

BFUG B3 7
4 October 2004

FURTHER ACCESSIONS TO THE BOLOGNA PROCESS.

PROCEDURES FOR EVALUATION OF APPLICATIONS AND REPORTS FROM POTENTIAL NEW MEMBERS

1. BACKGROUND

At its meeting in Dublin on 14 June 2004, the BFUG Board discussed requirements and procedures related to further accessions to the Bologna Process. The Board made the following decision:

The Chair, together with the incoming Chair, will finalise the procedure for applying to join the Bologna Process and make it public as soon as possible. The deadline for applications will be 31 December 2004. The procedure for assessing applications will be decided by the BFUG meeting in October.

The procedure for applying was finalised shortly afterwards and published on the Bologna-Bergen web site. At the same time it was communicated informally to Moldova and Ukraine, which had both signalled interest in joining the process. Moldova formally declared its intention to join on 2 July, and Ukraine on 10 September.

The Board decided to postpone the decision on the procedure for *assessment* of applications and submit the question to the BFUG for a more thorough discussion. There was disagreement in the Board meeting on both principles and procedures. The purpose of the present document is to review alternatives and options as a basis for a decision by the BFUG.

The decision to accept new members to the Bologna Process will be taken by Ministers at the Bergen Conference in May 2005. The role of the BFUG is to make a recommendation, having satisfied itself of the credentials and commitment of the applicants.

2. PRINCIPLES

The Berlin Communiqué lays down the criteria for membership of the Bologna Process:

Countries party to the European Cultural Convention shall be eligible for membership of the European Higher Education Area provided that they at the same time declare their willingness to pursue and implement the objectives of the Bologna Process in their own systems of higher education. Their applications should contain information on how they will implement the principles and objectives of the declaration.

The document prepared by the Chair and Secretariat for the Board meeting in Dublin (BFUGB3 7) summarised the principles underpinning the Bologna Process as follows:

- Mobility of students and staff;
- Autonomous universities;
- Student participation in the governance of higher education;
- Public responsibility for higher education;
- The importance of the social dimension of the Bologna Process.

The Board agreed that applicant states should be asked to confirm their adherence to these principles. In the published document on requirements and procedures, the principles are elaborated through references to the Bologna Declaration and the Prague and Berlin Communiqués.

It might be argued that if applicant countries have to prove that their higher education systems comply with certain principles, the same requirement should be made of existing members. No mechanism or procedure for this exists at present. In the run-up to 2010, however, all members may be asked to reconfirm their commitment to the core principles of the process, whether or not it is given a more formalised structure.

In accordance with the decision of the Ministers, applicant countries should declare their willingness to pursue and implement the *objectives* of the Bologna Process, as expressed through the ten action lines, and provide information in their applications on measures taken. Existing members do this through the stocktaking and their national reports. The procedure for applying decided on by the Board and published after the Board meeting includes a template for reporting in order to ensure consistent and sufficient information, similar to that for the national reports. The templates include some questions relating to the principles identified above, such as autonomy of higher education institutions and student participation.

3. PROCEDURE FOR EVALUATING APPLICATIONS

When an application for membership is received, the BFUG Chair and Secretariat will verify that it satisfies the prescribed procedures and send a confirmation of receipt to the applicant country. At the same time, the BFUG will be informed of the application. The applicant country may then be invited to seminars and other events in the Bologna Process.

3.1 Previous proposal

In the document prepared for the Board meeting in June, the following procedure was proposed for the further processing and assessment of applications:

The BFUG will ask a panel of highly respected specialists in higher education to study the individual applications and advise the BFUG. While the panel can determine more precisely its own operational procedures, it is envisaged that they will be along the following lines:

- (a) the Secretariat will issue the papers to the panel (called BFUG panel);*
- (b) the BFUG panel may, at its discretion, invite the applicant to discuss their material;*
- (c) based on a vote per expert, the BFUG panel will issue a recommendation on the application;*

- (d) the recommendation will be advised to the applicant and the BFUG at the same time. A copy of the BFUG panel's report will be made available;*
- (e) where the recommendation is in favour of membership, the BFUG will re-affirm this recommendation by at least 75% majority. The Ministers at the Bergen conference will be advised accordingly;*
- (f) where the recommendation is against membership on this occasion, the BFUG will review the recommendation. In this case, all members must vote in favour of the application if a positive recommendation is to be made by the BFUG to the Ministerial Conference.*

Successful applicant countries will be invited with observer status to the Bergen Ministerial Conference on 19-20 May 2005, where the decision regarding membership will be taken. Applicant countries will be invited to join the Ministerial Conference as full members only after accession.

Objections were raised against this proposal on two counts: the proposed review procedure and the idea of voting in the BFUG.

