

Preface

I am pleased to present a new book in the Council of Europe Higher Education Series. This series, launched in late 2004, is now well established as a reference series for higher education issues and policies. This is illustrated by the range of subjects covered, from the recognition of qualifications and quality assurance, through higher education governance to the public responsibility for higher education and research and the responsibility of higher education for democratic culture.

The present book reviews qualifications, which are a key element in higher education policy. Qualifications are an essential element of the Bologna Process and of the Council of Europe's higher education programme, and much has been written about qualifications, but this book is, to my knowledge, the first systematic presentation of this important concept.

I therefore hope the book will fill a clear need and serve as a reference work for credentials evaluators and those in charge of developing and maintaining national qualifications frameworks as well as, in more general terms, for policy makers and practitioners in higher education institutions and public authorities.

In one way this book represents a new development in our Higher Education Series. Whereas previous books have been edited volumes, this is a monograph, the first in the series. I am particularly happy that this monograph has been written "in house", by the Head of the Department for Higher Education and History Teaching, Sjur Bergan. He draws upon his long experience with the Council of Europe's higher education activities, ranging from work with the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention and our Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research to representing the Council of Europe in many areas of higher education policy debate in Europe.

I wish you pleasant reading, and I hope this book will help improve knowledge and understanding of a key concept in the current higher education debate in Europe and beyond.

Gabriele Mazza
Director of School, Out-of-School and Higher Education

Introduction

Reading a book on qualifications, as you are about to do, is an act that requires some courage. Qualifications are generally not considered a very stimulating topic, and there was a time when they were seen as the domain of a few highly specialised characters safely stored away in corner offices of higher education institutions, ministries or national information centres on recognition.

That was certainly an exaggerated view, but at the same time, though most higher education policy makers as well as the general public intuitively understood that qualifications were important, they also to a considerable extent took qualifications for granted. With some poetic licence, we may say that qualifications were thought of as what you obtained at the end of your studies – end of story.

This view may be exaggerated and overly simplified; if so, that would be a good thing. What is beyond discussion, however, is that our view of qualifications has developed considerably over the past few years. From being a concern for specialists, qualifications have moved to the centre of higher education policy debate. In Europe, the Bologna Process – aiming to establish a European Higher Education Area by 2010 – has defined qualifications as one of its key aspects, and two other aspects – recognition and quality assurance – are intimately linked to qualifications.

Not only have qualifications moved to the centre of the policy debate, but our perceptions of and thinking about qualifications have evolved at considerable speed. In Europe this rapid reappraisal is reflected in the development of national and overarching qualifications frameworks, in discussions of subject-specific and transversal competences and in a focus on learning outcomes, which may be defined as what learners can be expected to know, understand and do on the basis of a qualification. It is also reflected in a more developed view of the elements that make up a qualification, where the previous emphasis on the years it took to earn a qualification is being replaced by an emphasis on workload, and this is being complemented by consideration of other elements. Not least, the link between quality assurance and qualifications is becoming increasingly clear.

While our thinking has advanced considerably, to my knowledge there has so far been no attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of these developments. That is the reason why I have written this book: to try to present the concept of qualifications as they are reflected in current thinking and debate. I hope I have succeeded in doing so in an accessible form, yet I am painfully aware that not all issues concerning qualifications make for easy reading. This is hopefully a book that will not put readers to sleep, but it is also not a book to take to the beach. It requires a fair degree of commitment and interest from the reader, and I hope to reciprocate by providing an interesting if not always easy journey through a fascinating concept.

The book is divided into four main parts. Part I outlines the complex reality that we will be exploring, in part through a brief and selective historical overview – or rather synopsis – and in part by exploring some of the complexities involved. In particular,

this is where we will meet the concepts of subject-specific and transversal competences.

Part II dissects the concept of qualifications by considering each of their five elements: level, workload, quality, profile and learning outcomes.

Part III seeks to put things back together again and to put them into context. This part considers national and overarching qualifications frameworks as well as learning paths.

