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Advisory Group 2 "Support for the Belarus roadmap"

DRAFT FINAL REPORT

For the convenience of reading, the text of the Belarus Roadmap is in the boxes.

BELARUS ROADMAP FOR HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM

In view of the fact that Belarus will be joining the European Higher Education Area 16 years after the launch of the Bologna Process, the Belarusian authorities and the BFUG will work together on developing and implementing a roadmap for higher education reform in Belarus in accordance with the values, principles and goals of the EHEA, as detailed below.

Under this roadmap the Belarusian authorities would, in full respect of the powers of the Government, the national parliament, higher education institutions, and other stakeholders:

Introductory Remarks

The Advisory Group 2 Belarus Roadmap has based its work on information gathered from, as well as on direct exchanges of views with, a broad range of stakeholders in Belarusian higher education. These include the Ministry of Education; the National Institute for Higher Education which has a public mandate with regard to the EHEA, representatives of the Rectors' conference; individual rectors and other institutional leaders; representatives of officially recognised student organisations as well as of student organisations that are not recognised by public authorities; and representatives of other stakeholder organisations, including the Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee and Ad Hoc Commission of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Belarusian National Platform and the Office for a Democratic Belarus, some of which are not recognised by the Belarusian authorities. The Advisory Group has also consulted non-Belarusian organisations and individuals with good knowledge of higher education in Belarus. This broad gathering of information has been essential to the Advisory Group's work. On some issues, information provided by different stakeholders has been so divergent that it has proved almost impossible for the AG to establish a clear picture of the current factual situation.

Ways of working in the Advisory Group 2

The Advisory Group met six times in the last two years to follow-up on and assessed the progress towards achieving the commitments of the Roadmap. Several Peer Learning Activities were organised with a wide variety of stakeholders of European and Belarus higher education institutions and authorities in order to involve all relevant actors within the Belarus higher education sector. Topics of the Peer Learning Activities included all aspects of the reforms necessary for implementing the Bologna tools adequately (Independent Quality Assurance and Accreditation, Qualification Frameworks, the use of ECTS and Learning Outcomes, Introduction of Bachelor and Master programmes, institutional take-up of Bologna reforms, student participation in practice, Mobility and Internationalisation, Diploma Supplement, funding possibilities via Erasmus+ and national programs like the German Academic Exchange Service, etc.). The Advisory Group also organised site-visits to higher education institutions with long-time experience introducing and using all relevant Bologna tools and structures.

In addition, Belarus benefited from the EU Erasmus+ support to reform higher education (13 ongoing capacity building projects), to increase the internationalisation and mobility (over 200 bilateral projects supporting 1.400 individual academic exchanges), to increase awareness about Bologna tools and practices (2 technical assistance missions organised in October 2016 and April 2017).

Introduction to the Belarus higher education system

Access to higher education in Belarus is normally at the age of 17 after graduating from the secondary school system after 11th grade: it is noted that Belarusian students access higher education at an earlier age than students in most EHEA-countries. A centralised higher education access exam in three subjects (depending on the subject a student wants to study) has to be passed. Depending on the results of the exam a study place will be offered. Studying in Belarus entails fee paying for the majority of students. Roundabout 40% of study places are state subsidised, so that students with best results in the access exam are offered a free of charge study place and a stipend. Central regulation of higher education and of curricula development is still predominant. During the course of the work of Advisory Group 2, it became obvious that there is still a confusion of concepts and terms of the Bologna Process. It became clear that generic Qualification Frameworks were rather understood as Occupational Standards Frameworks, that study programmes are seen as leading to a certain occupation, that quality assurance and enhancement was rather understood as quality control, that student-centred learning and teaching is still to be developed, and that ECTS was still considered primarily as workload and not as defined and assessed Learning Outcomes.

There have been several delays in the implementation and the set timelines of the Belarus Roadmap which will be elaborated in the separate chapters of this report.

