

# Bologna through Bologna Experts' Eyes

## ***Introduction***

In 2014, the Dutch team of Bologna Experts published a report – Bologna through Bologna Experts' Eyes (January 2014) – in which they reflected on the activities they had undertaken in the 2004-2014 period and suggested a Bologna agenda for the Netherlands for the coming years.

This report provides an update on the activities which the team undertook in the 2014-2018 period, in the framework of the projects FaBoTo I and II (Facilitating Bologna Tools for HEIs and Quality Assurance Organisations), financially supported through the Erasmus+ programme.

Building on years of experience, it can be stated that the Dutch team of Bologna Experts has succeeded in raising significant further awareness about the usefulness of the Bologna tools. The team is convinced that it is very important to continue its activities, so as not to lose momentum in supporting the institutions in the implementation of Bologna principles in their internationalisation policies, in particular the effective and correct use of the Bologna tools. Key in this respect is the ECTS Course Catalogue.

In the Netherlands, the ECTS Course Catalogue is perceived to be the most important action point for higher education institutions; it is moreover conditional for the action point regarding recognition, as mentioned in the next call for proposals. Only recently, a number of institutions have started thinking about the implementation of the ECTS Course Catalogue and have asked the Dutch team for support regarding this process.

With respect to other Bologna tools and practices – the Diploma Supplement (DS), the issue of grading and grade conversion, and recognition – good progress has been made. However, to make a difference, further steps are required. This is not limited to the situation in the Netherlands, but also relates to cooperation with partners in Europe and beyond.

A survey of the Bologna Process key commitments, as identified in the Paris Communiqué of 25 May 2018, show that the Netherlands is performing rather well. At the same time, it is fair to state that regarding the core mission and objective of the Bologna Process – ‘to enhance the quality and relevance of teaching and learning’ – further steps can and should be taken. Not all programmes in the Netherlands are outcome-based yet and prepare sufficiently well for the workplace and for civic, social and cultural engagement, both stressed as being important in the Communiqué. Based on their knowledge of current relevant developments in Europe, the members of the Dutch team are convinced they can be of service again in the future by offering appropriate advice and support.

The following part of this report not only takes stock of the work established by the team as part of the FaBoTo I and II projects, but also contains a proposal to continue its activities building on the Paris Communiqué of 2018, signed by the Ministers of Education of the 48 countries that constitute the European Higher Education Area.

## ***Evaluation of activities***

The Dutch team of Bologna Experts was first formed in 2004. It originally consisted of three representatives of the research universities, three representatives of the universities of applied sciences, and representatives of the national student organisations (LSVb and ISO). Over the

years, the composition of the group of representatives of the HE institutions has changed, keeping a small core of representatives in place, which guaranteed the continuity in the team's activities over the years. It has also meant that the overall expertise of the team has grown. The national student organisations were active contributors to the team's work until 2014. Unfortunately, the student organisations have not prioritised this topic over the past four years. At present, the team of Bologna Experts has seven members: three representatives of the research universities and four representative of the universities of applied sciences.

The Dutch BFUG member has always been an important unofficial member of the team and has been invaluable as a linking pin between the team and the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences. Throughout the years, the representatives of the National Agency have been the backbone of and driving force behind the team.

In the framework of two consecutive projects FaBoTo I and II, the team focused on supporting HEIs with the implementation of the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE), in particular the Bologna instruments, such as the Diploma Supplement, the ECTS Course Catalogue, and the ECTS Grading Table. The team undertook the following activities.

### **Diploma Supplement**

In 2016, the team carried out a survey of the existing practice in Dutch HE with regard to the DS, a follow-up of the survey which the team had undertaken in 2006.

The 2006 survey showed that Dutch HE institutions were insufficiently aware of what had been agreed upon with regard to the DS in the framework of the Bologna Process. The team was instrumental in ensuring that the format developed by the European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNESCO/CEPES was made mandatory through Dutch law and organised a number of national and regional workshops on the implementation of the correct DS.

The 2016 survey showed that significant progress has been made with regard to the DS. The Dutch HEIs now devote a lot of attention to their DS and the EC/CoE/UNESCO-CEPES template is widely used. The quality of the DS is generally good, although there is still room for improvement.

Following the adoption of a number of changes in the EC/CoE/UNESCO-CEPES template by the Ministerial conference in Paris in May 2018, the team will ensure the distribution of the relevant information to the HEIs and intends to assist the institutions with the implementation of the update in their DS.

