in implementing the objectives set by ministers. However, this was partly due to the fact that many of the reforms were already underway when the Bologna Process commenced in 1999. The next decade will involve greater challenges for Ireland and they come at a time of economic difficulty.