In parallel with the work of the Advisory Group, a New Education Code was drafted by Belarus authorities. As its adoption was removed from the agenda of the Belarus Parliament late 2017, the exact changes that are likely to be included, especially those with relevance and conformity to the necessary Bologna reforms cannot be judged. References to the New Education Code in this report should be understood as referring to the latest version of which the Advisory Group was informed, prior to its withdrawal from consideration in Parliament.

Finally, the Co-chairs would like to underline, that not all reforms outlined in the Roadmap require a legal basis, but may and could be accomplished through sound institutional implementation and practice without legislative change.

Structural reforms

Qualifications framework

Commit to developing a National Qualifications framework compatible with the QF-EHEA.

Commit to establishing a timetable for this work and to identify a national steering group by the end of 2015 and to launch work on the NQF in the first half of 2016.

As part of this work, commit to introducing the three-cycle system on the agreed Bologna model, establishing a first degree of 180 - 240 ECTS credits and consequently to gradually phase out the remaining 5 year *bakalavr* degree, and subsequently measure student workload in ECTS, as stipulated in the revised ECTS Users' Guide.

Assessment:

The draft Education Code of the Republic of Belarus (the latest one that the Advisory Group had access to) looks as if it is generally in line with the Bologna model and meets some of the Roadmap requirements concerning the introduction of a three cycle higher education system. Yet, the fact that the three cycle system was introduced while the two cycle system is still in place, substantively complicates the sound implementation of the Bologna model. Currently, two systems run in parallel and it is unclear how long and to what extent this situation is intended to last. In several countries, a limited number of study programmes – medicine is a typical example – is not organised according to the three cycle system. However, in Belarus, the exceptions to the three cycle system are more numerous and the timetable of further reforms is uncertain. It still remains unclear when the revised Education Code will be adopted and how the BA and MA-cycles will be linked to the NQF.

- **National qualification framework (NQF):** The NQF is not yet in place. The new Education Code does not mention the NQF and also does not mention programmes that are referenced to the NQF. The adoption of NQF has been postponed. A national consultation with stakeholders has been conducted in 2017. The draft qualification frameworks presented to the advisory group was

rather an occupational standards framework than a qualification framework outlining generic competences laid down along the Dublin Descriptors.

Remaining tasks:

- Discussion of the NQF details,
 - Setting of a concrete adoption date and
 - Referencing higher education qualifications to it.
- **ECTS:** It is claimed that the ECTS system is applied in Belarusian HEIs, though ECTS credits are not explicitly mentioned in the draft Education Code. The previous credit system is used in parallel. So far, ECTS, which is called “cumulative points” in Belarus, is solely understood as reflecting contact hours and workload. One “cumulative point” equals to 36-40 working hours by a student, which is far more than the typical ECTS range in the EHEA (26-30 hours). Accumulation and transfer functions of ECTS credits are not employed. The Learning Outcomes concept has not yet been introduced. The 2015 ECTS User’s Guide is translated into Russian and is available to HEIs.

Remaining tasks:

- Speeding up the transition and development of documents for higher education institutions to facilitate the process of creating new programs by using ECTS and Learning Outcomes appropriately.
 - Make the ECTS User’s Guide (2015) known to all in charge of creating study programmes and accreditation.
 - Training of higher education institutions academic and administrative staff has to be foreseen for proper implementation.
- **Three cycle higher education system:** The draft Education Code from 2017 introduces shorter Bachelor programmes of up to 4-4.5 years (240-270 ECTS). The goal is to increase the number of 4 year programmes, introduce 1-2 year Master programmes and to decrease long cycle programs (some up to 6 years). Each university has the right to handle the transition in its own way, taking advice from the local employers into account.

Following the Roadmap, the New Code introduces a three cycle higher education system by mentioning the terms “bachelor” and “master” but at the same time preserves the term “specialist”. By sticking to both models, the New Code complicates the incorporation of the Bachelor-/Master-system.

