

Degree Structures

Preamble

ESIB—The National Unions of Students in Europe has existed since 1982 to promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at the European level, and towards all relevant organisations and institutions. ESIB currently has 46 member organisations from 35 countries.

Introduction

The adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, based on a system of two cycles, has been a key theme in the Bologna Process since its very beginning. Since the 2003 Berlin Communiqué, doctoral programmes are considered as the third cycle in the Bologna Process.

Reforms to degree structures have taken place in many countries in and around the European Higher Education Area as a consequence of the ministerial meetings. The reforms have happened for various reasons. It is imperative to be aware of all the objectives of such reforms to make sure that not only the objectives of the Bologna Process as such are reached, but also the rationale behind the objectives is honoured.

ESIB welcomes the introduction of a three-cycle degree structure in general, but is very concerned by the improper implementation and the consequences this still has in some of the countries in the Bologna Process. The introduction of access limitations between the cycles and the ill—reflected changes in the duration of study programmes without proper adaptation of curricula are the most unacceptable developments. They have led to decreasing flexibility and room for students' individual choice of elective courses within a programme and leave less room for horizontal mobility.

Definitions

Due to different terminology being used in different national contexts, it is essential to establish the following definitions.

Course—a course is a smaller unit of studies, typically limited to one topic within a subject, to be taken during one academic year or a shorter period

Programme—a programme is a combination of courses a student takes, at the end of which the student will obtain a degree

Degree—a degree is obtained by a student when the student has fulfilled a certain number of credits and other requirements

License—a document awarded by a public authority giving the right to exercise a certain profession

Diploma—a diploma is a paper record to prove that a student has obtained a degree

Qualification—a qualification is achieved when a competent body determines that an individual's learning has reached a specified standard of knowledge, skills and wider competences. The standard of learning outcomes is confirmed by means of an assessment process or the successful completion of a course of study. Learning and assessment for a qualification can take place through a programme of study and/or work place experience. A qualification confers official recognition of value in the labour market and in further education and training. A qualification can be a legal entitlement to practice a trade.

Aims of a three—cycle structure

Initially, mutual recognition of degrees across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was the key motivation of a common degree structure. It was envisaged to reach better recognition of degrees both for the labour market and for the purpose of further study.

However, reasons for introducing the three-cycle degree structure also go beyond recognition of degrees. One of the arguments is the introduction of intermediary exit points and bridges between different sub-sectors to allow more people, and in particular to motivate underrepresented groups, to enter higher education and complete a degree. In traditionally long curricula, many students dropped out and often did not get any qualification recognised at all. ESIB supports the development of qualifications which increase the flexibility of educational paths and the possibility for an individual to be an active and self-directive learner while rejecting the fragmentation of degree to an unlimited extend which could directly affect the value of the degree obtained.

Changes on the labour market in the past decades have created a greater demand for graduates having a broad spectrum of competences and knowledge from different professional areas. Growing demand for interdisciplinary knowledge can be met through the three-cycle degree structure. Greater educational flexibility and the possibility to combine different study areas are prerequisites to achieve this goal. In countries where the three-cycle degree structures did not exist before the Bologna Process, its introduction has increased the diversity of qualifications, which meet other professional profiles and also helped to diversify the labour market.

The three-cycle degree structure enables the integration of informal and non-formal learning in the learner's life, such as work-based learning. First cycle graduates can have the opportunity to achieve learning from work experience and to later continue education in the second cycle.

Whereas a common degree structure should cater for comparability and transparency, such a common structure should not be a catalyst of the harmonisation of contents and/or teaching methods. Within a convergent structure there should be room for national and institutional diversity within the remit of the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area.

ESIB maintains that all degrees awarded in higher education should cater to all fundamental objectives of higher education, i.e.

- personal development;
- developing and maintaining an advanced skills, competence and knowledge base;
- preparation for life as active citizens in democratic society;
- developing critical thinking
- preparation for the labour market and academic careers.

Regarding the progression between cycles, ESIB maintains that the possibilities for progression must be open and flexible. ESIB also calls for research into how progression to higher cycles can be facilitated for groups that are under-represented in higher education in general and in the higher cycles in particular. ESIB further stresses that barriers such as tuition fees must not be used to limit access to any cycle of studies.