### **ECTS Course Catalogue**

In the 2014 report, the team of Bologna Experts concluded that Dutch HE institutions are generally insufficiently transparent about the content of their educational programmes. The communication via their websites about their programmes is generally directed at the recruitment of students and is insufficiently detailed and objective. The team therefore devoted a lot of attention to the promotion of the ECTS Course Catalogue, which is widely seen as a key instrument for transparency, but also for comparability and compatibility and therefore fundamental for credit mobility and recognition.

In 2017/2018, the team launched a survey of the existing practice in Dutch HE with regard to the ECTS Course Catalogue. The survey showed that not many HEIs have developed an ECTS Course Catalogue, as outlined in the most recent version of the ECTS Users' Guide. This version was endorsed by the Yerevan Ministerial Conference in 2015. Only a minority of institutions have a clear policy with regard to the ECTS Course Catalogue. In many institutions,

the ECTS Course Catalogue is seen as relevant only in relation to international exchange and the Erasmus+ programme.

To raise awareness about the importance of the ECTS Course Catalogue, the team produced the brochure *The ECTS Course Catalogue in practice* and organised information sessions on the topic at national conferences (Festival Erasmus+ 30 jaar; ECHE national conference).

### **ECTS Grading Table**

The ECTS Grading Table is not a tool which is as yet widely used by Dutch HEIs. HEIs apply different policies with regard to grade conversion. Since 2015, the ECTS Grading Table is an integral part of ECTS. This is based on the philosophy that not only credit recognition is important, but also that justice should be done to the level of performance of students in terms of recognition, as expressed in grades. The team organised a number of information sessions about the ECTS Grading Table (e.g. during the ECHE national conference) to increase the awareness of and knowledge about this recognition instrument.

The team also advised the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) and its member universities on the use of the ECTS Grading Table, by contributing to a policy paper.

### **Support to HEIs**

In the FaBoTo I project, the team provided support to the HEIs on the implementation of the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education in the form of national and regional information and training sessions on the implementation of the ECHE. The compliance and monitoring of the charter were discussed extensively, resulting in a higher awareness and understanding within the Dutch HEIs with regard to the relationship between the ECHE and the quality of mobility activities. The Bologna Experts gave training about the so called “pressure points” of the ECHE (ECTS Course Catalogue, Grading Table and Diploma Supplement).

In the FaBoTo II project, the team decided to undertake fewer national and regional information and training sessions. Instead, the team focused on undertaking support visits to individual HEIs to discuss the implementation of the ECHE with stakeholders within the institution. The visits proved to be very useful in that the Bologna Experts were able to share their knowledge and experience with a wide range of colleagues within HEIs and were able to provide tailor-made advice on the implementation of the ECHE.

### **Bologna Dialogues**

The team started up a dialogue with representatives of VET institutions on the use of ECTS and ECVET credits and learning outcomes related matters. The team set up a feasibility study into the use of credits in VET. However, it proved very difficult to identify a relevant number of institutions that were willing to participate in the study. Hopefully, the study can take place at a future date. The introduction of a credit (reference) system for the VET sector is thought to be important not only to facilitate (international) mobility and recognition, but also to enhance the collaboration between the MBO and HBO sector.

A dialogue was initiated with the Dutch ICT collaborative organisation for education and research (SURF), with the aim to raise awareness regarding the European quality and transparency standards. The talks have led to the adoption by SURF of the ECTS Course Catalogue guidelines for the development of a new national information platform on HE programmes and modules.

Representatives of the team have also been in touch with representatives of DUO, in particular the staff responsible for the implementation of Europass in the Netherlands, about the applied

format and use of the DS. It was agreed that the official format should be applied and the DS should be included in the database of DUO, in addition to the actual Diploma (registration). This requires further action towards the HEIs.

### **ECHE national conference**

Together with the Dutch NA, the team organised a very successful conference on the implementation of the ECHE. The conference was attended by representatives of a large number of Dutch HEIs and representatives of NAs and EHEA Expert teams from various Bologna countries.

The conference included sessions and workshops on:

- Implementation of the ECTS Course Catalogue
- The ECTS Grading Table
- Teaching staff mobility as a tool for professional development
- The ECHE in the 2030s
- The role of the ECHE in KA 107 projects

### **Dialogue with EHEA Experts from across Europe**

Together with the Dutch NA, the team also organised a PLA on Bologna and the Erasmus+ Charter, to which EHEA representatives from 8 Bologna countries were invited.

