Final Report and Recommendations

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On September 15, 2008

Foreword

The Bologna Seminar on Development of a Common Understanding of Learning Outcomes (LO) and ECTS was hosted by the Portuguese Directorate-General for Higher Education in collaboration with the University of Porto, with EURASHE-European Association of Institutions of Higher Education and with ESU-European Students' Union. It was held on the 19-20 June 2008 at the Faculty of Engineering, University of Porto, Portugal.

The main purpose of this Seminar was to make recommendations in order to improve the understanding of Learning Outcomes by all stakeholders, to explore the use of LO and ECTS for the implementation of new methods of learning and student centred learning, including new concepts for student assessment, and also to improve the understanding of the wider implications of LO in quality assurance, in recognition of qualifications, in defining flexible learning pathways, in employability and in fostering mobility.

A Forum Electronic Meeting, restricted to registered participants, took place between 2 and 13 June. Having as background a number of questions that were raised and distributed in advance (Annex 1), the main objective for this preliminary Forum Meeting was to hear participants about further possible questions to be raised and to share in advance some reflections that might improve discussions during the meeting (Forum Report in Annex 2).

The final Seminar programme (Annex 3) consisted of 3 keynote lectures, 7 oral presentations, 6 parallel discussion group sessions, 5 plenary debates and a final session for presentation, discussion and approval of conclusions.

All Seminar conferences and the plenary debates were broadcast live on streaming video through the Internet.

The Seminar was attended by 137 delegates from 31 countries (Annex 4).

The preliminary Forum meeting received 289 visits to the site. The Internet transmission, during the two days of the Seminar, was viewed by 255 visitors of 9 countries, in a total of 704 clip sessions (Annex 5). These are interesting figures, even if only thinking of promoting the use of this type of tools for future events.

It is not the purpose or intention of this short report to reflect the details of the presentations or discussions at the conference. However it is highly recommended that readers visit the conference website to refer to the Seminar programme and specifically to the presentations which are available to read or download at http://portobologna.up.pt/documents.php.

1. Framework and Organization

Introduction and Background

This Bologna Seminar was the third in a series of three official Bologna Seminars dealing with the relationship between learning outcomes, workload and ECTS. The very fact that there have been three seminars dedicated to these issues is an indication of how important they are to the Bologna Process and to the realisation of the European Higher Education Area.

The London Communiqué clearly stressed the importance of both workload and learning outcomes "efforts should concentrate in future … on proper implementation of ECTS based on learning outcomes and student workload.". A number of recent reports have provided an indication of the challenges posed by the proper implementation of ECTS and these reports have formed the backdrop to the three seminars.

Bologna With Student Eyes 2007 (BWSE) examined the extent of proper implementation of ECTS, via a survey of national students' unions. The report concluded that while ECTS had been widely adopted in law, it was not being widely implemented 'on the ground'. Twelve (out of 40) national Students' Unions reported that their national credit systems used learning outcomes 'in theory, but not in practice'. These concerns reflect those expressed in the European University Association (EUA) *Trends V* document, which suggests a lack of real reform of programmes of learning and systems of assessment, as well as a general misunderstanding about the role of learning outcomes and their use in and link to, credit systems. *Trends V* also stresses the importance of ensuring that "the fundamental elements of the system – learning outcomes and student workload – are well understood and implemented." Despite the fact that around half of Bologna countries have 'declared' figures for workload hours in legislation, BWSE argues that in only 3 cases is workload adequately measured.

It is also clear from a number of reports, including BWSE, *Trends V*, the Eurostudent survey amongst others, that there is very little consistency between, and even sometimes within, countries in terms of how a figure for workload is arrived at and how differences in academic year and vacations are treated. In Moscow, it was noted that in Russia, 'academic hours' of 45 minutes (as opposed to 'astronomical hours' of 60 minutes) are used for the calculation of workload. This or similar practices operate in a number of EHEA countries/systems.

Direct/inextricable link between NQFs/QF-EHEA and use of LOs and ECTS

Both the Edinburgh and Moscow seminars (Annexes 6 and 7) reflected the importance of the link between the development of NQFs and the implementation of ECTS using both LOs and workload. The Edinburgh Seminar reiterated the importance of both LOs and workload in the implementation of ECTS, endorsed the proposition that 'learning outcomes are the basic building block of the Bologna package of educational reforms' and stressed the importance of the link between qualifications frameworks, ECTS and ECVET. The Moscow Seminar stressed further the crucial link between learning outcomes at all levels to the descriptors of the NQF and the QF-EHEA and emphasised that the proper implementation of ECTS would require concerted action by stakeholders to bridge the gap between commitments and reality. It also stressed the importance of ECTS as a planning tool, the need for realistic workloads and credit allocation involving student input and the need for quality assurance and other

processes to verify progress in the implementation of ECTS, use of learning outcomes and implementation of NQFs

Also part of the background is the Council of Europe Higher Education Forum on Qualifications Frameworks held in Strasbourg in October 2007. The report prepared for the conference by Professor Stephen Adam, concluded that, amongst other things, there needs to be: Better understanding of the new educational Bologna infrastructure – the dynamic and interlocking fit between Quality Assurance, Qualifications Frameworks, external reference points, learning outcomes, credits, cycles, qualifications descriptors – all part of a new European educational paradigm; a common definition and understanding of credits and learning outcomes; and a better understanding of the relationship between the broad agreed features of ECTS and national/local credit systems/implementations of ECTS.

