

**Self-Certification of the Dutch and Flemish
National Qualifications Frameworks for higher
education vis-à-vis the overarching framework
for qualifications of the European Higher
Education Area.**

*Report of the Verification Committee on
Flanders*

2 February 2009

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(Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, November 2008)

1. Executive summary

The Bologna process, initiated in 1999, now embraces 46 countries cooperating to create a European Higher Education Area. It contains several action lines. Two of its crucial objectives are to harmonise the structures of national higher education systems and to create transparency within Europe and to the world at large. Another important objective is the expansion of national qualifications frameworks for higher education (NQFs) in line with the newly developed Overarching Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA), also referred to as the *Bologna framework*.

The alignment of the NQFs to the Bologna Framework should be the result of a process of self-certification undertaken by the national authorities. This self-certification involves international experts to verify whether the NQFs are compatible with the Bologna Framework.

This is the report on Flanders of the *Committee for the verification of the Dutch and Flemish NQFs*. The Committee has based its report on the documents compiled for this purpose and made available by the national authorities, best described as the compatibility documents, and on-site interviews with the main stakeholders.

The Committee's reference points were the criteria for verification as specified in the Bologna process. The Committee was also invited to give recommendations for the further development of the NQFs.

Conclusion

It is the opinion of the Verification Committee that the National Framework of Qualifications in Higher Education in Flanders is compatible with the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

Recommendations

This report underlines several issues and recommendations relevant to the further development of the Flemish NQF.

The new structure and degrees have yet to overcome old habits and traditions. The relevance of the academic Bachelor's degree for the labour market may be one issue that needs time to be incorporated in a new higher education tradition. It is recommended that the communication activities targeted at the main stakeholders and the public at large are intensified.

An important task of an NQF is to be transparent to the international public. The Committee has the impression that the binary orientation of the qualifications requires specific and targeted communication activities, with an important role for the ENIC/NARIC (NARIC-Flanders). This concerns both incoming students and Flemish graduates seeking employment or further education abroad.

The issue of recognition will be on national and international agendas for the next few years. This pertains to recognition of periods of study and qualifications. Also, further implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention should receive more attention, especially at HE institutions.

The 60 ECTS value of Master's degrees will need to be examined also in the context of international recognition.

The Diploma Supplement, obligatory as it is, will need further development, especially regarding currently absent learning outcomes

A major ambition behind the national qualifications framework is to include *all* learning achievements. The position within the framework of shorter courses or non-degree programmes, as well as certificates based on Accreditation of Prior Learning, should be promoted.

Possible future qualifications of which the learning outcomes match those of the Dublin Descriptors for the short cycle should be recognised as such within the national qualifications framework.

2. Introduction – the overarching Framework on the European Higher Education Area

In Bologna in 1999, education ministers from 29 countries initiated a process in which 46 European countries currently participate: the creation of a *European Higher Education Area* (EHEA). This European transnational process, referred to as the Bologna process, should contribute to making European higher education more competitive with and attractive to (students from) other world regions. One of its key goals was transparency, a term that was used in many of the different action lines the Bologna process initiated.

One action line was geared towards restructuring higher education programmes and the resulting qualifications. A comparable structure of qualifications should make the educational systems of the participating countries more compatible in the context of *cross border mobility* and *international recognition of qualifications and study periods*. The higher education systems of the participating countries should follow a three-tier structure consisting of three cycles, each resulting in a qualification, leaving room for intermediate qualifications within one cycle. In many countries the main qualifications are indicated as Bachelor's, Master's and Ph.D./Doctor's degrees.

Another action line was related to quality assurance, fostering *mutual trust* in each others' educational processes and outcomes, resulting in the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA* and the *European Register of Quality Agencies*.

In the action line concerning degree structures, the Bologna process also focused on the expansion of national frameworks of qualifications. This was a central theme at the ministerial Berlin meeting of 2003, where the education ministers called upon the participating countries to set up such frameworks. At the ministerial meeting in Bergen in 2005, the ministers adopted an overarching Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA), also referred to as the *Bologna framework*¹, which was developed by an expert Working Group.

In the context of the Bologna framework, general descriptors for all three cycles, known as the *Dublin Descriptors*, have been developed and eventually accepted by the different stakeholders in the Bologna process. These descriptors specify the general achievements of learners upon conclusion of one the cycles.