Team members participated and contributed to the PLA on Joint Programmes and the European Approach for Quality Assurance, which was implemented as part of the FaBoTo II project. Members were also invited to play an active role in PLAs organised by the EC and other countries and (co-)organised information and discussion sessions during EAIE conferences. It shows and confirms that the qualities and activities of the Dutch team are highly valued in Europe.

### ***Continuous role for a team of Dutch Bologna experts***

The Paris Communiqué tells us that significant progress has been made regarding the implementation of the agreed reforms, but that there is obvious unevenness between the 48 countries involved in the Process. The Netherlands has met the three key commitments by introducing the three cycle system – fully compatible with the QF of the EHEA and ECTS based –, has ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and has organised its quality assurance system in compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance. However, this does not mean there is no room for further improvement, because the modernisation of higher education is a moving target, as we are all aware.

Although the formal structures have been implemented, the actual challenge lies in the implementation of the reforms agreed. This is the case for all Bologna signatory countries, and also for the Netherlands. The Paris Communiqué refers explicitly to automatic recognition of comparable higher education qualifications and the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. It also stresses the increasing relevance of ECTS-based short cycle qualifications in preparing students for employment and further studies, as well as contributing to social cohesion. Of course these items are also of relevance for first and cycle degrees programmes (Bachelor and Master), as is stipulated in the Communiqué. For the very first time in a Bologna Process Communiqué, the focus is explicitly on (innovation in) teaching and learning. References are made to work-based learning, interdisciplinary and joint programmes. These all require particular teaching, learning and assessment policies, strategies and approaches.

The Dutch team of Bologna experts is convinced that there is still a world to win, in the Netherlands itself, but also in relation to the other countries involved in the EHEA, and of course the higher education institutions involved. Given the combination of high level expertise and the extended European network of the Dutch team members, the team is convinced that it can assist higher education institutions and their supporting and academic staff in a variety of ways and for different relevant topics.

The team also believes that it is equipped to fulfil the task of acting as a Bologna Process watchdog at political level,

- alerting the Ministry to developments in the Bologna Process and the consequences for Dutch higher education;
- offering advice to the Ministry regarding documents produced in the context of the Bologna Follow-up Group;
- informing and advising the the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) and the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (VH) concerning Bologna/EHEA related issues;
- advising the Ministry on how to overcome obstacles in the implementation of the Bologna Process policy reforms by and in HE institutions;
- advising the NA and HE institutions on the implementation of the Bologna instruments (e.g. through user manuals, training and information meetings).

### ***The Bologna agenda for The Netherlands***

Based on the aims as defined in the Paris Communiqué and based on identified needs by the team, the Bologna agenda for The Netherlands should include the following topics.

#### **Transparency of education offered by Dutch HE institutions**

In the 2014-2018 period, the team intensively addressed the ECTS Course Catalogue and the ECTS Grading Table as instruments for the enhancement of transparency and recognition of education. It would be extremely useful to continue this work, especially in the form of in-house training and counselling. These tools are instrumental for implementing the three key commitments identified in the Paris Communiqué. In the context of the FaBoTo projects I and II, the team has had to conclude that higher education institutions have serious difficulties in implementing and using these instruments successfully and therefore still require (external) support.

#### **Training**

The knowledge of (teaching) staff members in universities and universities of applied sciences about the Bologna Process and the EHEA is limited. Their everyday work, however, is influenced by the developments which have taken and are taking place in the framework of the process. The team of Bologna Experts therefore proposes to develop an on-line (introductory) module on the main aspects of the Bologna Process. It intends to focus on issues which are particularly relevant for the Netherlands. The module can be offered through the Nuffic Academy.

