

**Bologna Conference on student mobility
Fostering student mobility: next Steps?
Involving the stakeholders for an improved mobility inside the EHEA**
Brussels
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Conclusions and Recommendations
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1. Introduction and context

The conference *Fostering student mobility: next Steps?* was organized by the Ministry of the French Community Belgium with support of the Austrian Ministry of Science and Research and official representatives from Croatia, Spain, the Netherlands, the European Students' Union and the Bologna network on student support. It took place at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, on 29 and 30 May 2008. The Conference was attended by about 150 delegates from government departments, higher education institutions, bodies responsible for higher education mobility, rectors' conferences, teaching staff as well as European and international inter- and non-governmental organizations.

The conference stood in the context that mobility is one of the action lines of the Bologna process, even if many obstacles remain. A first challenge that is faced by Austria and the French Community is the asymmetric mobility linked with what we call degree mobility. It consists in a large number of foreign students, generally with similar language who are entering Universities to study and after finishing their studies go back to their home country. The consequence is a massive squeezing out of national students and a serious threat to national health care systems.

One of the remaining challenges to foster mobility inside the EHEA is also the portability of grants and loans. With a few exemptions, grants and loans for students are confined only in their home country. Countries hesitate to open their student loans and grants for portability, so that students can study abroad without necessarily having studied in their home country.

On the other side, European Universities are struggling to be more attractive to foreign, but also national students. Therefore the question raised is how can Universities get more attractive on national but also on international level?

The conference was made up of plenary presentations and discussions, as well as three parallel working groups. The approach to the theme was comprehensive, ranging from fundamental and overarching aspects such as the beginning of mobility in Europe thanks to ERASMUS and its further development through the Bologna process, to the question of the impacts of Bologna on mobility such as the various types of mobility and the search for statistical data. Overall, there were four different plenary presentations, next to the introduction by the organizers, the report of the *rapporteur général*, and the three parallel working groups. The seminar was chaired by Prof. Marcel Crochet. Prof. Vincent Vanderberghe (BE, UCL and OECD), Aldrik In' T Hout (NL, Bologna Network) and Prof. Pavel Zgaga (University of Ljubljana) were working group chairs.

The present report tries to capture the essence of the presentations and discussions of the conference, rather than attempting to recapitulate or deal in detail with the individual presentations of the conference. All information about plenary sessions and working groups can be found on the homepage. The report is structured into a section consisting of the *rapporteur's* conclusions and another one containing the recommendations of the seminar.

2. Conclusions

The *first conclusion* to be drawn is perhaps an obvious one, but it needs to be stressed nonetheless: *student mobility has remained one of the main action lines of the Bologna process. Mobility in a broad sense has a high value for the European society of knowledge.* There was an agreement at this conference that mobility is part of the mission of Europe's higher education institutions. But there was also consent that *while the Bologna process has certainly pushed positively student mobility, much remains to be done.* To foster mobility, portability of grants and loans needs to be further implemented, because, it is indispensable for mobility. Mobile students' integration is an added value for host and sending institution. The advantage of the EHEA is its institutional, cultural and national diversity.

The *second conclusion* directly proceeds from the first. It says *that student mobility is a complex phenomenon and the Bologna process has brought new forms and possibilities of mobility (vertical/horizontal mobility, joint programmes, etc.) which have made even more complex our common understanding of student mobility.* Mobility has grown from a simple idea in which students go abroad to a complex issue, where social, economic, financial and cultural issues have to be considered. Mobility no only means going abroad with Erasmus or another international program, but also the possibility to decide on its own to make a full degree study abroad. Institutions and countries have to implement new tools or develop them further to satisfy demand.

Therefore, and this is the third conclusion, it is necessary *to get data and statistics on student mobility in order to get a realistic picture, to compare, to evaluate and to implement efficient policies at national and European levels.* Experts working in the field of student mobility have found out that in most of the Bologna countries there is a shortage of statistical data on student mobility. In some countries mobility data exist, but only on a general level. Before being able to act on student mobility, especially in the field of portability of grants and loans, countries need an overview of student mobility. This picture is only available through statistical data that do not exist to date.