Transparency and mutual trust are key elements for attaining cross-border recognition. Mutual trust in the quality of the different education systems and their programmes is to be complemented by mutual trust in the comparability of qualifications and learning achievements. The latter is to be guaranteed by a system of national qualifications frameworks made comparable and compatible through the overarching Bologna framework. In fact, this will crown the process of restructuring national education systems into three cycles of qualifications.

¹ Parallel to the developments described in the Bologna process, another overarching framework has been adopted by the European Union: European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF). This framework goes beyond the borders of higher education and encompasses all qualifications and learning achievements. The EQF is not part of this certification process and will therefore not be mentioned separately in this report.

The ministers agreed that the national authorities themselves should verify in a self-certification procedure whether their national qualifications frameworks were compatible with the Bologna framework. It was recommended that the use of a committee of external and partially international experts would be an element of this self-certification process.

The Dutch and Flemish national authorities decided to undertake this certification process jointly, and commissioned their joint accreditation agency, the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) to organise it.

The NVAO set up the *Committee for the verification of the Dutch and Flemish NQFs*.

In accordance with the Terms of Reference, this committee's main task was "to verify whether the Dutch and Flemish National Qualification Frameworks for higher education (NQFs) are compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The committee will base its conclusions on the criteria for the verification that are specified below. The committee may also give recommendations with regard to the further development of the NQFs."

The Committee consists of the following experts:

- Dr. Bryan Maguire (chair): Director of Academic Affairs, Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) in Dublin; former member of the steering group for verification of the Irish NQF; former National Qualifications Authority of Ireland; expert Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks; member QA working group of EURASHE.
- Dr. Carita Blomqvist: Counsellor of Education, Finnish National Board of Education (ENIC/NARIC); President of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee.
- Dr. Sandra Elman: President, Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities in Redmond, Washington.
- Prof. Dr. Luc Francois: Director Association Ghent University; former director of education of Ghent University.
- Prof. Dr. Cees Karssen: former rector magnificus Wageningen University; chair of the Committee for Evaluation of Lectors and Knowledge Circles in Universities of Applied Sciences.
- Mr. Jindra Divis (secretary), general director of European Platform – internationalising education in Haarlem, former director of the Centre for International Recognition of Nuffic, former chair of ENIC network, former member of the NARIC Advisory Board.
- Process coordinator: Dr. Mark Frederiks, NVAO.

Apart from the documents presented to the Committee, the members also had access to existing NQFs and were informed about the ongoing developments elsewhere.

The present document is the Committee's report on Flanders.

3. The national education system and the NQF²

3.1. The qualifications structure

3.1.1. Introduction

With the Law on Higher Education 2003 (and two relevant Laws following in 2004) Flanders has restructured its higher education system along the lines of the Bologna requirements. The present higher education system consists of three cycles, each awarding a final qualification: the Bachelor's, Master's and Doctor's degrees. The introduction of an intermediate qualification is currently being discussed.

3.1.2. Binary system

The Flemish higher education system is a binary system making a strict distinction between professional programmes which focus on the knowledge and competences necessary to work in specific professions, and academic programmes, which are mainly geared towards scientific knowledge and research. This binary division is also built into the accreditation process. Although the division focuses on education programmes more than on institutions, it is safe to say that the binary system can also be perceived in institutional terms. The main institutional distinction is the one between *universiteiten* (universities) and *hogescholen* (university colleges). In general, universities provide academically oriented programmes, whereas university colleges focus on professionally oriented programmes. Another distinction between institutions is the one between statutory registered institutions and registered institutions. The latter category consists of private institutions, which have received official recognition following a registration procedure. The official designation of *university* and *university college* is reserved for the category of statutory registered institutions.

An *association* is an official co-operation between a university and one or more university colleges. Within this specific context, university colleges may offer academically oriented programmes, provided they go through the accreditation process for this orientation. University colleges offering academic programmes are in the process of aligning these programmes with research.

The Ministry of Education and Training is the relevant authority in higher education, cooperating with the autonomous HE institutions. The umbrella organisations of the HE institutions, VLHORA (Council of Flemish University Colleges) and VLIR (Flemish Interuniversity Council) also play an important advisory role to the Ministry. Furthermore, these institutions serve as external quality assurance agencies in the accreditation process in Flanders.

