

Radiography education in Europe, vision of HENRE (Higher Education Network for Radiography Education)

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Radiography education across Europe is organized at different levels ranging from no specific educational programmes, to regulated vocational training programmes and up to university undergraduate and postgraduate degree level. The content and duration of national education programmes depends very much on the status of the radiography profession in the individual country with national professional/legislative registration being a requirement for practice in some countries. A profession is said to be regulated when access and exercise is subject to the possession of a specific professional qualification and within the EU, the radiography and nuclear medicine technology professions are regulated by Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications. However, member states retain the right to lay down the minimum level of qualification required to ensure the quality of the services provided on their territory.

With one of the aims of the European Union (EU) being the free movement of labour within the EU, the enormous difference in the educational qualifications of radiographers has inhibited this free movement.

During the 1990s and the early part of this century, the trend in radiographer education in Europe saw the move from a vocational training base into higher education following the Bologna process and the Tuning methodology. The Bologna declaration (1999) signed by Ministers of Education from 29 European countries initiated the commencement of the Bologna process for the creation of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. This European reform process now involves 47 countries and seeks the pan European requirement for the EHEA of easily readable and comparable degrees organised in a three-cycle structure (e.g. bachelor-master-doctorate) (1).

An EU funded Life Long Learning project entitled Tuning Educational Structures in Europe (shortened to Tuning) developed a methodology to design and deliver degree programmes using a learning outcomes and competence framework approach linked to ECTS credits. HENRE (Higher Education Network for Radiography in Europe) has been instrumental in the development of generic and subject specific competences at 1st cycle degree level and producing a Tuning template for radiography degrees in Europe (2). The term Tuning was deliberately chosen to reflect the idea that universities do not look for uniformity in their degree programmes or any sort of unified, prescriptive or definitive European curricula but simply points of reference, convergence and common understanding (3, 4).

It is apparent that although degree programmes for radiography staff are not yet universal in Europe radiographers and others are involved in imaging at a high level of expertise and competence. Most member states in the EU are currently developing their own National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) that are compatible with the overarching framework of qualifications for the EHEA which define learning outcomes for each of the three cycles. A qualifications framework encompasses all the qualifications in a higher education system – or in an entire education system if the framework is developed for this purpose. It shows what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on the basis of a given qualification – that is, it shows the expected learning outcomes for a given qualification. It also shows how the various qualifications in the education or higher education system interact, that is how learners can move between qualifications. Qualifications frameworks therefore focus on outcomes more than on procedures, and several learning paths – including those of lifelong learning – may lead to a given qualification.

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a common European reference framework which links countries' qualifications systems together, acting as a translation device to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems in Europe. It has two principal aims: to promote citizens' mobility between countries and to facilitate their lifelong learning. Increasingly, lifelong learning is seen as a cross cutting issue, inherent in all aspects of the Bologna Process. Ministers' goals for lifelong learning will be substantially realised by improving the recognition of prior learning, including non formal and informal learning and through national qualifications frameworks which are also an important tool in supporting lifelong learning (5). The core of the EQF consists of eight reference levels described through learning outcomes and the NQFs will demonstrate how these levels interface with the EQF.

Vocational and work related qualifications are changing to become more responsive to the needs of employers and more accessible to a wide range of learners, the European Network of Information Centres (ENIC) and the

National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) are the starting points for the recognition of diplomas and qualifications for the purposes of admission to further study (6).

HENRE as the educational wing of the EFRS is composed of a number of educational institutions (predominantly universities) across Europe who offer radiography education and training who will be working towards the development of benchmark statements which enable the description of learning outcomes for radiographers at the various levels of the EQF. The hope is that national societies of radiographers will use these learning outcomes in their negotiations with the appropriate Ministries – education and/or health in order to put forward a case for radiography education at higher educational level and that a European standard for radiography education can be achieved in the long run.

European directives can have a strong influence on the education of radiographers as directives are required to be adopted by the member states and implemented in their national legal framework. One clear example of an influential directive is the Medical Exposure Directive (MED) 97/43/ Euratom which describes the general principles of radiation protection of individuals undergoing exposure to ionising radiation related to medical exposures. This directive requires all persons that apply ionising radiation for medical purposes must have adequate education in radiation protection and as education is a national responsibility, this directive does not specify the level of education. A survey undertaken in 2003, found that this MED directive has been implemented into member states laws in very different ways (6). Currently the European Commission has this Directive under review by a working group with the aim to produce a revised directive; the EFRS has been invited to comment on articles of the MED directive and HENRE as the educational wing is currently working towards the development of 1st post competencies in the area of radiation protection.

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