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REVIEW OF THE APPLICATION BY KAZAKHSTAN FOR ACCESSION TO THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

INTRODUCTION

On 5 February 2010, Kazakhstan applied for accession to the Bologna Process by sending its application letter (BFUG_ES_20_4b) and national report (BFUG_ES_20_4c) to the Ministers from Spain, Austria and Hungary as well as to the Bologna Secretariat.

The present document – which was prepared by the BFUG Chair, Vice-Chairs, and Secretariat with support from the Council of Europe – provides an assessment of Kazakhstan's application for membership of the Bologna Process.

BACKGROUND

Kazakhstan applied for accession to the Bologna Process prior to the Ministerial Meeting in Bergen in 2005 but the application could not be assessed because Kazakhstan was not a party to the European Cultural Convention. Kazakhstan has since then maintained a strong interest in the Bologna Process, explored possibilities for submitting a new application prior to the 2009 Ministerial Meeting and participated at Ministerial level in the first Bologna Policy Forum in April 2009. Kazakhstan has also been invited to participate in the 2010 Bologna Policy Forum.

CRITERIA FOR ACCESSION

It is recalled that the criteria for accession to the Bologna Process are, as spelled out in the Berlin Communiqué (2003):

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.

Document BFUG (ES) 20_4a that is based on the documents developed for the 2005 accession and that was sent to Kazakhstan to describe the application procedure, further specifies that:

“Like the existing members of the Bologna Process, **applicant countries are expected to commit to implementing the principles and objectives of the Bologna Declaration and all subsequent Communiqués.**

The realisation of the European Higher Education Area can only be achieved by incorporating the underlying principles of the Bologna Process within the higher education system of each country. In the context of the accession of new members in 2005, these **underlying principles of the Bologna Process** have been summarised as follows:

- International mobility of students and staff;
- Autonomous higher education institutions;
- Student participation in the governance of higher education;
- Public responsibility for higher education;
- The social dimension of the Bologna Process.

Applicant countries are requested to confirm their adherence to these principles in their applications.”

KAZAKHSTAN’S COMPLIANCE WITH THE CRITERIA

European Cultural Convention

As mentioned, Kazakhstan’s application was not considered in 2005 because the country was not a party to the European Cultural Convention. Here, a significant change is under way. Kazakhstan applied for accession to the Cultural Convention and the Council of Europe’s member states were consulted by written procedure in autumn 2009. By the deadline set for the written consultation, which allowed time for Permanent Representations to consult competent national authorities if they so wished, no objections had been received to Kazakhstan’s request. On January 13, 2010 the Committee of Ministers decided to consult the two non-member States party to the European Cultural Convention and set the deadline for comments to February 19. At the same time, the Committee of Ministers indicated that if none of the non-member States party to the Convention had expressed objections by the deadline, the Committee of Ministers would consider Kazakhstan’s request on February 24, in which case the likely decision will be to invite Kazakhstan to accede to the Cultural Convention. After this, Kazakhstan will need to deposit its instrument of ratification and has indicated that it intends to seek to do so as soon as possible. Article 9.3 of the Convention stipulates that “[w]ith respect to each signatory government ratifying subsequently [i.e. after the entry into force of the Convention with the first three ratifications], the Convention shall enter into force on the date of deposit of its instrument of ratification”. If invited to accede, Kazakhstan will therefore become a party to the Cultural Convention as soon as it deposits its instrument of ratification.

It therefore seems likely that Kazakhstan will accede to the European Cultural Convention either before or shortly after the Bologna Ministerial Conference on March 11-12, 2010 and thus fulfil the first criterion for accession.

National Report

With its national report submitted with the application, Kazakhstan was required to detail its current higher education policies in the light of the Bologna Process and to outline how the principles and objectives of the Bologna Process have been and/or will be implemented.

1. General information on the higher education system

The first section of the national report provides brief but clear information on the higher education system of Kazakhstan, which is made up of 9 national, 32 public, 1 international, 13 military and 90 private higher education institutions. It underlines that important developments have taken place over the past few years with the establishment of a three-cycle degree system established in the Law of 2007, the introduction of a credit system, and the setting up of a National Accreditation Center in 2005. The report states that rectors of public universities are appointed by the Ministry while those of private universities are appointed by the owners; it does not describe the procedures leading up to appointment.

2. Partnership

Higher education policy is coordinated by the Higher and Postgraduate Education Department of the Ministry of Education and Science. Kazakhstan does not yet have a national working group for Bologna follow up or a Bologna promoters' group but commits in the national report to establishing such groups as soon as the country joins the Bologna Process.

3. Stage of implementation of the first and second cycle

The 4 year first degree was generalized and the 1 – 2 year second degree introduced in 2001. The report states that all institutions implement the first degree while 75 institutions implement the second degree, and that as a result around 50 per cent of *institutions* offer degrees according to the "Bologna cycles", with medicine, veterinary and military studies as the main *disciplines* exempted from the two cycle system.

Students follow three main types of programmes below doctoral level: first cycle, second cycle and diploma specialist: the latter comprises longer professional studies such as medicine, veterinary medicine, architecture. The overall numbers show a strong concentration in first degree programmes, and the report indicates that programmes at higher levels will be increased. It should be noted that the columns indicating students "enrolled" in 2008/2009 have been interpreted as meaning those starting their studies in that year. The most relevant column is therefore the one indicating total student numbers.

4. Stage of implementation of the third cycle

PhD studies were introduced in 2005, and in 2009 the total intake was 200 students, while the total amount of students studying in doctoral programmes in 2009/2010

was 622. There is some indication of an effort to strengthen studies and student numbers at second and third degree level but, as noted above, the report indicates a very strong concentration of students to first degree programmes.