3.1.3. Qualifications and credits

In general terms, university programmes in the "pre-Bologna" higher education systems consisted of a 2-years' programme leading up to a *kandidaatsdiploma*, to be followed by a 2-3-years' programme resulting in the degree of *Licentiaat*. At the university colleges, there were two types of programme. The one-cycle programmes

² The following description was based on the materials available to the Verification Committee. The Committee has decided to include only the main information relevant to the context of this report. For a full account, the reader is referred to the documents as outlined in paragraph 7 (References).

led to the degree of *Gegradueerde*, a final qualification. And two-cycle programmes, which provided two consecutive qualifications: *Kandidaat* and *Licentiaat*.

The Doctor's degree was open to holders of relevant *Licentiaat* degrees.

The *Licentiaat* (both from a university or a university college) is now considered the equivalent of a Master's degree. The *Kandidaat* was considered to be an intermediate qualification not equivalent to a Bachelor's degree. The qualification of *Gegradueerde* is recognized at the level of a Bachelor's degree.

Through the implementation of the Bologna agreements, a new structure of three cycles was introduced. The new qualifications were the Bachelor's degree (in both orientations, academic and professional), the Master's degree and the Doctor's degree (PhD).

The main objective of the academic Bachelor's degree is to give access to further studies in a Master's programme. Entry into the labour market is possible, but according to the compatibility document as presented to the Committee, this is only a secondary objective.

Noteworthy also are the advanced Bachelor's and Master's degrees, with their focus on the broadening or deepening of a specific discipline.

A credit system in accordance with ECTS has been introduced in the first two cycles, so that the programmes are now referred to in credits instead of years. A full-time year consists of 60 credits, which amounts to a workload of 1500 to 1800 hours. A single component – a unit of teaching, learning and evaluation activities – contains a minimum of 3 credits. The successful completion of a component results in official recognition in the form of a *credit certificate*. Students may also enrol into a learning agreement for a given amount of credits.

Bachelor's programmes consist of at least 180 credits, advanced bachelor's programmes of 60 credits, Master's programmes of at least 60 credits and advanced Master's programmes consist of 60 credits. The Doctor's programme is not expressed in credits.

The degrees and titles of Bachelor, Master and Doctor (Dr/Ph.D.) are protected by law.

As a crucial instrument for transparency, the *Diploma Supplement* has been made obligatory through national legislation for all accredited programmes.

3.1.4. Progression

An important issue in light of the NQF is the *progression between* qualifications, and initial *access* to the HE system.

In Flanders, access to higher education programmes is explicitly prescribed by law. In general, admission is conditional upon the Flemish Diploma of Secondary Education, with an entrance examination for medicine and dentistry, and a skill test (artistic entrance exam) for Audiovisual and Visual Arts, Music and Performing Arts.

Every academically oriented Bachelor's degree gives direct access to at least one Master's programme. Professionally oriented Bachelor's degrees can also give access to a Master's degree, but the institution may require and offer a bridging course. The bridging programmes consist of a minimum of 45 and a maximum of 90 credits. Tests may reduce the number of required credits to 30. Accreditation of Prior Learning

(APL), focused on experiential learning or qualifications³, may even lead to a full exemption from bridging courses. The Committee was informed that the percentage of holders of *professional* Bachelor's degrees progressing to Master's programmes is rising.

Academic Bachelor's students may be admitted to Master's programmes before all the requirements for the Bachelor's programme have been met. Nevertheless, they have to graduate as a Bachelor before they can receive the Master's degree.

Access to an advanced Bachelor's or Master's programme is conditional upon a previous degree of the same level and may be restricted to specific previous Bachelor's/Master's programmes; *completion* of a previous programme is required. Preparatory courses are possible.

The progression from one cycle to the next is regulated, so in the context of the 'regular' degrees there is progression between the cycles. However, the Committee found no references to the progress of learning achievements in the *advanced* degrees vis-à-vis the 'regular' degrees. In other words, the advanced degrees are not specifically included in the NQF.

Admission to the Doctorate's degree is in the competency of each university, with a Master's degree being the customary or basic requirement.

3.2. Accreditation

The accreditation process provides a link between qualifications, learning outcomes and quality assurance.

The accreditation of HE programmes is organized by the Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie, NVAO (the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders). The NVAO is responsible for the accreditation of the programmes within the first two cycles.