3.2 Possible review of applicant countries by an expert panel

Some Board members argued that the Bologna Process is mainly a political process and that all countries that wish to join, should be able to do so, pointing out that in previous cases there has been no review procedure. One possibility which was mentioned, was that countries that do not fully meet the requirements laid down in the Berlin Communiqué, might be granted conditional admission depending on remedial measures. These members were against the proposal for external review, arguing that the BFUG should itself evaluate the candidates and present them to the Ministers.

Other members argued that accession to the process should not be automatic and that applicant countries should be evaluated to see if they meet the criteria laid down by the Ministers. Such members underlined the importance of assessing the quality of the higher education system of the applicant country and whether it conforms to the democratic principles underpinning the Bologna Process. The procedure should be designed to assist countries in reforming their higher education systems. On this model the BFUG would again make a recommendation to the Ministers, but on the basis of the conclusions of the expert panel.

As an alternative to an expert panel, the BFUG could appoint a working group to study or review the applications, or ask the Board to do it. If the BFUG decides that applications should be subjected to review, no matter by what method, it may ask the Board to draw up operational procedures for the assessment at its meeting on 9 December, or ask the working group or expert panel to elaborate its own procedures, as appropriate. If the BFUG chooses to make a recommendation to the Ministers without prior assessment by a working group or expert panel or by the Board, it may ask the Secretariat to prepare a background document presenting the application(s).

3.3 The decision-making procedure in the BFUG

At the Board meeting, several members voiced concern with regard to the proposed voting procedure. It was pointed out that it represents a difference from previous accessions, that inter-governmental bodies reach decisions by consensus, and that this is also how decisions are made by Ministers in the Bologna Process. This does not mean that one country can block the decision, but that the Ministers commit themselves to reaching agreement.

Against this argument it might be held that while the Ministers must reach consensus, the same is not necessarily true of the BFUG. Countries may legitimately hold different views, and it might be argued that it is important for the Ministers to know about such differences (and then hopefully solve them).

If the BFUG decides that its recommendation to the Ministers in Bergen on applications for membership should be decided by a vote, the voting rules should be made clear in advance. In the case of prior evaluation by a working group or an expert committee, or by the Board, the conditions for a recommendation by the BFUG going against that from the prior evaluation should also be clear, cf. the previous proposal cited in section 3.1. It must be clear on what basis (voting, consensus or other) the BFUG is making its recommendation to the Ministers.

4. SUMMARY

In deciding on a procedure for evaluating applications for membership of the Bologna Process, the BFUG will need to consider at least the following points:

- Whether applicant countries should be subjected to a review of their higher education systems by an independent panel of experts, a BFUG working group or by the Board in order to assess whether they meet the criteria for membership. Alternatively, the BFUG may itself evaluate the applicants and present them to the Ministers without prior assessment.
- If a review procedure is decided on, the BFUG may ask the Board to decide on further details related to the appointment of the panel or working group and its operational procedures, or procedures for the assessment of applicants by the Board itself. A country being reviewed should always have the opportunity to comment on the report from the assessment before the BFUG makes its recommendation to the Ministers.
- The exact basis on which the BFUG will make its recommendation where a review has been carried out, including questions such as
 - whether a positive conclusion to the review should automatically lead to a favourable recommendation by the BFUG;
 - on what conditions, if any, the BFUG might give a positive recommendation to the Ministers if the review has concluded that the applicant country does not meet the requirements for membership.
- By what mechanism (voting, consensus or other) agreement on the recommendation to be given to the Ministers is to be reached in the BFUG, and what happens if agreement is not reached.

5. PROPOSAL BY THE CHAIR

Provided that a study of the documents submitted by applicant countries is considered useful:

- a) The BFUG appoints the members of the review panel or the BFUG working group, or asks the Board to review the application(s).
- b) If an expert panel or a working group is to be used, the Board proposes (overnight in Noordwijk or on 9 December) a 3- 5 member panel/working group.
- c) The Secretariat forwards the material it has received from applicant countries to the panel/working group or to the Board.
- d) The panel/working group/Board develops (guidelines for) the operational assessment procedures. One possibility would be for the Board to conduct the assessment per item according to set criteria.
- e) After the assessment is completed the panel/working group/Board decides on an overall recommendation.
- f) The panel/working group/Board informs the applicant of its recommendation. The applicant may comment on the recommendation.
- g) The recommendation plus the comments of the applicant are submitted to the BFUG (February/March 2005).
- h) The BFUG follows the recommendation unless a substantial number of members express very substantial arguments contrary to the recommendation.
- i) The BFUG submits the conclusions of the review to the Ministers with its own recommendation. If the recommendation of the BFUG is different from that resulting from the review, the reasons for this should be made clear.