



EUROPEAN
Higher Education Area



eu2020.de



Federal Ministry
of Education
and Research



KULTUSMINISTER
KONFERENZ



Department
for Education



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot

Report to the BFUG Board on progress in EHEA implementation by Belarus

Ann Katherine Isaacs
BFUG Vice-Chair

I. Introductory comments

The present report is informal in character; its purpose is to summarise and evaluate progress since the Paris Ministerial Conference. It is presented to the BFUG Board as a input for discussion and can be developed further, or differently, in view of the Berlin BFUG meeting as will be deemed appropriate.

The period of slightly more than two years since the Paris Ministerial Conference has seen fairly constant interaction between the Belarus delegation and the Vice-Chair, and to a lesser extent with the Board itself on occasion of the presentation of the reports from Belarus on achievement during 2018 and 2019, and of the workplans for 2019 and 2020.

At present the widespread and ongoing political upheaval in the country after the elections of 9 August have made it impossible for the Belarusian delegation to comment on the draft except in very general terms. The ultimate results of the present political situation are for the moment impossible to foresee, and inevitably will have impact on the velocity and direction of future implementation of the reforms mandated at the accession of Belarus to the EHEA. Still, it is hoped that this draft can provide some elements, however provisional, for a discussion on any recommendations that can be made for the future.

II. Background: from Yerevan to Paris

The EHEA Ministers accepted Belarus' request to become a member of the EHEA at the Yerevan Ministerial Conference in 2015. In the Yerevan Communiqué we read:

Ministers welcome the application of Belarus to join the EHEA and in particular its commitment to implement the reforms, 16 years after the launch of the Bologna Process, to make its higher education system and practice compatible with those of other EHEA countries. On that basis, Ministers welcome Belarus as a member of the EHEA and look forward to working with the national authorities and stakeholders to implement the reforms identified by the BFUG and included in the agreed roadmap attached to the Belarusian accession. Ministers ask the BFUG to report on the implementation of the roadmap in time for the 2018 ministerial conference.

Thus, with the motivation that it was joining the EHEA at a late date, when the other countries had already had time to implement (and contribute to designing) the Bologna reforms, Belarus was given a Roadmap containing indications of deadlines for actions to be taken. The BFUG, responsible for reporting on the implementation of the Roadmap, set up an Advisory Group to assist Belarus.

In the three year interval between the Yerevan and Paris Ministerial Conferences, the Advisory Group undertook extensive interactions, including peer learning activities, with the Belarusian authorities and stakeholders. A relevant number of Capacity Building and Mobility initiatives were funded by the European Commission to support implementation. The Co-Chairs of the Advisory Group prepared and presented a

Report to the Paris conference¹. The Report details accomplishments and tasks still to be completed according to the order in which they were mentioned in the Roadmap:

Structural Reforms:

Qualifications Framework

Quality Assurance

Recognition

Transparency instruments

Mobility of higher education staff and students and internationalisation

Lifelong learning and the social dimension of higher education

Fundamental Values of the EHEA

Finally, the Roadmap mentioned organizational matters, such as the obligation to nominate responsible persons with a good knowledge of English and in general to cooperate with the BFUG.

The Report indicated that the changes planned had been accomplished only in part; in some instances drafts of reforms had been elaborated but not approved. In several cases it seemed that there had not been full understanding of the implications and, above all, the connected nature of the needed reforms. In other words it seemed that the vision of the Bologna commitments as a whole in which the various aspects and instruments depend on each other had not been thoroughly clarified.

The conclusions of the Report ('General Assessment') were that although "some limited progress has been made in individual areas", the Roadmap would not be fulfilled by 2018. Further efforts would be required across the board, and the crucial nature of the fundamental values was underlined. The response of the Belarusian Ministry of Education, also included in the General Assessment, showed a different view of the situation, its causes and the way forward:

The roadmap has been implemented and is being implemented on the basis of the authority and powers of the Ministry of Education. In most cases the Ministry of Education can initiate creating or amending laws, however, the power of adopting them belongs to the Parliament. Bearing that in mind, Belarus doesn't want to possess a special status in reference to evaluating the implementation. We'd like to maintain a constructive dialogue within the framework of the cyclic procedure or any other procedure proposed by AG 3, which will be applied to other countries that face issues of insufficient implementation.