Accreditation focuses on programmes and not institutions. Institutional audits, which are being introduced in the Netherlands, have not yet been initiated in Flanders, but pilot institutional audit projects are now being undertaken. A decision on this matter will be taken in 2009.

There are two forms of accreditation: accreditation of existing programmes and initial accreditation of future programmes. An important difference between these two is that in the case of initial accreditation the *achieved* learning outcomes can not be assessed. A procedural difference is that quality assessment agencies⁴ are involved in the accreditation process, whereas in initial accreditation, it is the NVAO itself that sets up the external panel for on-site visits to the institutions.

The accreditation process in Flanders largely consist of three steps.

- The institution writes a self-evaluation report (accreditation) or programme dossier (initial accreditation).

³ *Eerder verworven competenties/EVC* or *eerder verworven kwalificaties/EVK*.

⁴ VLIR and VLHORA for the accreditation of statutory registered institutions and recognised agencies for registered institutions.

- The external panel makes an on-site visit, and the quality assessment agency (the NVAO itself in the case of pre-accreditation) makes an assessment.
- The NVAO makes its decision.

Learning outcomes play an essential role in the accreditation process.

The NVAO's accreditation frameworks use standards and criteria to assess six categories of aims and objectives. The criteria are divided among the binary orientations (see 3.1.2.). Learning outcomes are relevant in several interlinked instances. A programme is expected to define its intended learning outcomes, i.e. the competences acquired upon completion of the programme. In the external assessment it should be proven that these intended outcomes are in line with the level *and* subject requirements of the programme. The external panel uses the Dublin Descriptors to ascertain the level. As for the subject requirements, it is crucial that "prior to the assessment of the programme, the external or assessment panel should produce a subject-/discipline-specific frame of reference in which they specify what the learning outcomes of the programme should be to offer sufficient generic quality", as stated in the *NVAO Self-Evaluation Report, Part 2*). In this way, the ongoing process of accreditation increases the quantity of subject-specific or discipline-specific learning outcomes. Furthermore, the panel should examine whether the curriculum is organised in a way most likely to support the intended outcomes.

The assessment process also seeks to provide evidence that the outcomes are actually achieved by the learners. This, of course, can only be ascertained in the accreditation of existing programmes.

As mentioned, HE institutions are expected to define their programmes in terms of learning outcomes. They are bound to do so by law. The Law on Higher Education Reform (2003) explicitly determined the level indicators and the award-type descriptors, which, according to the compatibility document, clearly fit the cycle descriptors of the EHEA (Dublin Descriptors) - see Appendix 1. Higher education will be affected by the introduction of a new Qualifications Structure sparked off by the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning for the entire educational system. The level indicators and award-type descriptors will not be changed, but *subject* descriptors will be introduced.

Only accredited programmes can be included in the Higher Education Register and the resulting qualification awards are considered officially recognized. These programmes can qualify for government funding and students are entitled to receive grants (not available for private registered institutions).

Initial accreditation in Flanders has a validity of 4 years, accreditation is valid for 8 years. In case of a negative decision, temporary recognition of programmes for a recovery period (to a maximum of 3 years) is possible.

3.3. Lifelong learning

Through discussions with stakeholders, and to a lesser extent through the material provided, the Committee found that additional learning achievements were accounted for in some way, but not explicitly within the NQF. In general, non-degree programmes offered by higher education institutions are part of quality-assessed (accredited) programmes. Most institutions also assess learning achievements of students in terms of Accreditation of Prior Learning (see par. 3.1.4), through which exemptions can be

granted. However, the civil effect of APL is confined to the context (e.g. Association) in which it was awarded.

3.4. The National Qualifications Framework

The NQF, as presented to the verification committee, should be seen as a codification of the different aspects or developments of the HE system's restructuring in line with the Bologna agreements. Its main elements are the introduction of the three cycles' degree structure, the description of the learning outcomes of educational programmes, the accreditation system and the introduction of credits (compatible to ECTS).

4. Criteria for verifying that national frameworks are compatible with the Bologna framework

4.1. *The national framework for higher education qualifications and the body or bodies responsible for its development are designated by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education.*

4.1.1. The Flemish Ministry of Education and Training has final responsibility for the national framework for higher education qualifications. The umbrella organisations VLIR and VLHORA have an important advisory capacity.