#### **Qualifications Frameworks**

The backbone of the three-cycle system is the Qualifications Framework for the EHEA. It offers an overarching framework, endorsed by the Ministers of Education in 2005, which is the basis for national qualifications frameworks. The framework focuses in particular on the learning process itself. Besides this model, the European Union established in 2008 the Qualifications Framework for LLL, which focuses in particular on the outcomes of the learning process, that is preparation for the world of work. In the Paris Communiqué it is stressed that higher education institutions should provide students and other learners with opportunities for lifelong personal development, enhance their prospects for employment and stimulate them to be active citizens in democratic societies. To meet these aims a new type of framework is required, which is tailored towards academic sectors and subject areas. Recently (2016-2018), such frameworks have been developed in the framework of the EU KA3 Forward-Looking Cooperation Projects by the Tuning project *Measuring and Comparing Achievements of Learning Outcomes in Higher Education in Europe (CALOHEE)*, in which a number of Dutch higher education institutions have played a prominent role. The Dutch team sees a task in not only disseminating these new forward looking Qualifications Reference and Assessment Frameworks, but also in assisting institutions with their implementation. This means supporting institutions and their programmes in the application of the student-centred approach based on well-defined and measurable programme learning outcomes. In this context, the team will seek cooperation with the Dutch Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO), Quality Assurance Agencies, the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (VH), and the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU).

### **Learning and Teaching**

The quality and relevance of learning and teaching is stipulated as the core mission of the structural reforms outlined in the Bologna Process and is included as a key activity of the development of the EHEA in the years to come. The Netherlands, which is the only country in Europe that requires a University Teaching Qualification (Dutch: BKO) of its teaching staff, is at the forefront of reforms. However, institutions still have limited experience in formulating learning in terms of 'relevance', that is the applicability of learning outcomes in practice, phrased in terms of the capability of graduates to perform tasks and roles in practical situations. The team sees a role for itself here in informing the higher education sector about current developments in Europe, for example regarding relevant approaches, such as blended learning, work-based learning, etc., which have also been covered in the aboven-mentioned CALOHEE project.

### **The role of the Short Cycle**

The position of the short cycle degree in The Netherlands has changed as a result of new legislation. The Associate degree is now seen as an independent degree at EQF level 5, according to the decision made as part of the development of the EHEA and explicitly included in the Paris Communiqué. These policy changes have led to a substantial growth in the number of Ad programmes. It will also have an effect on the relation between the VET and higher education sector.

### **Bologna Dialogues**

In view of the fact that in the new Erasmus+ programme, VET institutions will also be required to apply for an ECHE, it appears relevant to continue the discussion with the VET sector on the use of credits and learning outcomes. Given the expertise of the team, it thinks it is able to offer a substantial contribution.

In the framework of FaBoTo II a feasibility study was developed, which will provide insight into the usefulness for (Dutch) VET institutions to introduce a credit system. The study has not yet taken place. However, in view of the developments which influence the collaboration between

VET and HE (e.g. the position of the Associate degree programmes and the developments around the *flexibilisering (deeltijd)onderwijs*), the feasibility study is still relevant.

The second Dialogue is with SURF, the Collaborative organisation for ICT in Dutch education and research. Its adoption of the Bologna tools as the starting point for developing a national Course Catalogue is very promising in relation to the implementation of the ECTS Course Catalogue within the higher education institutions. The organisation has asked the Bologna expert group to join this development to guarantee that the result will be Bologna proof.

### **Joint Programmes**

As stated above, one of the focal points of the Paris Communiqué is the further development of joint programmes and joint degrees. This item is also related to the promotion of the use of the European Approach for Quality Assurance. Although the legislation in the Netherlands is in place now, the development and implementation of joint programmes and degrees is still limited. It requires specific and advanced knowledge and experience, which is not available in most higher education institutions in the Netherlands. The team presumes that it can be of service here not only by offering relevant information, but also by offering support.

### **Peer Learning Activities**

As in the previous period, team members are equipped to play an active role in the development, implementation of and contribution to Peer Learning Activities, both organised in and by the Netherlands and by the European Commission and by and in other EU member countries.

### **Peer support**

In the framework of the policies outlined in the Paris Communiqué to offer peer support and learning / training to other countries regarding the implementation of the three main action points of the Bologna Process, the team is convinced that it is able to support the Dutch government and the European Commission in contributing to this policy given its expertise and experience.

September 2018

The Dutch team of Bologna Experts

Inge Broekman (Universiteit Twente)  
Leonard van der Hout (Hogeschool van Amsterdam)  
Fred Jonker (Wageningen Universiteit)  
Anne-Klaas Schilder (NHL Stenden Hogeschool)  
Anke Thijsen (Saxion Hogeschool)  
Robert Wagenaar (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen)  
Els van der Werf (Hanzehogeschool Groningen)