The recommendation of the co-chairs and authors of the Report was that there should be a specific support procedure for the following period, in order to ensure that the key aspects of the Roadmap would be implemented by 2020.

The Belarus question was addressed by the Ministers in Paris in the Communiqué²:

Belarus joined the EHEA in 2015 on the basis of an agreed roadmap. We acknowledge that some first reforms have been initiated, but also that substantial challenges remain. We welcome Belarus' commitment to work with and be supported by the partners in the implementation of the proposed strategy for 2018-2020.

The solution adopted was to accept the Strategic Action Plan³ proposed by Belarus, thus indicating a shift to giving greater responsibility and agency to the country itself. This was in line with the general orientation of the EHEA which led in Paris to the creation of the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group (BICG) and

¹ Support for the Belarus Roadmap. Final Report, http://ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/2018_Paris/72/3/MEN_conf-EHEA_AG2_03_950723.pdf

² <http://www.ehea.info/page-ministerial-conference-paris-2018>

³ Draft Strategic Action Plan on Implementation of the major objectives of the education system development in line with the EHEA principles and tools, Annex II to the Paris Communiqué [http://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/EHEAParis2018_Communique_AppendixII_952775.pdf].

the decision to trial peer support groups (Thematic Peer Groups – TPG) to encourage and facilitate implementation of the ‘Key Commitments’, not only in Belarus but in all EHEA countries.

III. Implementation during 2018

Belarus initially submitted a quite detailed workplan for the remaining part of 2018. This was presented to the BFUG in its Vienna meeting in November 2018⁴. This workplan, approved by the Minister of Education and by the Presidium of the Rectors’ Council, lists in table form 20 ‘activities’, indicating the timeframe for accomplishing them (from July to December 2018) and the responsible body (in most cases the Ministry itself, often the NIHE [National Institute of Higher Education], and/or the HEIs. The activities described included the nomination of the ‘National Working Group’, the nomination of the members of the BICG’s Thematic Peer Groups for the implementation of the Key Commitments; workshops, seminars, study visits, a proposal to the BFUG about ‘consultants/experts’, review of the Draft NQF, amendments to existing norms on the approval of ‘standards’ and ‘curricula’. It also foresaw the first stage of elaboration of new educational standards and curricula and new core curricula for the first cycle, consultations with the BFUG, development of a multilingual draft DS, and an examination of the approach used in other EHEA countries to ensuring employment of graduates (a delicate matter because of its connection to the obligatory work stages required from graduates). All in all, an ambitious workplan to continue to lay the ground for implementation of many key aspects of the EHEA commitments.

The report on the activities carried out from May to December 2018 was presented to the Board in February 2019 for its meeting in Skopje⁵. The report, helpfully, was organized according to the order of the topics listed in the original Roadmap. The Board had some questions about it, and asked the Vice-Chair to communicate both its appreciation for the ongoing work and its comments and questions to the Belarusian delegation. This was done with a letter and a long Annex, showing in boxes the Board’s questions with regard to each topic. In general the questions aimed at gaining a clearer idea of what had been accomplished concretely, and to what extent the stakeholders, especially but not only students, had been informed and involved. Belarus replied, point by point, sending explanations and clarifications, and also pointing out that, in its view, many of the questions had already been answered previously.

IV. Action plan for 2019 and Report on Implementation

During the same months the Belarusian delegation also elaborated and shared its draft workplan for 2019. This was eventually finalised and signed by the Minister on 25 February 2019. This plan was again conceived in table form, and follows roughly the structure of the roadmap and was accompanied by a plan for inviting experts to assist and advise in the implementation process.

Belarus presented its report on the achievements of 2019 for the online Board meeting chaired by Ukraine⁶. This report presents, in table form, the actions and activities described in the 2019 Action Plan, and the corresponding achievements, again following the structure of the Roadmap. The achievements can be summarised as follows.