4.1.2. The NVAO is the authority in charge of accreditation of HE programmes.

4.2. *There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework.*

4.2.1. Central to the Flemish NQF is the continued and expanded application of the cycle descriptors of the EHEA in the three cycles, which has been codified in law. There is a direct link to the accreditation process, where the 'Dublin Descriptors' have a crucial impact on the very first stage of the process.

4.2.2. The compatibility document states that the qualifications at the completion of the first cycle, i.e. professional and academic Bachelor's degrees, are labour market relevant, though this is not the academic degrees' primary objective. During the interviews, the social partners in particular expressed doubts about this degree's labour market relevance. But in general, the stakeholders found it too soon to evaluate this issue, because they also signalled positive developments.

4.2.3. The legacy awards (pre-Bologna qualifications) have been absorbed into the new system (see 3.1.3.).

4.2.4. The qualification/degree titles are protected by Flemish Law.

4.3. *The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS compatible credits.*

4.3.1. The qualifications are explicitly based on learning outcomes, as specified in Flemish law (Law on Higher Education Reform of 4 April 2003). Furthermore, learning outcomes have a crucial role in the very first stage of the accreditation process (see par. 3.2.).

4.3.2. The Law on Universities (1991) and the Law on University Colleges (1994) introduced ECTS in Flemish higher education for all programmes (both in terms of transfer and accumulation). The Law on Higher Education Reform of 4 April 2003 endorsed the compatibility of the existing credit system with ECTS for all the accredited programmes and qualifications.

4.4. *The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent.*

4.4.1. The inclusion of the present qualifications is the result of a transparent national process, coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Training, in line with the restructuring Flemish higher education system along the Bologna lines. Inclusion of possible new qualifications is also a responsibility of the Ministry as part of the regular legislative process. In Flanders, this process is transparent and involves different stakeholders.

4.4.2. The programmes accredited by the NVAO are registered in a public register (Higher Education Register).

4.5. *The national quality assurance systems for higher education refer to the national framework of qualifications and are consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent communiqué agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process.*

Regarding this point, we refer above all to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

In 2007, the national education Ministries of The Netherlands and Flanders commissioned an international peer review of the NVAO, taking the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) of ENQA (and the code of good practice of ECA) as a framework for the evaluation. The outcome was codified in two of the documents available to the Verification Committee: *Report of the Committee for the Review of the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), Self Evaluation Report 2007* and *Part 2, NVAO Self-evaluation Report*, (NVAO, 2007).

For our conclusion we quote from the former report (page 55):

7.1 NVAO compliance with ENQA/ESG

In the light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review Committee is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, NVAO is in compliance with the ENQA Membership Regulations and in substantial compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. The Panel therefore recommends to the

Board of ENQA that NVAO should have its Full Membership of ENQA confirmed for a further period of five years.

(7.2 NVAO compliance with ECA Code of Good Practice

In the light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the Review Panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, NVAO is in compliance with the ECA Code of Good Practice.)

On 5 December 2008, the NVAO has been included as one of the first European quality assurance agencies in the independent European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

4.6. *The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements.*

In Flemish higher education, HE institutions are obliged to give out Diploma Supplements. The Ministry has stated explicitly that the outcomes of the verification process will be incorporated in the updated Diploma Supplement.

4.7. *The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published.*

4.7.1. The party responsible for the NQF is the Ministry of Education and Training.

4.7.2. The umbrella organizations VLIR and VLHORA are advisory bodies.

4.7.3. Other stakeholders (social partners and students) are involved in an advisory capacity.

4.7.4. NARIC-Flanders is in charge of:

- International academic recognition;
- Professional recognition of teacher qualifications;
- Dissemination of information.

5. Issues raised by stakeholders and recommendations

5.1. Stakeholders

On 5 and 7 November, the Certification Commission was able to discuss the NQF and its conformity to the Bologna Framework with representatives of the main stakeholders in Flanders. The Committee spoke with the following persons.

