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“FROM BERLIN TO BERGEN”

Halfway in the Bologna Process towards 2010, we start to see the contours of the European Higher Education Area. It is not a single, unified higher education system, but a group of more than forty national systems developing according to jointly agreed principles.

For many countries, “Bologna” has been an inspiration and a recipe for highly needed reforms in their higher education systems. At the same time we are jointly building a common framework to realise the idea that students and staff shall be able to move freely within the European Higher Education Area, having full recognition of their qualifications. They all report progress.

All participating countries have produced National Reports. These reports have given information on planned reforms as well as on what has already been accomplished.

Recommendations from the fourteen Bologna Follow-up Seminars included in the Work Programme for the Berlin-Bergen period have fed into the stocktaking project, into the development of the overarching framework for qualifications, into the joint efforts in quality assurance and also directly influenced the drafting of the Bergen Communiqué.

As the Bologna Process has been developing, its ten action lines have tended to overlap or merge and new concepts have been introduced. The action lines have been imperative for the dynamics of the Bologna Process, but they do not explicitly define the final goal. New concepts, now being developed, may better fit this purpose.

Priority in the Berlin-Bergen period has been given to developing:

- a three-cycle degree system in each participating country,
- national quality assurance systems cooperating in a Europe-wide network,
- mutual recognition between participating countries.

Each of these elements has a national dimension and a European dimension. So has the concept of qualifications frameworks now being introduced in the Bologna Process; national frameworks fitting into an overarching framework for qualifications in the European Higher Education Area. The complementarity between this overarching framework for higher education to the broader European framework of qualifications now being developed within the European Union will be essential.

The overarching framework for qualifications in the European Higher Education Area and the individual national frameworks are based on three main cycles, Bachelor, Master, and Doctor. Generic descriptors will be used as reference points. Credit ranges have been introduced for the first and second cycle, the third cycle does not necessarily count credits.

There will be European standards for internal and external quality assurance. European quality assurance agencies will be expected to submit to cyclical reviews and a European register of quality assurance agencies will be set up.

In June 2004, a Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees was adopted as a subsidiary text to the Lisbon Recognition Convention. By May 2005, 36 of the now 45 participating countries in the Bologna Process have ratified the Convention. For the national arenas, the Follow-up Group has advised that higher education institutions should recognise prior learning for access and as elements in higher education programmes.

The stocktaking that Ministers asked for in Berlin has been carried out. Overall, participating countries have made good progress. However, the increased membership emphasises the need for participating countries to take responsibility to assist each other. A separate report on stocktaking will follow this report.

The Bologna Process is a voluntary cooperation between different national systems overseen by the Ministerial Conferences and the Follow-up Group. There is no legally binding provision except for the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the arrangement being based on mutual trust. Participating countries have adapted their legislation to the principles and objectives of the Bologna Process, and higher education institutions are committed to implementing them.

As the vision of the European Higher Education Area is gradually being realised, the Follow-up Group has had preliminary discussions concerning 2010 and beyond. Some governing structure should be brought in place to follow developments after 2010; it may be a continuation of the Follow-up Group or a more permanent mechanism.

In addition to structures encompassing qualification frameworks, quality assurance and recognition, the European Higher Education Area will have a social dimension: Higher education should be equally accessible to all and students should be able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. The Follow-up Group sees a need for more data for focusing on the challenges of the social dimension and has asked for a mandate to start work in this direction.

Working together with organisations representing university leaders, staff and students, business and social partners, the participating countries can see the implementation of the Bologna Process changing the vision of the European Higher Education Area into a reality.

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(The General report is available at: www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Bergen/050503_General_rep.pdf)