1. Qualification Framework

The NQF, the BelQF is revised and ‘finalized’ after a series of consultations. It was approved by the Minister of Education on 30 December 2019. A draft on the Application of the Credit System was posted for discussion on the www.edustandart.by/ website and was also discussed with the BFUG Vice-Chair (and ECTS expert). There was a meeting of the Rectors’ Council on implementing the second cycle.

⁴ http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Board_RO_MK_64_9_Belarus.pdf

⁵ http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Board_RO_MK_64_9_Belarus.pdf

⁶ http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Board_HR_UA_70_9_Belarusian_Strategic_Action_Plan.pdf

2. Quality Assurance

Information on the present system was submitted to a large group of relevant international experts in order to finalize the “Concept of the National Education Quality Assurance Agency”, and the timeframe for joining ENQA and EQAR. There was a study visit to FINEEC. The “Concept” was further refined and included in the World Bank project in course of finalization. The timeline (launch of the agency in 2022) was approved by the Rectors’ Council.

3. Recognition of Qualifications

Mutual recognition agreements were signed with several countries; the information on the Belarus ENIC webpage was updated; supported by participation in the Thematic Peer Support Group on LRC, guidelines for the recognition of refugees’ qualifications were drafted, and a new database to facilitate recognition procedures was under development

4. Transparency tools

The ‘Component 2’ of the project being finalized with the World Bank stipulates ‘modernization’ including the use of learning outcomes and updated contents for HE. A workshop was held on this topic, sponsored by the WB, Belarus and with the support of the UK; a guidebook was published and the WB supplied all HEIs with it. This issue specifically is to be considered at the end of 2020. With regard to implementation of the Diploma Supplement, a draft law was prepared, and a project carried out to prepare for a digital edition.

5. Mobility of higher education staff and students

Achievements listed are an increasing number of HE programmes in English, available for foreign students: 27 HEIs offered 72 first cycle and 109 second cycle programmes, more than double the number of the previous year. A ‘Resolution’ on sending teaching staff abroad was approved; 19 foreign citizens were admitted to study in Belarusian HEIs at public expense. In the Component 2 of the World Bank project, there is to be funding for monitoring of students ‘using Eurostudent methodology’, this to begin in the last quarter of 2020. Several further activities prepared ground work for the further ‘promotion’ abroad of the Belarus ‘brand’ in education.

6. Lifelong Learning and Social dimension of Higher Education

Here the aspect highlighted is the review of the system of job placements of graduates. A workshop on the monitoring of graduate employment was held with the support of the UK Embassy and the World Bank; a Guidebook was published. One HEI (BSU) launched an internet portal to help graduates to search for a first job on-line; the Federation of Trade Unions organized a similar service. BSU was proud of a good ranking in the QS employment category. Guidelines are planned in the future for RPL.

7. Fundamental values

The aspects of the fundamental values considered are basically the participation of students and staff in HE governing bodies, and the creation of ‘favorable conditions’ for the formation of ‘public organizations’ in the education sector, with a view to facilitating the protection of rights of staff and students. The achievements: the development of a draft on ‘Youth Policy Development’, 2020-2030, which in the future should be approved by the government. This draft and other issues were discussed in joint sessions by the Minister and the ‘Public National Student Council’. Students were involved in state accreditation commissions for HEIs and HE degree programmes.

8. Organizational Support

This section comprises five aspects: first, providing information to interested parties, which includes events, publications and also uploading legal documents on the www.edustandart.by/ website. The second regards workshops and events held by the Ministry and the NIHE. The third is the formation and support of the BFUG delegation and its participation in the working groups, peer groups and other activities. The fourth is the formulation and approval of the Report here summarised. The fifth and last is the elaboration of the workplan

for 2020, which was submitted to the Presidium of the Rectors' Council in February 2020, and which we summarise below.