In Part IV, we look at the relationship between qualifications and education systems. Not all qualifications are linked to national education systems, and we look at some qualifications that are not. We also consider how learners can move from one education system to another without losing the real value of their qualifications. In other words, we discuss the recognition of qualifications. Finally, we close by looking at why qualifications are important and link that to some developments we are likely to see in the future.

In writing this book, I have often thought about the kind of introduction to qualifications I would have liked to have had at my disposal when I started working with the recognition of qualifications some fifteen years ago. I had a background in higher education administration, but I had not worked much with qualifications until I came to Strasbourg in 1991 to take on responsibility for, among other things, the Council of Europe's recognition activities. Little was available in terms of introduction, and I had to learn by failing and doing, and by discussing with more experienced colleagues, many of them from various national information centres.

However, this book could not have been written fifteen years ago, and not only because I did not have the necessary knowledge and understanding at the time. Many of the developments that are described in this book have taken place over the past decade or so, and had this book been written fifteen years ago, it would not only have been very different but also much less interesting.

Secondly, though the early focus of my activity in the Council of Europe – recognition of qualifications – is of great importance as well as a frequent source of frustration, this is not a book about recognition. It is a book about qualifications, and recognition is just one aspect of them. Recognition will, however, be greatly facilitated if we arrive at a better understanding of the very concept of qualifications. This will help us move away from a legalistic emphasis on comparable procedures to a more qualitative approach, in which we seek to assess knowledge, understanding and abilities, and not just the formal procedures that have brought learners to where they are.

I believe that much progress has been made in the recognition of qualifications as well as in the understanding of the concept of qualifications itself over the past decade, and that here is a clear relationship between the two. Yet, much remains to be done. We need to develop our understanding further, and we need to encourage more policy makers and practitioners to share this understanding. That is one of the main aims of this book.

Qualifications may appear to be a technical topic, even if they are a key element of current policy debates, and one cannot deny that technical considerations are important. Yet understanding the technical aspects should enable us to place the issues in context and to use transversal skills like analytical ability and communication skills to develop and assess qualifications. Technical aspects are important, but those who limit their consideration to the technical aspects have missed a great deal. Few things in life are entirely technical, and qualifications are no exception. Knowledge is important, but it is even more important to marry knowledge and understanding. Understanding without knowledge may be impossible, but knowledge without understanding is at best an opportunity missed.

Qualifications are also about attitudes. They need to be approached not from a purely mechanistic and technical point of view, but with understanding and respect for those who hold them. Very often, considerations of qualifications are important to the further activities of those who hold them. In considering qualifications, we may open or close opportunities for individual learners: we may enable them to make use of their full potential or deny them the opportunity to do so. The best approach to qualifications that I can think of is found in the title of one of the most famous and influential political pamphlets of all time: Tom Paine's *Common Sense*. In working with qualifications, the prevailing attitude should be that of trying to make things possible rather than to make them impossible. We should seek to identify opportunities rather than restrictions, even if both are of course a part of our reality.

No author can write a book of this length without revealing something about himself. We write more easily about things we know than about things we are less familiar with. By the end of the book, readers will be in no doubt that history, linguistics and social sciences are closer to my heart than natural sciences, and I hope they will bear with my choice of examples, which at times will undoubtedly seem exotic to some. However, exotic examples may be better illustrations since we are not tied up in our preconceptions.

It is also obvious that no author can write a book like this without being indebted to many people. I have benefited from the encouragement and wisdom of many colleagues from all over Europe and beyond. They are recognition specialists at national information centres, academic and administrative staff from higher education institutions and policy makers working with public authorities. They are engaged in the European networks for the recognition of qualifications, in the Bologna Process aiming to establish a European Higher Education Area by 2010, and in a variety of other contexts in Europe and beyond.