The Board of the NVAO

- Guy Aelterman, Vice-Chairman
- Leendert Klaassen, Executive Board Member
- Guido Langouche, Executive Board Member

Flemish Ministry of Education and Training and NARIC Flanders

- Erwin Malfroy, Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (higher education policy design)
- Daniël De Schrijver, NARIC Flanders

Council of Flemish University Colleges (VLHORA)

- Ann Verreth, Secretary General
- Floris Lammens, Policy advisor

Council of Flemish Universities (VLIR)

- Prof. Ludo Melis, vice-rector of educational policy, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
- Prof. Raoul Van Esbroeck, Professor of Educational Sciences, Free University of Brussels

Bologna experts

- Piet Verhesschen, associate Professor, Educational Policy Unit, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
- Jan Geens, international officer, Council of Flemish University Colleges
- Lucien Bollaert, University College West Flanders

Student union representatives (VVS)

- Nele Spaas
- Gertie De Fraeye

Social partners (SERV)

- Nele Muys, Advisor Research Unit, UNIZO (Organisation for the Self-Employed and SMEs)
- Rudy Van Renterghem, Deputy Secretary General, ACV (Christian Labour Union)
- Dirk De Vos, Higher Education Officer, VSOA (Free Labour Union for the Public Service – department of Education)

5.2. General observations

The NQF in Flanders seems part of the implementation of the different action lines of the Bologna process, rather than a stand-alone exercise. It is clear from the documents and the communication about the process to stakeholders and the Verification Committee, that the whole course of implementing and disseminating the NQF is perceived as an ongoing process. The compatibility document mainly describes the current state of affairs. This process will evolve further, especially in the context of implementing the European Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning. Many stakeholders considered the latter process to be of major importance for the Flemish NQF.

The stakeholders taking part in the interviews were clearly involved in the development of the NQF and, in general terms, all approved of the NQF and its description.

5.3. Issues raised by stakeholders and recommendations

It is not possible, nor necessary, to go over all the issues raised. We will mention those issues that we identified as specifically relevant for the further development of the NQF, as confirmed by the Terms of Reference. Where possible, we have formulated specific recommendations.

5.3.1. The new structure and degrees have yet to overcome old habits and traditions. The relevance of the academic Bachelor's degree for the labour market may well be part of the official educational policy for the future – though not as a first objective – some of the stakeholders, the social partners in particular, are not very enthusiastic about this. However, there were also positive signals, such as growing government recruitment of academic Bachelors and a declining percentage of automatic progression of academic Bachelors to Master's programmes. The acceptance and development of the academic Bachelor's degree needs more time as far as labour market relevance is concerned. It is recommended that the communication activities targeted at the main stakeholders and the public at large are intensified

5.3.2. An important task of an NQF is to be transparent to the international public. The Committee has the impression that the binary orientation of the qualifications requires ample communication towards other educational systems, especially given that Flanders has a strict binary division linked to individual institutions.

The student representatives expressed their concerns about international recognition of professional bachelor's degrees, if the practical component was given too much emphasis.

Specific and targeted communication seems advisable, with an important role for the NARIC-Flanders. The communication activities should target both incoming students and Flemish graduates seeking employment or further education abroad.

5.3.3. Recognition issues were raised on more than one occasion. The students affirmed that international recognition of periods of study is still rather problematic.

There still seems to be a difference of opinion between accreditation and international recognition communities on the issue of non-recognition due to "substantial differences", especially where duration or study load is concerned.

Also, employers in Flanders tend to require specific degrees and not levels of qualifications. Intensified communication and dissemination activities about the NQF to the public at large, particularly employers, seems recommendable.

5.3.4. There was some concern expressed about the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. It may be that institutions need more time to incorporate the provisions in their recognition practices, especially the prescribed deadlines for decisions. More communication from the Ministry and NARIC-Flanders might be useful.

5.3.5. Different stakeholders affirmed that the level descriptors might be too general for use, but uttered concerns about the development of overly detailed learning outcomes at discipline level. They broke a lance for upholding the necessary flexibility, which is the benefit of the present NVAO approach. The stakeholders supported *voluntary* development of more detailed outcomes in HE institutions.

5.3.6. Another noteworthy issue in light of both the Bologna-agreements and international recognition is the observation that many Master's programmes in Flanders consist of 60 ECTS. Ongoing international cooperation, including the development of joint degrees, will have to show whether this situation poses an obstacle to mutual recognition. The Committee has been informed that this issue is already being discussed.

