

BFUG8 12

COUNCIL OF EUROPE: AUSTRIAN BOLOGNA PROCESS INFORMATION SEMINAR

Introduction

1. The Council of Europe, working with the Austrian Presidency, organised a meeting for the new Bologna signatory countries to provide information about the Bologna Process and the work of the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG). This paper invites the BFUG to note the outcome of that meeting.

Participants

2. The meeting took place in Vienna, on 26 January 2006. Board Members, the Chairs of the Working Groups, ENQA and representatives from Albania, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the Ukraine took part. Poor weather conditions had prevented the Armenian representative from attending. The Moldovan representative was unable to attend, due to difficulties in getting a visa. Both Armenia and Moldova had sent in short papers, explaining their approach to implementing Bologna in their respective countries.

Purpose of the meeting

3. The purpose of the meeting was to:
- introduce the new countries to the current members of the Bologna Board
 - outline the role of the EUA, EURASHE and ESIB in the Bologna Process
 - explain the management arrangements for the Process
 - share examples of good practice in implementing the Bologna Process
 - outline the objectives and current status of each BFUG Working Group, ENQA's work and the Trends V and ESIB surveys
 - invite the new countries to explain their current priorities for higher education.

Key points raised

4. The meeting provided an opportunity to provide factual information about the Bologna Process, the role of EUA, EURASHE and ESIB, and the activities of the working groups. It was also a useful forum to exchange ideas on effective engagement with the process and BFUG. Key points emphasised included:

- The importance of students, the institutions and other stakeholders being involved in developments at both national level and through participation in EUA, ESIB and EURASHE.

- There was no one model for implementing Bologna reforms: the best approach depended on the context in which the reforms were taking place and the priorities of the individual countries concerned.
- The network of support available through BFUG members and their willingness to help colleagues.
- The importance of taking part in BFUG meetings, seminars and other events associated with the Bologna Process.
- The importance of ensuring good links between BFUG representatives and their Minister(s); it was particularly important in the run up to the bi-ennial Ministerial conferences when BFUG was discussing the contents of the Communiqué that BFUG members made comments and contributions agreed in advance with their Minister(s).
- The importance of good links between BFUG representatives and any national groups of stakeholders set up to implement the Bologna Process.
- The value of consistent representation at BFUG meetings, to allow representatives to develop expertise and build up good relationships with other BFUG colleagues.
- The importance of planning ahead, for attendance at BFUG and other meetings, to allow sufficient time to arrange visas.
- The use of the Bologna Secretariat and other websites as sources of information.

Reports from the new countries

5. The representatives from Albania, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the Ukraine each gave a short report on their current priorities for higher education. These are summarised below.

6. The representatives from Armenia and Moldova provided written updates. These are attached for information.

Albania

- The two cycle model had been adopted and had been in place for about two years.
- An accreditation agency had yet to be set up, but the final decision was about to be taken by Ministers. The higher education sector was very small (10 HEIs only). The addition of an external element to accreditation and quality assurance was expected to be helpful.
- There was increasing student involvement in HEI governance.

- As part of a 10 year Master Plan for Higher Education, consideration was being given to setting up a National Higher Education Council, to act as an intermediate body between HEIs and Government. Higher education and research were currently separate. However, in future, they might be linked.
- The need for greater financial resource was a significant factor: budgets for HE were low (2.9% of GDP), but the Government wanted to increase investment.
- Funding for the HE sector came from the Government and tuition fees.
- Not all graduates had access to the second cycle. Entry was decided by Bachelor degree results and on the advice of the university.
- There had been an increase in student numbers, but the drop-out rate was high at pre-university level.
- There were six private HEIs. In the past, some lecturers worked in both the private and the public sectors. Now, they could only work in one sector.

Azerbaijan

- The HE system of 24 public and 16 private HEIs had been highly centralised; this had provided the starting point for the transition process.
- A first step had been to ratify the Lisbon Convention and take measures to implement the Convention.
- In 1993, the two-cycle system was introduced in HE and in 1997 the first students graduated with a Bachelor degree diploma.
- Azerbaijan was looking for a method to implement a complimentary credit system and sought the assistance of Bologna colleagues. There were still issues around quality assurance and recognition of studies for students who study abroad.
- Internal quality assurance was the responsibility of HEIs. External quality assurance was the responsibility of the Ministry, but this was under review.
- Approximately 20% of the state budget was allocated to education.
- Each university had its own student association, as well as a state and national association.
- The student participation rate was about 40%, of whom about 5% dropped out.
- Students from some 37 countries were studying in Azerbaijan, mainly from eastern European and Arabic Countries.

Georgia

- Georgia had started a programme of education reforms in line with the Bologna goals prior to joining the Bologna Process. Legislation in line with Bologna had been introduced in December 2004. The process of implementing the legislation had shown there were some shortcomings and some amendments were required.
- A new finance model was being developed, which would include portable student grants.
- By introducing new accreditation arrangements, the number of institutions had halved to around 170 since independence. The number of HEIs was expected to reduce further still.
- Unified national admission exams had been introduced, to ensure fairness.
- There were a number of challenges still to be addressed. They included a lack of academic and administrative staff in HEIs; poor understanding of the terms autonomy and accountability; a lack of partnership between HEIs; and outdated curricula and resources.
- Hopefully the establishment of a Rector's Conference will address the problem of not enough partnerships between HEIs.
- Regular meetings with stakeholders had been taking place and a website had been set up, address as follows:

<http://www.bologna-supporters.ge/Eng/index.htm>

Ukraine

- Full details of the current situation in the Ukraine were given in their application to join the Bologna Process.
- A primary aim was to gain more constructive support from university Rectors and academics for the practical implementation of the Bologna Process. A support structure had been set up to facilitate this. Students were involved in that support structure. Authority for self government by HEIs had been established through special changes to Ukraine's Law "On Higher Education" (February, 2006).
- The intention was to identify a lead HEI in each region to spread good practice and take the lead on implementing Bologna reforms in that area.
- There was increasing use of ECTS and work was under way to align professional qualifications with the Bachelor degrees.
- There were a number of challenges to overcome. They included increasing the employability of the new Bachelor graduates; better alignment between school and Bachelor curricula; reducing the variability in the quality of HEIs;

and improving the social and economic situation of students. These would require significant cultural change – a process that would take time.

- There were 232 state and municipal HEIs and 113 private institutions; this allowed a participation rate of about 60% of school leavers. Funding for education was around 6.5% of GDP.

Conclusion

7. All participants felt the day had been a useful opportunity to exchange ideas and information, and would lead to the development of more constructive engagement of the new member countries within the Bologna Process. Thanks were extended to the Council of Europe and the Austrian Presidency for arranging and supporting the event.

Bologna Secretariat
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