

The Bologna Process in higher education

Compatibility of The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area November 2008

In November 2008, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) verified that *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* is compatible with the *Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*. This verification represents an important landmark in the journey to implement the goals of the Bologna Process.

Background

The Bologna Process proposes that the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is developed as a means of promoting mutual recognition of qualifications, demonstrating transparency of systems and easing the mobility of staff and students across higher education in Europe.

One of the key features of the Bologna Process involves the development of a national qualifications framework in each country, and the development of criteria and procedures to be used by each country to verify that its national framework is compatible with an overarching *Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* (FQ-EHEA). The FQ-EHEA consists of three main cycles. Each cycle has a generic descriptor of the typical abilities and achievements associated with completion of that cycle. See www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/qf/overarching.asp.

The process of verification allows each country engaged with the Bologna Process to illustrate both the robustness of their quality assurance systems and the links between the qualifications which comprise the national framework and the three EHEA qualification cycles. The process is one of self-certification by each country.

The target is that verification of compatibility with the EHEA will be completed by all Bologna countries by 2010. *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) was the fourth national framework to be verified against the FQ-EHEA. Completion of the national self-certification will be noted in the European Diploma Supplement (in the national description of the higher education system, available at www.uknec.org.uk and at the European National Information Centres - National Academic Recognition Information Centres (ENIC-NARIC) website, www.enic-naric.net).

The FHEQ

First published in 2001, the FHEQ is a higher education qualifications framework developed and maintained by QAA. It applies to degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic awards (other than honorary degrees and higher doctorates) granted by higher education providers in the exercise of their degree awarding powers.

The FHEQ has five levels, three of which are undergraduate and two are postgraduate. These are numbered 4-8 (levels 1-3, which precede higher education, are located in *The National Qualifications Framework* and *The Qualifications and Credit Framework* (NQF/QCF). Each of the levels of the FHEQ is illustrated by, and each award determined by reference to, a qualification descriptor. The qualification descriptors reflect five distinct levels of intellectual achievements associated with the typical higher education qualifications awarded by higher education providers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI).

The second edition of the FHEQ, published in August 2008, is a product of a long-term review and feedback process spanning from March 2003 to June 2008. It incorporates feedback gained from extensive discussion and consultation with the EWNI higher education sectors and their stakeholders. The FHEQ is available on the QAA website at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ.

The verification process for the FHEQ

The self-certification of the FHEQ was taken forward by QAA at the request of the then Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) and the Welsh Assembly Government in 2007. The process was facilitated by an Advisory Group comprising representatives of the higher education sectors and four international experts and, in essence, involved a mapping and comparison of the FHEQ and its qualification descriptors against the FQ-EHEA and the qualifications descriptors of each of its cycles.

The Advisory Group concluded that the FHEQ, in totality, is fully compatible with the FQ-EHEA. The outcomes of the verification process are summarised in the table on page 3.

The Advisory Group specifically concluded that:

- Foundation Degrees (for example, FdA, FdSc) and by extension the Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE) and Higher National Diplomas (HND) are intermediate qualifications within the first cycle of the overarching FQ-EHEA
- bachelor's degrees (non-honours degrees) are compatible with the first-cycle descriptor within the overarching FQ-EHEA. Holders of this degree can gain access (but not necessarily immediate access) to programmes within the second cycle
- bachelor's degrees with honours (for example, BA/BSc Hons) are compatible with completion of the first cycle within the overarching FQ-EHEA
- master's degrees (for example, MPhil, MLitt, MRes, MA, MSc) and by extension integrated master's degrees (for example, MEng, MChem, MPhys, MPharm) are compatible with completion of the second cycle within the overarching FQ-EHEA
- doctoral degrees (for example, PhD/DPhil (including new-route PhD), EdD, DBA, DClInPsy) are compatible with completion of the third cycle within the overarching FQ-EHEA.