Concerning the doctoral qualification/third cycle, there are different levels of doctoral studies (aspirantura/adjunktura and doctoral studies) and two types of research qualifications (candidat nauk and doktor nauk).

Currently the third cycle is a separate level under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education as it is funded by the Ministry. There are two types of degrees awarded: diploma of candidate of sciences (after the examinations, before thesis defence) and diploma of researcher which is approved by an Accreditation Committee after the thesis defence.

Quality assurance

Commit to establishing, by the end of 2017, the legal basis for an independent quality assurance agency in conformity with the European Standards and Guidelines.

By the end of 2015, develop a timetable for establishing this agency.

Through the BFUG, invite foreign quality assurance experts to advice on the timetable and plans for establishing the agency as well as on the process leading to it being established.

Assessment:

A crucial part of the Bologna Process is the establishment of an internal and external quality assurance system in line with the ESGs, where an essential element is an independent quality assurance agency, whose task is implementation of both quality assurance (in a form of evaluation, audit, accreditation etc.) and quality enhancement activities.

In Belarus, the concept of quality assurance is still predominantly understood as/limited to quality control and remains completely in the hands of a unit which is part of the Ministry of Education. The Belarus members of the Advisory Group reported that concept of an independent quality assurance agency is still debated, still not clear and questioned, and has therefore not been reflected in official documents yet. The draft Education Code does not foresee the establishment of an independent quality assurance agency, nor does it mention the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) as a commonly agreed set of principles. There is also no reference to the ESGs in the draft Education Code or in policy documents of which the Advisory Group is aware, nor is there any mention of the need to constantly engage in support and development of quality culture within institutions. Quality is mainly understood as conformity to educational standards for study programmes or management standards such as ISO (certification of quality management systems is popular with Belarus higher education institutions).

There have been several occasions when quality assurance experts from abroad took part in the Peer Learning Activities in Belarus, enabled by the financial support from the Council of Europe and the European Commission. Presentations were made on various topics, including ESG, individual country experiences, as well as more general overviews of how external quality assurance is set up in other European countries. To the best of Advisory Groups knowledge, no experts were invited to advice concretely on the timetable for the establishment of an independent quality assurance agency, or to review any draft documentation pertaining to evaluation criteria, methodologies and similar matters.

Remaining tasks:

- Provision of legal basis for the establishment of an independent quality assurance agency that distinguishes assurance activities and quality enhancement activities.
- Drafting of a package of legal documents for implementation of external quality assurance in line with ESG.
- Raising awareness of ESG and its application within higher education institutions.
- Capacity development of an independent quality assurance agency staff.
- Piloting new evaluation procedures.

Recognition

By the end of 2016, review legislation and practice with a view to identifying any modifications needed to bring them into conformity with the obligations undertaken by Belarus as a State party to the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

By the end of 2017, implement any required modification of practice that does not require amending legislation.

By the end of 2017, develop a timetable for the implementation of required legislative modifications.

Assessment:

The Belarusian Centre of the European Network of Information Centres (ENIC) has been peer reviewed by the ENIC/NARIC of Belgium (Flanders) and the feedback provided was positive. It is an active member of the ENIC Network and contributes to its activities.

The draft Education Code mentions the terms “recognition”, “equivalence” and “compliance”. The predominant logic in recognition procedures in Belarus is still to assess “equivalence” of qualifications and not to follow the logic of the Lisbon Recognition Convention of substantial difference and of recognising unless a substantial difference can be demonstrated. Therefore, it is important to clearly state that recognition is granted unless substantial difference according to agreed five elements to the qualification (level, quality, workload, profile, and learning outcomes) is identified. Belarus authorities assess foreign qualifications on a case by case basis but do not take NQF-referenced qualifications or ECTS of study programs into account. Although the draft of the Education Code gives more leverage to higher education institutions concerning the recognition and determination of the study duration, the Code still does not link this procedure to ECTS credits nor to learning outcomes.