Beside the statistical problem, the fourth conclusion addresses another issue: *When access is restricted (i.e. through numerus clausus), mobility offers the possibility to circumvent the obstacles and find new opportunities to study abroad. Such a situation, often called "bypass mobility", creates deregulations both in sending and host countries.* In recent years countries observed a significant increase in the so-called degree mobility. Such mobility is often provoked by countries with access restriction to certain studies, so that students are forced to go abroad to study where no such restrictions are in place. Departing from the actual challenges faced by the French Community of Belgium and Austria, participants at the conference noticed that such bypass mobility is more common within the EHEA than it is generally thought. It was noted, that countries seem to be quite reserved to approach this problem. Some delegates reported similar problems in their own country.

Consequently the *fifth conclusion* is that *bypass mobility should be discussed in a way to identify types of sectors/fields in which it is occurring and develop specific or universal solutions. Countries should also consider good practice and examples of application.* The causes of bypass mobility are often the linguistic proximity of two countries and in consequence public perception is a brain drain combined with a sort of mobility where a state finances with its tax money the education of another country. But the consensus also was

that a general solution can't be found, each bypass mobility problem needs its own solution, if there is any solution. Discussion turned less on possible solutions to the problem, but more that a general discussion should be opened about possible negative effects or consequences for countries, if mobility increases in a way, that a state encounters serious problems to assure continuity and supply of fresh working force.

The *sixth conclusion* comes back to portability of grants and loans. *Mobility remains inaccessible for many students due to administrative, institutional and financial obstacles. While portability of grants and loans efficiently tackles the financial obstacles, very few countries have implemented or even discussed this possibility.* Discussion concentrated on the fact that grants are highly relevant to stimulate mobility and should be seen as a key element. But on the other hand it's unclear to what extent portability helped to improve mobility. Apart from financial obstacles, there are differences between EU and non-EU countries in handling portability of grants and loans. Therefore portability of grants and loans should be included in the stocktaking process.

The seventh and last conclusion deals again with the fact, that *student mobility in the EHEA remains quite unbalanced. A limited number of countries and institutions attract most of the mobile students. Unbalanced flows of mobile students are persisting.* The Bologna process should contribute to brain circulation and not to brain drain. But another issue is how the Bologna process can attract immigrants already living in the EU. One solution could be that institutions should be more aware about the special needs of immigrants and mobile students, such as an effective student information point.

3. Recommendations

Based on the above observations and conclusions, the conference delegates adopted the following recommendations.

Recommendation I

Mobility remains a challenge within the Bologna process.

European Ministers in charge of Education should set mobility of students, staff, researchers and graduates as one of the main action lines of the new Bologna process era. Operational objectives such as portability of grants and loans should be defined more precisely. Implementation of mobility measures and policies should be defined, assessed and guaranteed through the Bologna coordination method.

Recommendation II

More and better statistical data are needed to give governments a basis for further improvements.

National governments should commit themselves to systematically collect comparable, reliable and quality data (quantitative, qualitative and good practices). These data should be compiled and analyzed at national and European level through specially-mandated bodies.

Recommendation III

Access to higher education and mobility programs should be favored.

National governments should favor access to higher education and mobility programs, together with high standards of quality. Democratization, mobility and quality are essential components of the EHEA. They will also increase the attractiveness of their national higher education systems.

Recommendation IV

Governments should further improve the financing of mobility.

National governments should implement new means of financing mobility through simple, equitable and transparent procedures. The network of experts on student support is highly appreciated. National governments should take part in the network in order to share good practices.

Recommendation V

National governments should pay further attention to mobility within the EHEA.

National governments should tackle the consequences of the unbalance of student mobility in the EHEA. Therefore, better information at institutional, national and European level on mobility programs is needed. Moreover, national governments and institutions should reinforce the organization of joint/double programs and diplomas, under transparent procedures and conditions.

Recommendation VI

A general debate on bypass mobility from governments is requested.

National governments should be aware of and recognize bypass mobility and find commonly adequate solutions. Therefore, mutual comprehensiveness and commitment for joint solutions are fundamental.

Recommendation VII

New strategies to boost attractiveness of higher education are needed.

Higher Education institutions should be encouraged to develop diverse strategies to attract diverse students groups with a special attention on challenges faced by students during their academic life.
