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CHALLENGES REGARDING MOBILITY

1. BACKGROUND

Increased mobility of students, academic and other staff and graduates is an overarching objective of the Bologna Process, and many of the other objectives are related to it. The Bologna Declaration and the Prague and Berlin Communiqués speak of removing obstacles to the free movement of students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff, and the Bologna Declaration indirectly mentions some such obstacles: for students, lack of access to study and training opportunities and related services, and for staff, difficulties related to recognition of periods spent abroad without prejudice to their statutory rights. Much has been achieved, not least through support from EU programmes. In the Berlin Communiqué, Ministers noted with satisfaction that mobility figures had increased, and pledged to take the necessary steps to 1) “improve the quality and coverage of statistical data on student mobility”, and 2) “enable the portability of national loans and grants”.

Considerable difficulties exist in relation to these commitments. The Communiqué Drafting Group for Bergen has therefore asked for a paper highlighting issues and challenges related to mobility, particularly in areas which lie outside the domain of education ministers, and for this paper to be discussed by the Board and the BFUG. The document will concentrate on mobility of students. This does not mean that the problems mentioned in relation to mobility of academic and other staff have been solved. These problems should be examined separately, preferably in cooperation with professional associations and other staff organisations.

2. DISCUSSION IN THE BOARD MEETING ON 25 JANUARY

In its meeting on 25 January 2005, the Board noted that establishing an effective European Higher Education Area is not within the power of education ministers alone, and that issues affecting mobility that do not lie within their domain, such as visa regulations, must be addressed. All the participating countries in the Bologna Process should therefore consider these issues with a view to possible commitments at the Bergen conference. Since a commitment by an education minister commits the government of the country in question, *it is essential for the members of the BFUG to consult with other relevant ministries in their home countries* to enable commitments to be made.

With the support of the Chair and the EUA, the Vice Chair proposed that mobility should be made an area of priority for the next two-year period, and that specific targets should be set for 2007. The Board concluded its discussion by proposing that the Bergen Communiqué might call on participating countries to take action in one of the areas mentioned in sections 3-8 below, possibly visas, and in addition ask the BFUG to further examine the issues involved. A fuller account of the discussion is found in the minutes from the Board meeting, cf. agenda item 2.

3. THE DIFFICULTY OF QUANTITATIVE TARGETS

Defining operational and thereby measurable targets for mobility is difficult for several reasons, both political and technical. The political difficulties are related to social issues such as differences in wealth between European regions, and to potentially conflicting objectives. Such issues are explored in more detail below.

The technical difficulties relate partly to the lack of statistics implied by ministers, and partly to comparability. The recent OECD report *Internationalisation and Trade in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges* (2004) has a separate chapter on “Cross-Border Post-Secondary Education in Europe”, but the coverage is uneven: statistics are largely limited to the (then) EU/EEA countries. 17 of the present Bologna Member States are not members of the OECD, and 15 are not covered by EU statistics. So-called “UOE data” are reported to UNESCO in addition to the OECD and Eurostat, but not all countries have central statistical agencies capable of providing data of sufficient quality.

Another limitation is the problem of defining the term “mobile student”, discussed in an annex to the report. Here, it is pointed out that the data for most countries include both resident and non-resident foreign students. “Thus, ‘foreign students’ are generally an overestimate of international mobile students, especially in countries like Germany or Switzerland where the access of foreigners to citizenship is (or was) limited. For example, 34% of foreign students in Germany were resident foreigners in 1999. In 1999, 50% of foreign students in Switzerland and Sweden were resident foreigners” (p. 308-09). This explains why Switzerland tops the table for the number of foreign students as a percentage of all (foreign and domestic) students, with 17% as compared with 13.9% for Australia and 10.9% for the UK (figures for 2001).¹ On the other hand Sweden counts only foreign students registered in the Swedish population register, which misses out many students from the other Nordic countries. In principle, but not always in practice, the figures include foreign students enrolled in distance education programmes. The numbers may be significant; the UK Open University, for instance, had around 30,000 students from other European countries in 2003. Finally, reporting is not standardised with regard to the minimum required stay abroad. According to the OECD this should be one term of full-time study, or one year if the student remains enrolled in the home institution and/or continues to pay fees there. In practice, however, exchange students on short-term postings are often included in the statistics.

In view of these weaknesses the working group on indicators and benchmarks under the EU “Education and Training 2010” work programme has launched several activities for developing new indicators.² Among other things it is proposed to replace citizenship with prior education level or main residence status as the chief criterion for defining mobile students. In any case improving the quality and coverage of statistical data on student mobility is a daunting task, which will require action at the national level in a number of countries as well as international efforts involving relevant actors. With the exception of exchange programmes, it will be difficult to set quantitative targets for mobility until better statistics are developed.

