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12-13 October 2006

INITIAL DISCUSSION ON POSSIBLE ARRANGEMENTS FOR SUPPORTING THE CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT OF THE EHEA POST 2010

Introduction

1. When the Board met in June and September, there was some initial discussion about how BFUG might fulfil the Ministers' request (contained in the Bergen communiqué) that BFUG "explore the issues" surrounding the arrangements necessary to support the continuing development of the EHEA beyond 2010. Drawing on those discussions, this paper suggests that BFUG recommends to Ministers that the current informal arrangements are working well, and that we do not foresee any need for change. This should however be kept under review, as we approach 2010.

Background

2. In preparation for the Ministerial meeting in Bergen, the previous Secretariat did some preliminary thinking on the appropriate support mechanisms for the EHEA post-2010 and tried to stimulate a first discussion amongst Ministers. In the event this was not taken up. The Bergen Communiqué asks BFUG to explore the issues, but does not set a timescale for reaching any conclusion or making any recommendations.

Comment

3. There is widespread recognition that the inter-governmental, partnership approach adopted within the Bologna Process has been successful in bringing about substantial changes at national and institutional level to create a series of independent, but increasing compatible, higher education systems. With its commitment to increasing the quality of European higher education, through curricula reform, increasing autonomy for higher education institutions, greater openness and transparency through compatible qualifications frameworks based on robust quality assurance systems, the Bologna Process is increasing the attractiveness and competitiveness of European higher education.

4. It is clear that change on the scale necessary takes time before it is fully embedded and implemented. In the short-term, we should not reduce our efforts to achieve the realisation of the key components of the EHEA by 2010. However, in a number of countries, particularly but not exclusively those newer to the Process, it is possible that not all the Bologna action lines will have been fully implemented by 2010. And, in any case, the need to ensure the attractiveness and competitiveness of European higher education will not stop, come 2010. Higher education systems will continue to need to adapt and develop in response to new societal, economic and global demands. For all these reasons, there is likely to be a continuing need to work together to maintain the strength of European higher education, working collaboratively to share good practice, to build capacity across the EHEA and ensure its continuing coherence.

5. In the earlier discussions during the 2003-05 period, a number of possible options were identified to support the continuing development of the EHEA. These included:

- maintain the current arrangements, i.e. continue with the current pattern of BFUG meetings chaired by the country currently holding the EU Presidency; work taken forward by a mixture of working groups and seminars in partnership with the key stakeholders (institutions and students); a Secretariat provided by the country next hosting the bi-ennial Ministerial conference;
- develop a form of self-certification against agreed characteristics of the EHEA, with the onus on individual countries to ensure they meet the agreed commitments and possibly some form of peer review;
- build closer links to the Lisbon Process, including inviting the European Commission to provide a permanent secretariat to support the Process;
- develop a legal instrument, along the lines of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, including inviting the Council of Europe to provide a permanent Secretariat.

6. Advantages and disadvantages can be attributed to each option. The current arrangements are dependent on good will, but have the advantage of having worked well thus far and in many ways the willingness of countries to undertake the necessary reform has been enhanced by the fact that the process is relatively straightforward and unbureaucratic. Some form of self certification process is consistent with practice being developed within the Bologna Process, but possibly suggests a commitment to a fixed “ideal” which is not compatible with the pace of change in our 21st century world. Inviting the European Commission to provide a permanent secretariat might be seen as leading to the exclusion of the 20 participating countries outwith the EU. The process of agreeing and implementing a legal instrument is lengthy and complex, and as in the case of a self certification system, suggests a rigid set of criteria fixed at one point in time which would not be able to adapt.

7. It is not clear that any of the options identified above would necessarily be better than simply continuing the current, collaborative, partnership approach. It has facilitated significant change and supported the concept of the EHEA as an area based on the increasing compatibility of diverse national HE systems.

Suggested approach

8. Based on the initial analysis outlined above, we suggest that we inform Ministers that, as requested in the Bergen Communiqué, BFUG has had a discussion about possible arrangements for supporting the continuing development of the EHEA beyond 2010. Our conclusion is that the current informal arrangements work well and that there is no need for a more structured or formal approach. However, we will keep this under review, as we approach 2010. This outcome could

be reflected in the London Communiqué to be agreed by Ministers in London, May 2007.

Conclusion

9. BFUG is invited to:

- agree the suggested recommendation that we should retain the current informal approach, but keep this under review as we approach 2010.

Bologna Secretariat
September 2006