V. Action Plan for 2020

Belarus prepared a draft workplan for 2020, which after discussion with the Vice-Chair, was finalised⁷. The workplan again is organized according to the general categories established in the original Roadmap, listing the foreseen dates for accomplishing the many subpoints, and the bodies or entities responsible. It continues in the numbering of the items the Report on achievement during 2019. In summary:

1. Qualification framework

The key point to be accomplished during 2020 is the "Self-certification ... in accordance with established criteria and procedures" of the National Qualification Framework, the BelQF, which had been under discussion and development for some time (subpoint 1.2). This logically includes a subpoint (1.3) on refining the understanding and application of ECTS, which is supposed to be the object of expert discussion during the first half of the year, and revision and approval in the second half. There are also points on the correlation with the existing degree structure (1.1) and on the development of 'professional standards' in relation to the new BelQF (1.4), as well as meetings of the Rectors' Council and Presidium on improving digitalisation in training (1.5), and on the relationship between the labor market, professional standards and educational content (1.6).

2. Quality Assurance

The activities and target dates are those agreed and detailed in the World Bank project (which the parties later finalised and signed). Thus item 2.1 is the formation of the Working Group on establishing the 'National Agency for the Quality of Education'; item 2.2, to be accomplished within 1 month from the signature of the loan agreement between the WB and Belarus, includes the development and approval of the Working Group's action plan, which comprises development of the normative acts so that the Agency can begin functioning from 1 January 2022 in conformity with the ESG and other support for the Agency. During the first semester of 2020 there is to be a study of international experience of QA agencies; in the second semester the preparation of the relevant draft normative acts, and a meeting of the Presidium of Rectors on the theme.

3. Qualification Recognition

The central element of this topic is an analysis of the national legislation in order to ascertain its compliance with the UNESCO Global Convention, to be carried out by June 2020 (item 3.3); why there is no reference to the Lisbon Recognition Convention is not clear.

4. Transparency tools

The first item contemplates the fundamental and very ambitious aim of 'designing the content of the higher education specialities' in accordance with the new BelQF, an activity to be completed in 2020. It is not clear why this activity (subpoint 4.1) is under this heading rather than under "1. Qualification Framework", nor is it clear how it will be carried out (the HEIs are indicated as the responsible bodies). The other items under this heading regard on the one hand 'credits' although ECTS is not mentioned (item 4.2); learning outcomes (item 4.3); and the Diploma Supplement (items 4.4 and 4.5): the guidelines for issuing the DS are to be completed by April 2020; a pilot project on a digital version by the end of the year. The heading also includes a meeting of the Presidium of the Council of Rectors.

⁷ Annex

5. Mobility of faculty and students, internationalization

Here the topics touched are several although the most comprehensive is the last. Item 5.7 refers to 'expansion of the practice of the academic mobility' of staff and students, as 'part' of the 'State program "Education and Youth Policy" for 2016-2020'. This to be carried out by HEIs; there are no numerical targets or information on trends. Expansion and development are also planned for English language programmes (5.1); grants for persons not residing in Belarus (5.2); guidelines for joint programmes with foreign partners (5.4); an internationalization strategy for HEIs – including promotion in international rankings (5.5); measures for the promotion of Education in Belarus brand. There is also a mention of 'certification testing' in Russian and Belarusian as a foreign language.

6. Lifelong learning and the social dimension of higher education

This general aim has only 4 subpoints, of which 3 are analyses: item 6.1, to be completed by July 2020, is of the 'stratification of students' in order to identify under-represented groups; item 6.2 is an analysis of the implementation in Belarus of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; item 6.3 an analysis of the implementation during 2019 of the action plan for inclusive education: both to be finished by March 2020. The last point is enhancement of Belarusian HEIs standing in the QS ranking of graduate employability.

7. The fundamental values of the EHEA

Under this heading the main concern seems again to be exploring how students can be involved more closely in decisions regarding higher education. Thus subpoint 7.1 entails drafting a resolution to be made by the Council of Ministers on 'State Youth Policy'; item 7.2 is a workshop in 'gifted youth'; item 7.3 foresees a discussion with the 'Public Republican Student Council' on modernization of HE; 7.4 foresees the participation of students in commissions for accreditation of programmes; 7.5 is to be carried out by the higher education institutions, and regards support to 'public associations' in the field of education, not only for students, but also for teachers, to support their 'development' and protect their rights. The activities culminate in 'meetings' of the Rectors' Council with the 'Public Republican Student Council'. The only explicit gesture in the direction of other fundamental values is item 7.6 which encourages signing the Magna Charta Universitatum, but which may indicate confusion about who the signatories might be.