¹ Luxembourg would have been still much higher, but figures for 2001 were not available.

² See “New Indicators on Education and Training”, Commission Staff Working Paper SEC(2004) 1524, November 2004, available at http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/2010/doc/indicators_en.pdf.

4. MOBILITY AND STUDENT SUPPORT

This was one of the themes of the Dutch Presidency Bologna Seminar “Designing Policies for Mobile Students” in October 2004. Here it was pointed out that whereas EU member states generally prefer the principle that mobile students should be financed by their home country, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) has emphasised the principle of EU citizenship laid down in the Maastricht Treaty and as a consequence extended the equal treatment principle to at least partly include foreign students, thus placing the responsibility for financing on the host country. These developments may deter countries from making national loans and grants portable, both because of the risk of double claims and because of the potential financial risks involved. Children of EU citizens acquire rights in the country where their parents live and work, although this may not be their home country, and students who work while studying may themselves acquire “worker” status. If they then want to go to a third country to study, they will be eligible for the same loans and grants that the host country provides to its own nationals. In other words, if loans and grants are portable countries risk having to give them to foreign nationals studying in third countries, or in their original home countries. As this is largely an internal problem in the EU, the European Commission has announced plans to set up a working group to examine the issues.

The Dutch seminar examined the arguments for both home-based, host-based and European-based student support systems. In the long term a European solution was deemed desirable, and the possibility of establishing a European fund for student support, proposed by ESIB, was discussed. As was pointed out at the Board meeting in December, however, allocations for such a fund lie outside the province of education ministers and would have to be decided by the government and/or national assembly of each potential contributing country. If the idea is to be promoted by Ministers in Bergen, it must thus be ensured that sufficient political support exists in each country to make it a feasible proposition, cf. section 2.

5. ADMINISTRATIVE AND TECHNICAL OBSTACLES

A number of administrative and technical obstacles may present themselves to prospective mobile students, especially if they come from South-East Europe and wish to study in the EU/EEA (or the other way around). As pointed out by the OECD report, “costs for visas and other legal documents can be quite high and procedures may be complicated”.³ In addition visas may be valid for a single entry only, necessitating a new application for each journey between the home country and the country of study. With regard to opportunities for working, employers in EU countries may be required to prove that the vacancy could not be filled by a worker from within the Union, or work permits may be difficult or impossible to obtain for students and/or their spouses. This in turn reduces the opportunities for students with limited financial means. Requirements for proof of financial self-sufficiency may also scare away some students.

Another aspect of this issue is access to accommodation, student welfare systems and social benefit schemes once the student has been admitted. EU students are eligible for social benefits on certain conditions, but these may be changing following decisions in the ECJ which then become case law. In any case such benefits may be unavailable to non-EU citizens, again placing students from the poorer parts of Europe at a disadvantage. A possible

³ *Internationalisation and Trade in Higher Education*, p. 106.

measure to facilitate mobility would thus be to give foreign students the same rights as domestic students in relation to such schemes, with the exception of maintenance grants, where even EU students have no automatic rights in other member states of the Union, and where the principle of home country financing would apply.

Mobility would be enhanced by less restrictive regulations, simpler procedures and reduced fees for visas and residence permits, and by access to social benefits in the host country. Again, however, such measures lie outside the province of education ministers and would need to be discussed at the national level in each participating country if they are to be raised in Bergen. With regard to visas it should also be noted that less restrictive regulations may lead to “visa mills”, i.e. institutions whose main purpose is to enable registered students to obtain a visa, usually at a considerable cost in the form of admission fees etc., and then disappear into the economy. In the UK the scrutiny of visa applications became stricter in the spring of 2004 after a group of 35 Chinese cockle-pickers, including at least one student, were trapped by tides and 19 people drowned.⁴ Universities immediately complained that this would lead to a reduction in income. In Norway the role of agents was highlighted the same year after two Chinese students at a regional private education institution were murdered and it turned out that they had not been following courses for a long time, but were working in Oslo. The institution was later forced to close.

6. MOBILITY AND GEOGRAPHICAL BALANCE

In spite of the statistical weaknesses referred to in section 3, there can be no doubt that there is a huge imbalance in mobility at the European level along a north/west – south/east axis. For instance, the OECD study cited shows that whereas in 2001 the UK had almost 9 incoming foreign students per domestic student abroad, the Slovak Republic sent 5,3 students to other countries for each foreign student it received. Besides the UK the major host countries, predictably, were Germany and France. Both received more than three times as many students as they sent out, as did Belgium and Switzerland.⁵

This imbalance has a number of consequences. In the UK, where higher education is explicitly regarded as an export industry, universities charge fees, which for non-EU students may be three to ten times higher than the fee paid by British and EU students at the bachelor level, and two to three times higher at the master level.⁶ Even in non-fee-paying countries like Germany the imbalance in mobility contributes to a transfer of wealth from the poorer to the richer part of Europe because of the income generated from services provided to the student (accommodation, subsistence etc.).