The conclusions of all of these conferences indicate that there is an increasing recognition of the indivisibility and the interdependence of the use of learning outcomes, ECTS credits and qualifications frameworks. This also reflects the report of the BFUG Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks, which proposed that credits be assigned to qualifications within national systems and that credit systems which are developed and implemented within national qualifications frameworks should be compatible with ECTS.

Presentations and discussions

Against this background, delegates in Porto heard presentations on a variety of subjects, ranging from "Everything you need to know about Learning Outcomes!", through specific case studies of the use of ECTS and learning outcomes, including at discipline, institutional and national level, to the wider implications of qualifications frameworks.

Presentations and discussions in plenary sessions took place under the following broad topics: Topic 1 – *Understanding Learning Outcomes and ECTS by all stakeholders* (Chair: Lucien Bollaert, EURASHE); Topic 2 - *Learning Outcomes, ECTS and Teaching/Learning Methods* (Chair: Maria de Lurdes Correia Fernandes, U. Porto, Portugal); and Topic 3 - *The wider implications of Learning Outcomes - in National Qualifications Frameworks, Recognition of Qualifications, Quality Assurance…* (Chair: Bruno Carapinha, ESU). The final plenary session (Chair: Sebastião Feyo de Azevedo, U. Porto, DGES, Portugal) followed on from the discussions at the six topic-based discussion groups.

Preliminary conclusions were presented at the end of the first day and these fed in both to the discussions on the second day and to the final conclusions and recommendations.

2. Conclusions

The following conclusions were drawn from the presentations, the plenary discussions and the discussions in the workshops and form the basis of the 'priorities and recommendations' which will be presented to the Bologna Follow-Up Group for its consideration. These conclusions were presented to and accepted by delegates.

1. The shift to ECTS and learning outcomes requires a great deal of work and resource. For some it will represent a paradigm shift towards a more learner-centred approach to education, for others a development of what they already do. Support and training for staff in developing, writing and assessing Learning Outcomes is essential and this needs commitment at the highest level, including from heads of institutions and from ministers. Sharing of good practice should be a priority.

2. If change is to be effective, academic staff, students and other players need to be convinced about the purpose and benefits of such change, therefore there is a need to engage with academics and students in terms which they relate to.

3. There should be input from all stakeholders, including learners and employers, in the design of programme outcomes – this should help to generate a shared understanding of the terminology describing the key concepts and to demonstrate the benefits to stakeholders as well as link programmes to the real needs and roles of graduates. It should also ensure that learning outcomes are clear to, understood by, and benefit, all stakeholders. We should remember that this is a two-way process – universities do not simply provide graduates for the labour market - their graduates also shape the labour market.

4. In the context of ECTS, learning outcomes and workload are effective tools for curriculum planning and development, and for helping students to plan their workload, and to know what is expected of them. However, workload measurement is not an exact science, nor is it a definitive measure – there is no 'average student'.

5. Workload is an important local tool for students and academics to work within common and agreed parameters and provides a 'feasibility check'. However, it is not easy, for staff nor for students, to estimate workload, particularly outwith contact hours. There is currently huge variety of practice in estimating workload hours – it would be good to share practice, although transparency should not be used as a stick to beat people with!

6. Differences between the number of learning hours, whether declared or measured, whether between individuals or systems, are not a major issue, given the other relevant and related parts of the Bologna 'architecture'.

7. Learning outcomes cannot capture all learning which occurs in HE and they must not be used in a restrictive or reductive way, but in a holistic manner. Learning outcomes should and can capture the highest level skills. It is possible for learning outcomes to capture non employment-focussed outcomes, but there will be some unintended/unplanned learning outcomes which although not assessed, can be of real value to students and in helping to shape ongoing programme development.

8. It is essential to stress the link between ECTS/workload/LOs and other parts of Bologna Architecture – e.g. the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, the

European Quality Assurance Register, national qualifications frameworks and the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area and through this, to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (QF-LLL). Bologna Action Lines are a package of reforms which complement and support each other. For example, in countries with NQFs for HE – Ireland, Scotland, Germany, EWNI - quality assurance mechanisms check for use of learning outcomes consistent with the NQF and likewise self-certification processes and ESG/ENQA reviews check their NQFs and quality assurance processes against the QF-EHEA and the European Standards and Guidelines.