The transition between former and new degrees brings up the problem of the acceptance of these new degrees by the labour market. Further spreading of information and clarification of the competences provided by the new qualifications are required in order to promote transparency and graduates employability. Also the former qualifications should not be devaluated by this process of transition. The discussion should focus on the learning outcomes and competences provided by the qualifications of the new and of the former degree structures.

Employer's recognition is vital and must be enhanced, but it should not be allowed to dictate the future of higher education. It is important that individual thought and critical analysis are maintained.

Moreover, the implementation of the three-cycle system cannot be successfully completed if the financial means, time and information are not given to HE institutions. Further support from public authorities is required in all the countries of the European Higher Education Area.

ESIB strives for non-EU Bologna countries to be consulted. Countries with a HE system differing significantly from the three-cycle system, especially from the Central and Eastern Europe should be given more support and financial help to deal with these reforms. It is also essential that HEIs and student bodies inside HEIs are fully involved in the reform process.

Short cycle degrees

Short cycle degrees are a very heterogeneous group of programmes and studies. In some countries, a part of these programmes are recognised as higher education, while in other countries they are regarded as post-secondary education (even if leading to similar professional qualifications). These types of programmes can be carried out by higher education institutions, post-secondary education institutions and even secondary schools, which create greater difficulties for both the national and international comparability. Therefore, complete information about the nature, outcomes and competences provided by these programmes must be available at all time.

Designed mostly to provide for short-cycle professional or vocational qualification after secondary education, these study programmes must allow the students to continue further studies in higher education either immediately after graduation or later. These short cycle programmes can constitute an access route to full length first cycle degrees. They can be a tool to guarantee flexible entry and exit to higher education.

The main reasons for their preservation are that mobility between higher education institutions sometimes is limited to vertical mobility and as such requires a completed degree; the need to provide a visible first exit point for students from non-traditional backgrounds and students who do not wish to take part in full length first cycle degree programme.

In this context, access with such a degree to programmes leading to a full first-cycle degree is crucial and must be provided for any and all students wishing to continue towards the full first-cycle degree. Such degrees can also be useful in the validation of non-formal prior learning in cases where first and second-cycle degrees are not applicable.

The establishment of a qualifications framework addresses some of these issues. It is of utmost importance that short-cycles or intermediate degrees are properly addressed in qualifications frameworks at national and European level.

Some of these concerns may be addressed by the introduction of the European Credit Transfer Accumulation System (ECTS). Credits help in inter-institutional recognition and a formalised system of credit transfer and accumulation will improve recognition of short cycle degrees. Such a system also helps to recognise and validate the achievements of those students that take a non-degree programme, follow an individual programme or do not complete a full programme.

The relevance of such degrees for the labour market is another crucial issue. The inclusion of all social partners in the design of such programmes and degrees is vital in this context.

First and second cycle degrees

The first cycle degree, usually referred to as Bachelor's degree, some of the aforementioned objectives of higher education may be stressed over others in specific programmes. For example, some programmes may be devised for students who wish to proceed to a second-cycle programme directly; while other students may wish to gain rapid access to the labour market after obtaining the first-cycle degree. However, it is crucial that all programmes address all objectives.

The second-cycle degree, usually referred to as Master's degree, should offer students the chance to either specialise further in the subject or subjects of their first degree, or to complement their education in another field. In order to answer to all these objectives, there is a need for flexible curricula, which would offer the freedom for students to choose courses and other parts of the programme. This would lead students to the acquisition of a solid base for further education and/or the necessary competencies for working life, according to the student's wishes. Both first and second cycle degrees must allow access to employment in general. In particular, public employers carry a high responsibility to properly recognise first-cycle degrees of potential employees, as they are a role model for private employers.

Doctoral degrees

The Bologna Process is not specific when it comes to the structure of the third cycle, usually referred to as Doctoral degree. There are many different approaches around Europe on how to organize the third cycle and it often depends on the tradition of the specific country or research area. ESIB favours structured doctoral

programmes as they have advantaged over unstructured programmes. The advantages range from issues of recognition, quality assurance, mobility, equal access and guidance to better development of transversal and generic skills. In cases of unstructured doctoral programmes, where students enrol in individual programmes, a form of "curriculum" or plan of work should be agreed upon between the doctoral student and the supervisor(s) in order to better protect the rights of the doctoral students. However it is important in any kind of a doctoral programme that the doctoral students have the opportunity to choose the courses they want to attend and to tailor them to their research project.