They are too numerous to name, but some nevertheless deserve special mention. In my early days working on the recognition of qualifications, I learned a lot from Graça Fialho, Marianne Hildebrand, Chantal Kaufmann, Kees Kouwenaar and the late Tibor Gyula Nagy. From the late 1990s onwards, Cloud Bai-yun, Yves Beaudin, Carita Blomqvist, Christoph Demand, Jindra Divis, E. Stephen Hunt, Erwin Malfroy, Polona Miklavc-Valenčič, Eric Schwartz, Timothy Thompson, Nadežda Uzelac, Gunnar Vaht and many others have been invaluable colleagues and friends in my work on recognition. So have Stephen Adam and Andrejs Rauhvargers, from whose immeasurable

knowledge and great common sense I have benefited both on recognition issues and on far broader issues of higher education policy.

That naturally leads me to the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research (CDESR), where those who deserve a heartfelt thanks are again too many to name, but where I cannot imagine what our work would have been like without the competence and friendship of successive committee chairs Krzysztof Ostrowski, Per Nyborg, Věra Šťastná and Luc Weber, as well as Bureau members Radu Damian, Michael Daxner, Jürgen Kohler, Evangelos Livieratos, Virgílio Meira Soares and Gro Beate Vige.

In the Bologna Process, I am again faced with the problem of having too many friends and colleagues to thank and too little space in which to do so. Purely in alphabetical order, Heli Aru, Gottfried Bacher, Fr. Friedrich Bechina FSO, Mogens Berg (who chairs the working group on qualifications frameworks), Yvonne Clark, Germain Dondelinger (who is now also a member of the CDESR Bureau), Hans-Rainer Friedrich, Éva Gönczi, Rachel Green, Birger Hendriks, Fr. Franco Imoda SJ, Dionyssi Kladis, Hélène Lagier, Jan Levy, Pedro Lourtie, Lela Maisuradze, Ian McKenna, Ann McVie, Seán Ó Foghlú, Annika Persson Pontén, Seamus Puirsell, Louis Ripley, Sverre Rustad, Norman Sharp, Athanassia Spyropoulou, Bjørn Stensrud, the late Roland Vermeesch, Barbara Weitgruber, Peter Williams and Lesley Wilson receive particular thanks, also on behalf of those who cannot be mentioned here. With Staša Babić, David Crosier, Lewis Purser, Srbijanka Turajlić and Pavel Zgaga I have shared unforgettable moments as well as intense discussions, in South-East Europe and elsewhere. Martina Vukasović represented European students in a spectacular way as President of ESIB – the National Unions of Students in Europe – in 2000 and has been a valued expert and friend ever since.

Jan Sadlak and Lăzar Vlăsceanu of UNESCO-CEPES as well as David Coyne and Peter van der Hijden of the European Commission have shared very generously of their insights without undue regard to organisational turf. With Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, now of UNESCO Headquarters, formerly of UNESCO-CEPES, I shared the unforgettable experience of seeing both the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the ENIC Network (about which, more later in this book) from early ideas to functioning realities. Last, but not least, some colleagues in the Council of Europe deserve particular thanks. Maitland Stobart and James Wimberley helped me in my early years here, and our current Director of Education, Gabriele Mazza, as well as Sophie Ashmore, Katia Dolgova-Dreyer, Angela Garabagiu, Josef Huber, Ólöf Ólafsdóttir, Jean-Pierre Titz and Mireille Wendling have provided continual encouragement, advice and support.

Stephen Adam and Athanassia Spyropoulou read and commented on the whole manuscript, and Carita Blomqvist, Josef Huber and Lewis Purser read and commented on parts of it. Andrejs Rauhvargers also provided valuable discussion. The responsibility for any remaining mistakes, omissions and misinterpretations of course remains with the author.

Qualifications become a reality to us at different stages of our lives: when we meet them as students and hopefully also as lifelong learners, when we meet them as

requirements in our professional lives, when we meet them as parents and also at other stages. This book is dedicated to Gabriela and Catalina, for whom qualifications are a bit closer to their daily lives than they would sometimes wish as they make their way through the school system, as well as to Margarita, who helps them cope. May our joint multicultural background – with one leg in Europe and one in Latin America, as well as at least a hand in North America, and our joint experience as immigrants belonging in more than one place – be a source of strength rather than of problems.