8. Information and development

This general item includes the intent to update the content on the EHEA on the Republic's website (8.1), for the NOPE (the National Erasmus+ Office) to inform interested parties about the development of Bologna tools (8.2); conducting seminars and events to inform students and staff about the EHEA and 'the processes of introducing elements of the EHEA into the national higher education system (8.3). Furthermore it is foreseen that teaching staff and students participate in fact finding visits to other EHEA countries (8.4, again under the aegis of the NOPE and the HEIs).

Directly related to the mechanics of carrying out the workplan: 8.5 foresees quarterly meetings of the national working group on the implementation of EHEA tools in Belarus; 8.6. on ensuring the presence of representatives of the country in the relevant international meetings and events; 8.7 foresees the preparation and presentation of the report on implementation of the 2020 workplan itself (item 8.7, in January 2021); and finally, again in January 2021, the workplan for the coming year (8.7).

Developments during 2020

During the BFUG meeting in Kyiv the Belarusian delegate Elena Betenya took the floor to announce that the BelQF, the Belarus NQF, has been approved, and that self-certification is proceeding. She also praised the BICG initiative and the TPGs (in which she and other Belarusian colleagues have participated actively) as an effective support system for countries implementing 'Bologna'.

In addition to the NQF, other projects for reform have been drafted, discussed and revised since the second half of 2019. These are on Learning Outcomes, on ECTS, on Recognition. According to the most recent news, these were to be adopted in autumn 2020. On 23 June 2020 the World Bank officials and the Belarusian

authorities signed the largescale project for educational reform which includes the implementation of an independent Quality Assurance Agency.

Final Considerations:

At the beginning of September 2020, and thus what would have been well past the date for the 'Rome' Ministerial Conference if the pandemic had not forced postponement, it is appropriate to formulate an overall evaluation of progress with regard to Belarus and its achievement since 2015.

A careful comparison of the Roadmap, the implementation reports for 2018 and 2019, and the action plans for 2018, 2019 and 2020, indicate that the process of implementation has been significantly slower than planned and agreed, but that progress has been and is being made.

The impression, noted in the 2018 Report, persists that the deep connection between the various facets of the EHEA commitments has not been fully understood. From the Action Plans and reports on implementation it seems at times that each 'piece' of Bologna is pursued separately making it difficult to ensure overall progress. This may be an effect of the method of reporting and should be explored.

In any case there appears to have been a degree of misunderstanding by Belarus of what was being requested by the Board, and possibly by the Board with respect to the intentions of those reporting. The former may have contributed to an only partly justified impression of lack of transparency in the reports presented; the latter to appearing to assume a 'naming and shaming' attitude. A natural desire to 'gild the lily' may have led Belarus to present as successes events and seminars related to the roadmap targets while the Board expected to see rapid proof of legal and normative change and concrete implementation in the reality of higher education.

Further complicating matters have been the reports produced by certain Belarusian student organizations and relayed to the Board through the European Students Union (ESU). Various denunciations of limits to students' freedom to self-organize, to travel freely and generally to making their views known without fear of reprisal have been voiced. Those responsible for the implementation process have denied that these reports are fact-based, and have insisted on the value of their work to ensure increasing transparency and greater student involvement.

Reasons for satisfaction and greater optimism are not lacking. In particular we note that work has progressed in many directions. It seems important that the draft documents relating to the key commitments (of which approval and implementation seemed imminent, at least until the most recent weeks) are publicly available on the www.edustandart.by/ website for comment and discussion, and they have received a large number of 'hits'.

In particular, the case of Belarus seems to confirm strongly the validity of the peer support method. I have been able to observe personally the importance of direct interaction between the Belarusian delegates and delegates from other EHEA countries, both those that are well ahead of Belarus in implementation and those that are still facing challenges during the TPG meetings. The realization that many of the issues faced are not unique to Belarus and that it is not simple to transform a higher education system – for any country – has been liberating, and has fostered more incisive action.

Participation in the TPGs, and the structured support offered (and the discipline imposed) by the World Bank, are positive factors that suggest that, if the political situation in the country allows it, further progress towards full implementation will be made.

Annex:

Workplan for 2020