Moreover, the New Education Code does not mention the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC), which is the legally binding international convention to be applied in EHEA of which Belarus is a party.

Recognition practice should therefore evolve to be fully in line with the LRC, its subsidiary texts, and make use of good practices as in the EHEA using the European Area of Recognition (EAR) and EAR-HEI-Manual.

Remaining tasks:

- Recognition decisions should be fully based on the LRC.
- The modification and creation of study programs should be left to higher education institutions (at the moment 35-40% of the core curricula defined by Associations).
- To do this, all Bologna tools need to be implemented appropriately (BA/MA, NQF, ECTS, external QA). This of course is rather a governance issue than a recognition issue.

Transparency instruments

By the end of 2015, develop a plan to implement ECTS in accordance with the revised ECTS Users' Guide by the end of 2017, with a strong focus on learning outcomes, curriculum design, delivery as well as assessment and applied to mobility programmes.

By the end of 2017, develop a plan to issue the Diploma Supplement in the format developed by the Council of Europe, the European Commission and UNESCO to all students automatically, free of charge and in a widely spoken language (other than Russian).

Assessment:

The establishment and the development of certain transparency instruments are ongoing. Belarusian partners stated to have started to incorporate the ECTS into its higher education system making use of the ECTS Users' Guide. Also the development and adaption of curricula and academic mobility has started but not yet coherently and globally for all higher education institutions.

The automatic and free of charge delivery of the Diploma Supplement in a widely spoken language other than Russian is not conducted systematically across all higher education institutions. (Students still have to make efforts to ensure receiving their Diploma Supplement). The draft Education Code does not guarantee an automatic and free of charge issuance of the Diploma Supplement.

Remaining tasks:

- Provision of legal basis for automatic and free of charge delivery of the Diploma Supplement in a widely spoken language other than Russian.
- Speeding up the implementation of ECTS, adaptation of curricula and academic mobility.

Mobility of higher education staff and students and internationalisation

In autumn 2015, launch work on a plan to facilitate, develop and diversify the international mobility of staff and students to as well as from Belarusian higher education institutions. Such a plan would be expected to include changes to the current system of mobility permits, to allow longer periods of mobility within the EHEA for both staff and students, without ministerial approval. The plan should be completed by the end of 2016 and should outline policy measures as well as any required legislative measures required to increase and diversify academic mobility from Belarus to its partners in the EHEA. Any required legislative measures should be introduced by mid-2017.

Assessment:

The international mobility of staff and students is a stated goal of the Belarussian authorities. Students are eligible to study abroad provided they can demonstrate above average grades and if they have the signed approval of the rector of their higher education institution. The real issue is the actual use of this formal regulation. In the best of cases, it is an unnecessarily complicated system that risks creating bureaucracy and slowing down applications. In the worst of cases, the system has the potential of being used to sanction students and staff perceived as "problematic". Even if it has proved impossible to establish whether the system is used in this way, the potential use is of concern. We recognise the need to plan the absences of staff in order to ensure teaching schedules but nevertheless take note of concerns expressed by stakeholders that this regulation may also be used to punish staff who may be perceived as problematic. The fact that students do not have to receive the approval of the Ministry of Education anymore is only a minor progress considering the necessary approval from the rector of a higher education institution.

Based on the first Erasmus+ feedback, it appears that students are facing problems in the recognition of their study abroad. Recognition of learning outcomes is not yet in place, since programmes are not using learning outcomes. So far, ECTS credits have not been recognised even if a learning agreement has been signed between sending and receiving higher education institutions prior to the study time abroad.

Remaining tasks:

- Find better and more efficient administrative arrangements that encourage mobility while ensuring that legitimate administrative concerns are met, and that reduce the potential for using the system to punish students and staff perceived as problematic – or may give the impression of doing so.

