

Seminar on Bachelor-level Degrees
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on Summit

Benefits of developing bachelor-level degrees

These conclusions concern first degrees or first cycle degrees commonly referred to as bachelor-level degrees. For the sake of clarity, the term bachelor-level degree will be used in this document.

Most European countries have, are introducing or are planning to introduce a higher education degree structure based on a sequence of bachelor, master and doctoral degrees. Reforms in this direction have been carried out in countries with unitary higher education system as well as in countries with binary or dual higher education systems.

Long first study cycles, high drop-out rates and the lengthening of university studies are problems shared by many European countries. Well-planned and efficiently realised bachelor degree programmes help reduce the number of students discontinuing their studies without any qualification and thus facilitates their placement in the labour market while possibly contributing to shortening overall study times. There is a considerable lack of comparability in the European degree structures which is an impediment to mobility.

The bachelor-master (two-tier) structure offers several advantages in comparison with the long, often rather inflexible curricula leading straight up to the master level which have been traditional in many countries. A main benefit is that students can be offered programmes which allow more easily individual flexibility, which also promotes mobility. The two-tier structure makes room for national and international mobility by contributing to the modularisation of study programmes. In the age of life-long learning one of the most significant factors speaking in favour of a two-tier structure is that it allows interaction between studies and working life.

Most of the professionally oriented higher education institutions offer at the moment bachelor-level degrees, and in many countries master-level degrees are being introduced to these institutions. This development may serve the purpose of diversification of higher education provision. It may also contribute to the efficient use of resources because students do not need to change their orientation at the transition point.

The bachelor/master structure has become a world standard. Its adoption will facilitate better recognition of European degrees both within Europe and in the world and will make it more attractive for international students to consider studying in Europe.

Framework for bachelor-level degrees in Europe

The promotion of mobility in Europe requires increased transparency and comparability of European higher education qualifications. In order to achieve this need some common criteria for the definition of bachelor degrees are needed. This framework should be flexible enough to allow national variations, but at the same time clear enough to serve as a definition. These broad definitions should be achieved already in the Prague Summit of Higher Education.

The following factors could be seen as useful common denominators for a European bachelor-level degree:

Bachelor-level degree is a higher education qualification the extent of which is 180 to 240 credits (ECTS). It normally takes three to four years of full-time study to complete the degree. Bachelor-level degrees play an important role in

the life-long learning paradigm and learning to learn skills should be an essential part of any bachelor-level degree.

It is important to note that the bachelor-level degrees, often referred to as first degrees can be taken at either traditional universities or at professionally-oriented higher education institutions. Programmes leading to the degree may, and indeed should have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs. In order to increase transparency it is important that the specific orientation and profile and learning outcomes of a given qualification are included in its title and explained on the Diploma Supplement issued to the student. Information on different study programmes should be transparent to enable the students make informed choices.

Even bachelor degrees which serve as an intermediate qualification preparing students for further study should be based on a proper curriculum. They should not only be seen as a part of a longer curriculum, as some students may wish to change direction or to choose a graduate programme or specialisation offered at another institution.

Labour market relevance

In the European tradition higher education has never been an island. There is a strong need for close interaction between higher education and society at large. Labour market relevance should not undermine higher education's cultural value.

There are many different ways in which bachelor-type degrees can be relevant to the common European labour market. While many curricula ought to be geared towards specific professions and immediate entrance onto the labour market, others need to prepare students for further studies and a later entrance. All curricula should include transversal skills and competencies required from all active citizens in Europe. This entails long-term development of educational contents.

In European countries labour markets expect higher education qualifications from more and more young people. This is likely to be more difficult in countries offering only long one-tier qualifications. The higher education system is expected to offer independent, shorter degrees of the bachelor type geared specifically for labour market needs. At the same time there are needs for updating and upgrading qualifications and skills of the present labour force.

Disciplinary issues

Different disciplines have characters of their own and they have to be taken into consideration when developing degree structures. It should be clear that in some fields which involve professional accreditation bachelor-level degrees will not always serve as independent qualifications leading to full labour market relevant professional competence. However, in those fields too an intermediate qualification may be worth developing for the reasons mentioned above.

In all fields, reasonable transition mechanisms between bachelor and master programmes should be established, both within the same higher education sector and between different higher education sectors. These transition mechanisms should enhance also interdisciplinarity.

Reforming structures only is not enough. Transparency and comparability of transferable core competencies expected from graduates of bachelor and master programmes in broad subject areas are needed at the European level. Higher education institutions and their European networks involving professional bodies and other stakeholders should develop these common guidelines.