As living costs will usually be higher in the host country even if there are no fees, in addition to the other extra costs generated by studying abroad, there is furthermore a danger that only students from privileged backgrounds will be able to go, thus aggravating the problems of social exclusion already existing in countries with limited domestic capacity in higher education combined with weak or non-existent support schemes. Talented students may receive scholarships, but this may serve to increase the problem of brain drain, especially

⁴ *Education Guardian* 9 August 2004.

⁵ *Internationalisation and Trade in Higher Education*, p. 116.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 106.

since in many cases the scholarships will have to be supplemented by loans, which it will be easier to pay back if the student stays on in a high-income western country.

Attracting talented foreign students and graduates as a means of strengthening national economic competitiveness is an explicit policy objective in several of the receiving countries. In Germany, for instance, an “Investment into the Future Programme” was launched in 2000, under which large sums of money have been invested in promoting German education and research abroad, developing internationally attractive curricula at higher education institutions, and scholarships. “In parallel, conditions for foreign students and researchers have been improved. Visa regulations and procedures have been liberalised, work permits are now easier to receive, proof of financial security has been facilitated and demands in terms of language ability were reduced or at least tailored to the needs of the student’s curriculum.”⁷ In general, the Bologna (and Lisbon) objective of promoting the attractiveness of European Higher Education stems from a concern that the United States in particular has proved better able than Europe to attract and retain “foreign brains”. As shown above, however, the implications of such policies *within* Europe need to be taken into account.

Another aspect of the imbalance is the increasing dominance of English as the language of higher education. At the global level, the US, the UK and Australia between them are host to more than half of all foreign students in the world. In Europe, the UK is the largest receiving country, as we have seen, and in addition countries wishing to increase the number of foreign students, such as Germany (and Norway), use English-language programmes as a means. This poses a threat to political objectives related to respecting and preserving linguistic and cultural diversity which are also part of the Bologna Process.

If Europe is to be competitive in the global higher education market in line with the Bologna and Lisbon goals, it depends on the success of the present major receiving countries, the United Kingdom, Germany and France. At the global level France fell from second to fourth position as a receiving country between 1980 and 2001, and is likely to be passed by Australia soon.⁸ In Germany and the UK, the number of foreign students has increased rapidly in recent years. In other words, the policy objectives of making European Higher Education attractive and competitive on the one hand and ensuring equity of admission, social justice and cohesion and linguistic and cultural diversity on the other are potentially conflicting. In order to minimise such conflicts, means must be found to at least partly rectify the imbalance of mobility within Europe.

7. MOBILITY AND THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Wealth is very unevenly distributed across Europe. Excluding the special case of Luxembourg, where a high proportion of employees live in neighbouring countries and thus contribute to the economy without being included in the resident population, GDP per capita expressed as a percentage of the EU 25 average varied from below 30% to nearly 150% across the European Economic Area in 2003.⁹ Although the data are not directly comparable, statistics covering Bologna member states outside the EEA indicate that the figure for some

⁷ Ibid. p. 112.

⁸ Ibid. p. 208, 111.

⁹ Figures from Eurostat. See

http://europa.eu.int/comm/eurostat/newcronos/reference/display.do?screen=detailref&language=en&product=EU_MAIN_TREE&root=EU_MAIN_TREE/economy/main/strind/ecobac/eb011.

countries in South-East Europe would be as low as 10% of the EU 25 average.¹⁰ Whereas the GDP of Western Europe has been growing steadily, statistics from the World Bank show that between 1980 and 1999, real GDP declined in 14 Central and Eastern European countries and by more than 50% in four of them.¹¹

This economic imbalance poses great challenges for European cooperation in any area, for the Bologna Process and for mobility in particular. The level of costs in the wealthy countries will in itself constitute a barrier for students from the poorer ones. With regard to setting targets for mobile students, any targets that do not take into account the differences in financial resources would be grossly unfair. ESIB has called for the establishment of a mobility fund or system within the framework of the Bologna Process to fill the financial gaps caused by differences in living costs and economic capacities in different countries and regions of Europe. As previously discussed, however, allocations for such a fund lie outside the province of education ministers.