Lifelong learning and the social dimension of higher education

By the end of 2015, develop a plan for the recognition of prior learning and implement the plan by the end of 2017.

By the end of 2016, review the obligation for students whose education is financed by public funds to accept work placements on graduation with a view to limiting it to specific professions for which there is a significant unmet need in the country and taking into account practice in other European countries.

By the end of 2017 review the criteria for financial support for students with a view to ensuring social equity unaffected by applicants' gender, race, colour, disability, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status.

Assessment:

The draft Education Code does not introduce any legislative changes concerning the work obligation for students whose tuition fees are covered by public funds. Students who studied with the support of public funds still have to accept work placements for two years upon graduation regardless of whether they are specialised in the assigned job or not. Some countries have a similar system for very specific professions or study programmes. Military higher education would be a typical example – officer students are often obliged to work in the armed forces for a given period or to reimburse the costs of their education. In some countries, medical doctors and dentists are required to work in peripheral areas of the country for a given period of time. In the case of Belarus, however, the work obligation is general for any students whose studies have been financed by public funds. The Advisory Group is not aware of any similar, generalised work obligation tied to public funding in any other EHEA country. Even if the Advisory Group notes that the Belarusian authorities argue that the system is intended to offer graduates assistance in obtaining initial employment, the Advisory Group finds it difficult to compare this system to career counselling that is now common in many European universities. The Advisory Group, in effect, questions whether this system is in accordance with the fundamental values upon which the EHEA builds and also whether the system is in fact an efficient way of ensuring that peripheral areas benefit from a highly educated labour force. Incentives would seem to be a more efficient solution than enforcing obligations. The Advisory Group has been unable to determine whether allegations of the system being used to punish students perceived as problematic are in fact true, but it recognises that the system has the potential of being used in this way – or of giving the impression of being so used.

Remaining tasks:

- As the freedom of choosing one's profession is a fundamental right in Europe, the obligatory work placement system should be reviewed and changed in accordance to the Roadmap.

Fundamental values of the EHEA

Implement the commitments made by the ministers at their meeting in Yerevan, as stipulated in the Yerevan Ministerial Communiqué.

By mid-2017, the Ministry will conduct an analysis of national legislation and submit to Parliament proposals for required measures to incorporate the principles of the Magna Charta Universitatum and Council of Europe recommendation Rec/CM(2012)7 on the public responsibility for academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

By mid-2016, develop a plan detailing legislative and policy measures aimed at enabling students and staff to organise freely and to register their organisations. By mid-2017, introduce any required legislative measures.

Assessment:

The draft Education Code mentions neither the terms “academic freedom” nor “institutional autonomy”. Moreover, the draft Education Code fails to elucidate the fundamental students’ or academic staff rights while it also does not explicitly restrict these rights.

Concerning the legislative measures regarding students’ and staff rights to register independent organisations, the draft Education Code does not mention any relevant governance models (e.g. academic councils, etc.). The draft Education Code does not provide any information on the election of student or staff representatives.

The practice of direct Presidential or governmental responsibility for appointing and dismissing higher education leaders is not compatible with the values of the EHEA, and of democratic higher education¹.

There is no structured consultation with stakeholders (students, staff, employer organisations, trade unions) on higher education reform.

Consequently, there are no significant improvements in the higher education institutional, organisational autonomy of staff or students.

Implementation

Commit to providing the necessary data for the 2018 Implementation report, in the format and by the date that will be determined by the BFUG.

Commit to appointing a contact person for the 2018 Implementation report exercise. The contact person will coordinate the gathering of information for Belarus and will ensure that all information requested is provided in English within the deadlines stipulated by the BFUG. The contact person should have a good knowledge of English orally and in writing.

Participation in the work programme

Appoint a delegation of 1-3 members to the BFUG with good working knowledge of English. It will attend meetings of the BFUG and will ensure continuity in its representation throughout the work period.

Ensure participation in relevant seminars and peer learning activities and is welcome to nominate candidates for working groups in the 2015 – 18 EHEA work programme.