The full report of the Advisory Group can be found at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/selfcertification09.

| Typical higher education qualifications within each level | FHEQ level* | Corresponding FQ-EHEA cycle |
|--|-------------|---|
| Doctoral degrees (eg, PhD/DPhil (including new-route PhD), EdD, DBA, DClInPsy)** | 8 | Third cycle (end of cycle) qualifications |
| Master's degrees (eg, MPhil, MLitt, MRes, MA, MSc) | 7 | Second cycle (end of cycle) qualifications |
| Integrated master's degrees*** (eg, MEng, MChem, MPhys, MPharm) | | |
| Postgraduate diplomas | | |
| Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)**** | | |
| Postgraduate certificates | | |
| Bachelor's degrees with honours (eg, BA/BSc Hons) | 6 | First cycle (end of cycle) qualifications |
| Bachelor's degrees | | |
| Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)**** | | |
| Graduate diplomas | | |
| Graduate certificates | | |
| Foundation Degrees (eg, FdA, FdSc) | 5 | Short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications |
| Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE) | | |
| Higher National Diplomas (HND) | | |
| Higher National Certificates (HNC)***** | 4 | |
| Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE) | | |

Notes to table:

- * Formerly, in the 2001 edition of the FHEQ, the levels were identified as Certificate (C), Intermediate (I), Honours (H), Master's (M) and Doctoral (D) level.
- ** Professional doctorate programmes include some taught elements in addition to the research dissertation. Practice varies but typically professional doctorates include postgraduate study equivalent to a minimum of three full-time calendar years with level 7 study representing no more than one-third of this.
- *** Integrated master's degree programmes typically include study equivalent to at least four full-time academic years, of which study equivalent to at least one full-time academic year is at level 7. Thus study at bachelor's level is integrated with study at master's level and the programmes are designed to meet the level 6 and level 7 qualification descriptors in full.
- **** In April 2005, the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers, the Standing Conference of Principals, Universities UK (UUK) and QAA issued a joint statement on the PGCE qualification title. The full statement may be accessed at: www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/PGCEstatement.asp
- ***** Higher National Certificates (HNCs) are positioned at level 4, to reflect typical practice among higher education awarding bodies that award the HNC under licence from Edexcel.

Implications of the verification of the FHEQ against the FQ-EHEA

On one level the verification process was a technical exercise; on another, it is an important step in confirming the compatibility and hence recognition and acceptability of our higher education awards within Europe. It is a significant milestone in improving the clarity of European systems of higher education, and enhancing the associated ability for staff and students alike to move across these systems. It signals an ongoing commitment to engagement with the needs and demands of students, staff, employees and employers in the wider European perspective.

Relationships with qualifications frameworks in Scotland and Ireland

There is a parallel higher education qualifications framework document for Scotland that reflects the features of its different education system, while making clear the many similarities and alignments with the FHEQ. The two frameworks share many core purposes and features. In 2006, Scotland verified the compatibility of its national qualifications framework against the FQ-EHEA. See www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/SCQF.

The authorities responsible for the maintenance of credit and qualification frameworks in the UK and Ireland have produced a guide to comparing the main qualifications offered in each country. *Qualifications can cross boundaries* enables comparisons to be drawn between qualifications and their levels (rather than direct equivalences) and is a useful reference document for comparing higher education awards within the UK and Ireland. See www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ.

Appendix - note on the conduct of the FHEQ verification process

An Advisory Group, established by QAA and consisting of representatives from the higher education sectors, a student and four international experts, met three times between July and October 2008. Its report on the verification process was approved by QAA's Executive Committee in February 2009 and ministers were then informed at DIUS, the Welsh Assembly Government and the Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland.

The Group addressed all the criteria for self-certifying the FHEQ against the FQ-EHEA and examined:

- the links between the qualification descriptors of the FHEQ and the FQ-EHEA qualification descriptors for each cycle
- the links between the entry points at various stages in the FHEQ and the entry points to the EHEA cycles
- the links between qualifications in the FHEQ and credit arrangements described in the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) and the Higher education credit framework for England (both of which are compatible with the European Credit Transfer System)
- the consistency of national quality assurance arrangements with the communiqués issued by ministers as part of the Bologna Process.

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