The issue of transparency was also raised vis-à-vis the Diploma Supplement (DS). Some of the stakeholders mentioned the absence of learning outcomes⁵ in the DS as a major shortcoming. This issue should be dealt with on national and institutional levels.

The students mentioned that delivery of the DS by the institutions was sometimes severely delayed. It appears that institutions still have to incorporate the DS into their daily practice.

5.3.7. Some of the stakeholders pleaded for more centralisation in the field of Accreditation of Prior Learning. At the least, recognition of APL-certificates between HE institutions may enhance student mobility. The Verification Committee stresses the importance of this issue because of the 'external' perspective of an NQF, which aspires to include *all learning achievements*. Therefore, the position within the framework of qualifications based on APL should be promoted.

5.3.8. The Committee was informed about the development of a new level 5 qualification. However, its precise status and place within the NQF has not yet been decided upon. Some of the stakeholders pleaded to position it within the first cycle as intermediate qualification. Note that full title of the relevant Dublin descriptor is "higher education short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle)". It was apparently envisaged that programmes linked to but not nested within full first cycle programmes or not necessarily situated within institutions providing full first cycle programmes could meet these outcomes.

⁵ The possibility of including learning outcomes in the Diploma Supplement has already been created on an international level. See paragraph 4.1 of the "Explanatory Notes to the Joint European Diploma Supplement". Status: adopted by The Committee of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region at its 4th session in Bucharest, Romania 19 June 2007: *Where available, provide details of the learning outcomes, knowledge, skills, competencies and stated aims and objectives associated with the qualification. This information, which relates to outcomes rather than procedures of learning, will increasingly be the key basis on which qualifications are assessed.*

If the learning outcomes of the proposed new qualification match those of the Dublin Descriptors for the short cycle then it should be recognised as such within the national qualifications framework.

6. Conclusions

After studying the compatibility documents and other relevant material, and after discussions with the stakeholders mentioned above, it is the opinion of the Verification Committee that the National Framework of Qualifications in Higher Education in Flanders is compatible with the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

7. References

- *Terms of reference for the committee for the verification of the Dutch and Flemish NQFs.*
- *The Bologna Framework and National Qualifications Frameworks – an Introduction*, with five appendices:
 - *Dublin Descriptors* (Extract from Working Group on Qualifications Framework Report, 2005);
 - *Good practice for the development of national frameworks of qualifications* (Extract from Working Group on Qualifications Framework Report, 2005);
 - *Criteria & Procedures for Verification of Framework Compatibility* (Extract from Working Group on Qualifications Framework Report, 2005);
 - *Recommendations to be considered by countries in undertaking the verification process* (Extract from Qualifications Framework Working Group Report, 2007);
 - *Bibliography*
- *Higher Education Qualifications Framework in Flanders. A presentation for compatibility with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.* Ministry of Education and Training, 2008.
- *Appendix 1 - Comparison HEQs Flanders (Belgium) & Dublin descriptors & EQF LLL*, Ministry of Education and Training, 2008.
- *Conformity of learning outcomes or achievements of the Ph.D. (Doctor) in Flanders with the Dublin Descriptors higher education degree “Doctor”.* Ministry of Education and Training, 2008.
- *Statistics in Flanders.*
- *Report of the Committee for the Review of the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), Self Evaluation Report 2007.*
- *Initial Accreditation Framework, Flanders, , NVAO, 14 February 2005.*
- *Accreditation Framework, Flanders, NVAO, 14 February 2005.*

8. Acronyms

- Het Hogeronderwijsregister / Higher Education Register
www.highereducation.be
- NARIC-Flanders – Recognition and information centre within the framework of the European Commission, Council of Europe and UNESCO
www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/NARIC/
- NVAO – Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie / Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO)
www.nvao.net
- SERV – Sociaal-Economische Raad van Vlaanderen / Flanders Social and Economic Council
www.serv.be
- VLHORA – Vlaamse Hogescholenraad / Council of Flemish University Colleges
www.vlhora.be
- VLIR – Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad / Flemish Interuniversity Council
www.vlir.be
- VLOR – Vlaamse Onderwijsraad / Strategic Advisory Council
www.vlor.be
- VVS – Vereniging van Vlaamse Studenten / National Union of Students in Flanders
www.vvs.ac

Appendix

Comparison HEQs Flanders (Belgium) & Dublin descriptors & EQF LLL (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, November 2008)