Cooperation with the BFUG

This roadmap will be implemented by the Belarusian authorities and stakeholders in cooperation with the BFUG. The BFUG will appoint a coordination group of members and consultative members that will facilitate co-operation, seek to identify possible partners for developing specific policy areas, and advise the BFUG on progress in the implementation of this road map. The Belarusian authorities will facilitate the work of this group and provide a contact person or contact group for this work. The coordination group will, among others, cooperate with the Belarusian delegation to the BFUG. The coordination group and Belarus will meet at least twice a year to discuss developments. The coordination group will report back from these meetings to the BFUG.

Assessment: Fulfilled

¹ Rectors of public higher education institutions are appointed by departmental ministers (for HEIs that are within departmental subordination) upon the agreement of the President of the country. The President directly appoints only rector of the Belarusian State University and Academy of Public Administration under the Aegis of the President of the Republic of Belarus. Rectors of private higher education institutions are appointed by the Minister of Education on the proposal of the founder of a private HEI.

Rectors of public higher education institutions are dismissed from their position by departmental ministers (for HEIs that are within departmental subordination). The President of the country directly dismisses from their position only the rector of the Belarusian State University and Academy of Public Administration under the Aegis of the President of the Republic of Belarus. Rectors of private higher education institutions are dismissed from their position by the Minister of Education on the proposal of the founder of a private HEI.

General Assessment:

The Roadmap will not be fulfilled by 2018. Some limited progress has been made in individual areas of the Roadmap, but the overall understanding of the interplay and interdependence of Bologna tools (BA, MA, PhD, NQF, Quality Assurance, ECTS, learning outcomes, Diploma Supplement etc.) still needs to be developed. Some major requirements of the Roadmap are still to be implemented and the lack of progress concerning the fundamental values of education such as academic freedom, autonomy and the establishment of student unions remains as an important task. There are still efforts needed when it comes to student mobility, the setting up of an independent quality assurance agency and a sound implementation of a national qualifications framework. Also the obligatory work placement system needs to undergo significant changes in order to meet the requirements of the Roadmap.

In response to the work of the Advisory Group and its draft report, the Ministry of Education of the Belarus wrote an official letter dated November 3rd 2017 (letter enclosed), stating: "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."

Statements to the same effect were made by the Belarusian member of the Advisory Group at its final meeting. The discussion showed, however, that other members of the Advisory Group did not share this view.

Recommendation by the Co-Chairs concerning the follow-up of the Belarus Roadmap

The Co-Chairs plead for a specific support procedure for Belarus that includes a clear mandate to address all still not achieved commitments of the Belarus roadmap until 2020, especially the adoption of a National Qualifications Framework, the establishment of an independent Quality Assurance Agency, the automatic, free of charge delivery of the Diploma Supplement in a widely spoken language other than Russian, the support for academic freedom and institutional autonomy, a review of the obligation for students whose education is financed by public funds to accept work placements on graduation, the right for students and staff to register independent organisations.

List of events in the framework of Advisory Group 2 Belarus Roadmap

AG 2 meetings und Peer Learning events:

19/01/2016 – Chisinau

2-3/06/2016 – Minsk

PLA on introduction of BA-MA-Programs, Quality Assurance, ECTS and Learning Outcomes

4-5/10/2016 – Rome

PLA on quality assurance, site-visit to QA-agency

24-25/01/2017 – Berlin

PLA with 60 rectors from Belarus with site-visits to the Technical University and Humboldt University in Berlin

April 2017: Contact Seminar with 60 representatives from German and Belarus Universities

18/05/2017 – Minsk

Conference with 200 participants from over 16 Bologna countries on Bologna Implementation

18-19/10/2017 Rome

Several national Seminars, Peer Learning Activities organised by Belarus authorities

Frank Petrikowski (Germany), Friedrich Becina (Holy See)

January 2018