As has been stated in the Berlin Communiqué all second cycle studies must give access to third cycle studies. Discrimination or specific access barriers put to students coming from non-university higher education institutions are unacceptable. Flexibility between second and third cycle studies should allow graduates of second cycle programmes admission to doctoral programmes in their field of studies as well as in other discipline. Recognition of prior learning should be applicable to doctoral studies. Access to doctoral programmes should also be possible for applicants not holding a second cycle qualification providing they have the necessary competences. Graduates of doctoral studies should be prepared for both an academic career and to work outside HEIs. To strengthen the links between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area, diploma supplement should be provided to doctoral students. This would help recognising doctoral degrees and could prevent employers outside of academia to discriminate against applicants with a doctoral degree out of lack of knowledge about their qualifications or out of a fear of them being overqualified.

Access between cycles

Access to programmes leading to a second-cycle degree must be open to all students that have a first-cycle degree. The completion of the first cycle must not be necessarily regarded as the exit point for the majority of students. Rather than prescriptively defining a "normal" exit point, the freedom of choice for each individual, whether to leave HE with a first, second or third cycle qualification, must be the reference. As such, all first-cycle degrees must give access to a wide range of second-cycle programmes and all second-cycle degrees must give access to third-cycle degrees while at the same time give access to the labour market. Tuition fees also create a barrier for access to the second cycle, and ESIB regards this as just as unacceptable.

Studies towards a second-cycle degree that are an integrated part of a degree structure or short courses of study allowing access must be provided free of charge and tuition fees. The provision of access to students from other higher education institutions in and outside the country must be given special attention. Access for students holding degrees that do not follow the three-cycle degree structure must be ensured, especially during a transition period or if not all degrees are part of a three-cycle degree structure. Second-cycle should give access to students who hold non-degree qualifications if these qualifications enable them to successfully complete the programme. The completion of a second-cycle degree must provide access to programmes leading to a doctoral degree.

Other degrees - regulated professions

There has been significant discussion on which existing programmes or degrees should be exempt from the adaptation of a three cycle degree structure. It is beneficial for students to have as many degrees as possible adapted to a common structure. Although a license to exercise a profession may require a longer period of study than the first cycle and/or additional requirements, there should be no fields of study exempted from the three-cycle degree structure. Demands for special treatment of these academic fields should not be accepted, for the sake of mobility and development of more diversified professional profiles. This should not lead to a lowering of the qualifications of the regulated professions.

The three-cycle degree structure brings a new paradigm and requires consideration of all reasons for its introduction on implementation. In order to obtain the qualification students of regulated professions need to fulfil all requirements, which in these cases usually mean the masters or doctors degree. However students must also have the possibility to exit the programme and receive a qualification at the bachelor level allowing them to continue education in another field or to obtain employment.

Quality Assurance and Accreditation

The quality of programmes leading to degrees is a decisive aspect of the acceptance of any degree structure. ESIB thus stresses that all programmes must be subject to quality assurance conducted in a transparent manner based on a clear set of goals that describe the outcomes that the degree represents.

Conclusions

ESIB support the introduction of a degree system essentially based on three cycles, including a doctoral level. However, the reason for the introduction of such a structure must not be forgotten. A new degree structure must not be focused on duration of study periods, but rather on providing the necessary competences and skills. The degree structure should allow more options for students, allowing flexible exit and entry between different types of higher education institutions and between higher education and the labour market. Therefore, all students completing the first cycle must have access to the second cycle, also if they choose to do so several years after they have obtained the first degree.

ESIB stresses that all degrees must cover all the fundamental objectives of higher education – if this is not assured, the character of the degree as a higher education degree will be put in question.

Finally, ESIB wants to stress that fighting discrimination and under-representation must not be limited to measures concerning the degree structure. Strategies have to be developed in order to neutralise any kind of barrier concerning access and completion of higher education.

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