As shown above, present mobility patterns reflect other imbalances. This may lead to brain drain, i.e. that talented students leave to study abroad and do not return. At the European level there is a fear of brain drain to the United States, resulting in damage to Europe's economic competitiveness. On a global scale, it is a serious concern for poor countries with less developed education and research systems. The inclusive nature of the Bologna Process provides a good basis for counteracting brain drain within Europe, but special measures may be needed.

8. RECOGNITION

According to ESIB, lack of recognition of study periods and qualifications gained abroad is still a major obstacle to mobility. However, the organisation also states¹² that what is needed to rectify this situation is above all for previously agreed measures such as ECTS, the Diploma Supplement and the Lisbon Recognition Convention to be fully implemented. Both *Trends III* and the Latvian Bologna Seminar on recognition in December pointed to lack of awareness and implementation at the institutional level as a main problem.

The work to develop qualifications frameworks both at the European and national levels is designed to increase transparency and thus facilitate mobility and recognition. The stocktaking will provide more information on the situation with regard to recognition in the Bologna countries, and may provide the basis for further actions and recommendations. Any new proposals or initiatives should await the stocktaking results.

¹⁰ Data from the *CIA World Factbook*. See for instance http://www.nationmaster.com/graph-T/eco_gdp_cap&id=EUR.

¹¹ Quoted from *Global Environment Outlook 3*, UNEP 2002. See <http://www.grida.no/geo/geo3/english/107.htm>.

¹² Under "Student Mobility" on its home page, see www.esib.org.

9. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

9.1. Statistics

The ministers responsible for higher education have called for better statistics on student mobility, and committed themselves in the Berlin Communiqué to take the necessary steps to improve the coverage and quality of statistical data. This can only be done through an expert group, which should include the OECD, Eurostat and other relevant actors. In particular the statistical coverage needs to be improved for Bologna countries that are members neither of the EU nor the OECD, which in some cases may require action at the national level to improve the availability and quality of statistics.

A possible recommendation for the Ministers to consider in Bergen, referring to the commitments already made, would thus be to a) encourage the development of better indicators, and b) commit themselves to providing statistics of sufficient coverage and quality from each country.

9.2. Legal issues related to portability

As stated above, this is largely an internal EU problem, and the European Commission has announced a working group to examine the issues. No action therefore seems to be called for within the framework of the Bologna Process at this stage, but as all the EU Member States are also Bologna countries, they should work to ensure that provisions and legal instruments are in accordance with stated political goals.

9.3. Financing/student support

ESIB has proposed a European fund for supporting mobile students in order to fill the financial gaps caused by differences in living costs and economic capacities between different countries and regions of Europe. If steps are to be taken in this direction, support must be secured at the national level in each participating country before the issue can be raised in Bergen.

9.4. Administrative obstacles

Again possible remedial measures largely lie outside the authority of education ministers and must be discussed at the national level if they are to be raised in Bergen. They include making visa and other regulations less restrictive, simplifying procedures and reducing fees, as well as granting foreign students access to accommodation, student welfare systems, social benefit schemes etc. on a par with domestic students. Possible negative consequences of easing regulations, such as the emergence of “visa mills”, must be taken into account.

9.5. Geographical imbalances and the social dimension

As has been recognised in previous ministerial communiqués, the Bologna goals of increasing the attractiveness and competitiveness of European higher education on the one hand and promoting equity, social cohesion and cultural diversity on the other are potentially in conflict

with each other. For the latter goals to be fully achieved, means need to be found to redress the imbalance in student flows at the European level, at least to some extent, at the same time addressing concerns of brain drain. On a small scale this can be achieved through programmes. Support schemes may also help. Ultimately, however, this imbalance is closely related to the uneven distribution of wealth between the countries and regions of Europe.

9.6 Conclusion

In the Draft Bergen Communiqué dated 08.02.05, a paragraph relating to mobility has been included (para 31):

“Providing better conditions for student and staff mobility through structural reform is one of the objectives of the Bologna Process. Aware of the many challenges to be overcome to further increase mobility between participating countries we underline the need for further studies of these challenges. In particular, we recognise the importance of simplifying visa requirements and procedures for students and scholars from other countries and continents.”

For establishing a base for further actions in priority areas (para 39), the proposal is to charge the BFUG with:

- “- organising a study on the provision of better conditions for student and staff mobility through structural reform;
- establishing comparable data on the social and economic situation of students in participating countries.”

Since it is not within the power of education ministers alone to take up the challenges involved to further increase mobility or to improve the economic and social situation of students, a commitment by an education minister commits the government of the country. ***It is essential for the members of the BFUG to consult with other relevant ministries in their home countries and report back to the next BFUG meeting*** to enable the proposed commitments to be made.