9. It is important to make clear the synergy of the different Bologna Action Lines – this is not a list of separate, additional, unrelated things to do, but a coherent framework for positive change which will bring benefits to learners, institutions and society more widely.

10. Subject and discipline LO developed in international cooperation such as Tuning can be most useful in translating the generic LO on European and national/regional level into LO on the level of programmes and modules.

3.   Recommendations

3.1.   Priorities for BFUG, for national authorities and for universities for action in relation to proper use of ECTS using learning outcomes and workload

1. High-level commitment from BFUG, ministries, rectors' conferences and quality agencies to supporting the proper use of ECTS using learning outcomes and workload. This will require appropriate commitment to and investment in staff training and development, in conjunction with support and sharing of good practice within institutions and agencies.

2. The development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks in each of the Bologna countries and within institutions, the development and delivery of learning, teaching and assessment which is consistent with their NQF and the Bologna framework.

3. The need to explain and demonstrate both the benefits and the synergies of the EHEA and its components to all stakeholders. Therefore it should be most useful to make clear the underlying principles, reasons and values of the Bologna process and 'architecture' and those thereafter to all stakeholders.

4. Support for sharing of practice between countries to support the development, synergies and use of learning outcomes, qualifications frameworks and ECTS.

3.2.   Recommendations

3.2.1. It is recommended that the **BFUG** should:

1. Agree collectively and individually to ensure that appropriate support, training and development is provided for universities and their staff to allow them to implement learning outcomes in programmes of study and to support the proper use of ECTS using both learning outcomes and workload.

2. Promote and support further exchanges and cooperation to share good practice between countries, drawing on experience from countries which have operational NQFs in place, or which are putting NQFs in place.

3. Address the widespread concerns about the timescales for implementation, including allowing a period of phased implementation, allowing for example, implementation to take place during the normal cycle for curriculum review taking into consideration the national, regional and sectoral/subject diversity in Europe.

4. Clarify that the declared number of student workload hours provides local guidance for learners and academics and that ECTS credits transfer between countries on an equal basis.

3.2.2. It is recommended that **higher education institutions** and their **representative bodies** should:

1. Develop and disseminate user-friendly documentation to explain to all stakeholders the benefits of learning outcomes and credits and to clarify the concepts and links

between learning outcomes and credits and other parts of the EHEA infrastructure, in particular, NQFs and quality assurance.

2. Implement a holistic approach, developing learning outcomes as an integral part of teaching, learning and assessment methods within an aligned curriculum.

3. Link ECTS to learning outcomes through quality-assured assessment, and through institutional arrangements to link curricula and programmes of learning to the NQF.

4. Involve staff, students and, as appropriate, employers in programme design, thereby ensuring 'ownership'.

5. Start at local level, with programme design, working backwards to identify progression.

6. Offer incentives to encourage staff to engage in new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment.

7. Support and encourage staff exchanges to promote interaction between academics and employers.

8. Create a forum for discussion and the sharing of good practice.

9. Work with students' unions to implement, stimulate knowledge about and promote the benefits of LOs and ECTS.

3.2.3. It is recommended that the **relevant national authorities/ministries**:

1. Ensure that NQFs appropriate for the national context and consistent with the Qualifications Framework for the EHEA are designed and implemented in a collaborative and transparent way with all the stakeholders.

2. Provide funds or resources for staff development and training within institutions and other agencies, to ensure proper implementation of ECTS using learning outcomes and ECTS within the context of complementary EHEA developments, including NQFs and quality assurance.

3. Ensure that assessors for national quality assurance bodies are properly trained.

4. Abbreviations employed

BFUG –   Bologna Follow-up Group

BWSE –   Bologna with Students' Eyes

DGES –   Direcção Geral do Ensino Superior (Directorate-General for Higher Education)

ECTS –   European Credit, Transfer and Accumulation System

ECVET -   European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training

EHEA –   European Higher Education Area

EQF-LLL -   European Qualifications Frameworks for Lifelong Learning

ESG/ENQA – European Standards and Guidelines / European Network for Quality Assurance

ESU –   European Students' Union

EUA –   European University Association

EURASHE – European Association of Institutions of Higher Education

EWNI -   England, Wales and Northern Ireland

HE -   Higher Education

LO –   Learning Outcomes

NQF –   National Qualifications Frameworks

QF-EHEA – Qualifications Frameworks for the European Higher Education Area

5. Annexes

The following annexes are available for download in pdf format from the Seminar Website:

Annex 1 – Framework and Guidelines for Discussion

Annex 2 - Preliminary Forum Report

Annex 3 – Seminar Programme

Annex 4 – List of Participants

Annex 5 - Information on attendance of the "Streaming online" session

Annex 6 - Conclusions of the Bologna Seminar held on 21-22 February 2008 at Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, Scotland

Annex 7 - Conclusions of the Bologna Seminar held on 17-18 April 2008 at the People's Friendship University of Russia, Moscow, Russia