

Portability of grants and loans

1. Purpose & assumptions

In the Bergen Communiqué the following text was incorporated:

Mobility

We recognise that mobility of students and staff among all participating countries remains one of the key objectives of the Bologna Process. Aware of the many remaining challenges to be overcome, we reconfirm our commitment to facilitate the portability of grants and loans where appropriate through joint action, with a view to making mobility within the EHEA a reality. We shall intensify our efforts to lift obstacles to mobility by facilitating the delivery of visa and work permits and by encouraging participation in mobility programmes. We urge institutions and students to make full use of mobility programmes, advocating full recognition of study periods abroad within such programmes. (Bergen Communiqué, May 2005)

In support of the commitment on portability, this paper presents a proposal for the formation of a working group on portability of grants and loans in order to identify, inter alia, the scope for and promote joint actions.¹ Portability of grants and loans, although not a panacea, makes a valuable contribution in realising mobility. Yet, countries are hesitant to implement portability. The objective of the working group is 'making portability work'. The results of the working group should assist countries in facilitating mobility by providing practical advice on the implementation of the portability of the available student grants/loans.

The work of the group will complement that of the working group on social dimension and data on the mobility of staff and students. To assure this, there will be close contact between the two groups. In principle, the proposed working group will confine its remit to addressing the issues affecting portability of grants and loans directly within the remit of Ministers for Education. The group will report its results to the BFUG before the next ministerial conference in London.

The proposed working group should carry out its task taking into account the following:

- Every state should be able to uphold its own system of student support. Participation in a portability process is a national competence as is the issue of the provision of grants and loans.
- It is likely and acceptable that different countries will have different timescales and approaches for addressing portability issues.
- As the student grant and/or loan systems are very different in the various Bologna countries, portability is not intended to be part of the stocktaking in the Bologna process.

¹ This document has been developed by Austria, Belgium (Flemish Community), Croatia, Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Scotland, Sweden

2. Proposal to initiate working group on Portability of Student Grants/Loans

It is proposed that the BFUG should initiate a working group on portability of loans and grants. In the Bergen Communiqué it was recognised that mobility of students among all participating countries remains one of the key objectives of the Bologna Process. **Mobility is the desired outcome, portability a means to that end.** For this reason the Ministers have declared the intention to stimulate and facilitate the portability of student grants and loans. The Ministers have also stated that, in order to make portability work, joint action could be an appropriate mechanism.

This proposed working group will examine the technical, practical and legal aspects of portability. For example it will address questions as: what is understood by grants and loans, what obstacles do countries encounter, how does EU-law affect the national competence on portability, what good practices are there to be learned from. The group will also explore areas for co-operation which could lend themselves to joint action. It will explore and/or formulate proposals to encourage and facilitate countries to promote and affect the portability element of their own student support systems.

A key outcome of the working group should be an elaborated description/detailed analysis of the issues involved in making portability more effective and identification of the scope for 'appropriate joint actions' so that during the 2007 Bologna ministerial conference in London the Ministers can consider a set of recommendations for possible incorporation in the London Communiqué. Subsequently it will be a matter for individual countries to proceed with the desired actions.

3. Proposed terms of reference

In order to obtain a workable set of proposals including joint actions, it is of importance that realistic and achievable targets for practical outcomes are set for the working group.

In this context the working group will seek to:

- Define the elements of this issue in more detail (e.g. what is understood by 'grants and loans');
- Describe the obstacles that countries encounter in making grants and loans portable;
- Examine and provide information on the relevant and applicable EU-law;
- Collect good practices;
- Provide a way to link the grant and/or loan authorities of different countries in order to exchange the necessary information;
- Develop a set of tools to guide countries in making their grant and/or loan system portable;
- Identify ways to facilitate each others portability systems (ranging from appropriate information about study programmes to the assistance in refunding the loans);
- Define levels/ways for exchanging relevant information.

In the elaboration, the working group is to be aware of the different positions of the Bologna countries (for example EU and non-EU) and will take these into account. It could include Bologna countries that do not have a student support system or that do not wish (at this point) to make their system portable. For countries that do or wish to make their grant and/or loan system portable, it will be of help to have a forum where they can exchange necessary information with countries that do not themselves have portability or that have another (or no) student support system.

4. Proposed process

The working group should preferably consist of experts of student support. These experts should be closely linked to the BFUG-representatives.

It is necessary to encourage a broad range of participating countries and relevant organisations.

Countries and organisations that are interested in joining this working group are asked to make this known to the BFUG secretariat.

It is of advantage that the working group is in close contact with the working group on 'Social dimension and data on the mobility of staff and students in participating countries' in order to build on complementary activities and to benefit from each others findings.

The information in this document will be further developed once the BFUG agrees to the establishment of a working group on 'Portability of loans and grants'. In this further elaboration the following will be included: terms of reference, organisation of work, time schedule, resources, list of membership, and the chair of the group. It is intended that considering the time schedule, the working group should provide results before the Ministerial Conference in London in 2007. As for the chair of the working group, The Netherlands are prepared to take on this position.

5. Time schedule

The Working Group proposes to carry out the work in 3 phases.

- Phase 1: June – September, see details below, reporting to the BFUG meeting in Helsinki
- Phase 2: September –January process the input of phase 1
- Phase 3: January – March, winding up, reporting to Ministerial conference in London

6. Organisation of work

In Phase 1 the group should concentrate on the first 4 bullets in the terms of reference as put down in the proposal. The following subgroups are suggested (at least):

EU-law

- The juridical consequences on the portability of grants and loans

Best practices (of at least) Scandinavia

- How does the portability work?
- What bi/multilateral agreements are made in order to carry this out?

Description of national student support systems

- What support systems are there in the different countries?
- To what extent are these portable
- What obstacles are restricting portability?

Definition group

- What is understood by...

Remaining mobility issues

- How to include countries with no student financial support systems?

With the information gathered in Phase 1, in Phase 2 the group should be able to process the last 4 bullets of the proposed terms of reference. Phase 3 should be reserved for preparation of the paper that will be submitted for the ministerial conference.