5. Relationship between higher education and research

Research is indicated as an important part of university activities and higher education institutions carry out 20 per cent of research (“scientific”) projects. However, only 0.14 per cent of the GDP are spent on research, while 80 per cent of doctoral students are funded by the government.

6. Access and admission to next cycle

All academic programmes give access to the second cycle but students have to take entrance exams.

All academic second cycle qualifications give access to the third cycle.

7. Employability of graduates/cooperation with employers

50 per cent of graduates with first cycle qualifications enter the labour market, and recruitment is helped by employment fairs. There is a little to some dialogue between HEIs and employers on issues like curriculum design, quality assurance and university governance. First cycle graduates are employable in public service, which has aligned procedures and career structures to take account of “Bologna changes”.

8. Implementation of national qualifications framework

Development of the NQF was started in 2009 and is scheduled for completion by 2012 (the “revised Bologna deadline”). It will include generic cycle descriptors and ECTS credit ranges for the first and second cycles. The NQF has been discussed with stakeholders and a timetable has been established that will lead to a national framework in 2012, which is within the time limit established by Ministers in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve. All formal arrangements for the NQF have yet to be established.

The overall state of development is indicated as “there is a timetable for implementation and the work has started”. Overall, Kazakhstan is probably somewhat less advanced in the development of its NQF than most – but certainly not all - Bologna member countries but it is well under way.

9. Reviewing the QA system against the ESG and national support for implementation

The QA system has not yet been reviewed against the ESG, but the National Accreditation Center is an associate member of ENQA and has developed standards and criteria for institutional accreditation with reference to the ESG through a European Commission funded project.

Most HEIs have published a quality improvement strategy and have arrangements in place for review and monitoring of programmes and awards. Some HEIs have described their programmes in terms of learning outcomes and measure achievement of learning outcomes.

10. Stage of development of external quality assurance system

External quality assurance is carried out through accreditation. In 2009, 10 HEIs passed national accreditation. The system operates at national level and covers all higher education. The system includes self assessment reports, external review, publication of results and follow up procedures. Peer review will be introduced in 2013.

11. Level of student participation

Student involvement in quality assurance is modest. Students do participate in internal QA and in some cases in the preparation of self assessment reports and follow up procedures.

12. Level of international participation

There is little international participation in QA, except for, in some cases, in the external evaluation of QA agencies. However, the National Accreditation Center participates in international networks as a full member of INQAAHE and an associate member of ENQA.

13. Stage of implementation of the Diploma Supplement

The DS will be issued to all graduates in Kazakh, Russian and English as of 2010 (i.e. the class graduating in 2010), automatically and free of charge. It is not issued to students in remaining "old type" programmes or in short cycle programmes.

So far, use of the DS for the recognition of foreign qualification is very limited and does not exempt holders from e.g. submitting official translations diplomas and transcripts of records.

14. National implementations of the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention

Kazakhstan is a party to this Convention and appropriate legislation complies with the Convention. The more detailed answers to the question under this point show that Kazakhstan applies a number of key principles and instruments – such as the Recommendations on Criteria and Procedures and on the Recognition of Joint Degrees but not all. Most importantly, the principle of demonstrating "substantial differences" in cases of non-recognition is inadequately implemented. A fully operational ENIC has yet to be established.

15. Stage of implementation of ECTS

Less than 50 % of HE programmes have all components linked with ECTS credits and ECTS are linked with learning outcomes on some programmes only. Kazakhstan has a national credit system that is not compatible with ECTS. There is some development and dissemination activity to improve implementation of ECTS and learning outcomes.

16. Recognition of prior learning

Little progress seems to have been made in this area.

17. Flexible learning paths

Much remains to be done also in this area.

18. Establishment and recognition of joint degrees

Less than 25 per cent of institutions are involved in joint programmes or degrees and some legal obstacles seem to remain although further details are not given. The total number of joint programmes is given as 37.

19. Removing obstacles to student and staff mobility

Some measures are taken to enhance mobility and financial support is available. On the other hand, arrangements for visas and work permits have not been amended to enhance mobility.

20. Portability of loans and grants

Existing grants and loans are not portable.

21. Implementation of strategy

Kazakhstan has not taken specific measures to implement the strategy "European Higher Education in a Global Setting" but indicates that it has done much to foster the Bologna Process in Central Asia. It has entered into a high number of bilateral cooperation agreements in higher education.

22. Main challenges for higher education

These are indicated as:

- Development and implementation of the NQF corresponding to the standards of the EHEA qualifications framework;
- Development of the NQF for lifelong learning;

- Creation of the national ENIC/NARIC center;
- Development of the university study programmes compatible with the Bologna Declaration provisions;
- Creation of the up-to-date mechanisms of recognition of prior learning;
- Development of portability of student grants and loans;
- Increasing student and academic staff mobility (visa, residence and work permits procedures);
- Increasing university autonomy;
- Increasing the level of students' participation.

Part II National strategies on the social dimension of the Bologna Process

The answers overall indicate awareness of the social dimension with no legal obstacles to equal access and some quotas to ensure representation of disadvantaged groups (e.g. orphans or people with disabilities). Support measures to a considerable extent focus on financial support.

Application letter

In the letter sent to the Bologna Secretariat and the Ministers from Spain, Austria and Hungary (see BFUG_ES_20_4b), the Kazakh Minister of Education and Science Zhanseit Tuimebayev confirmed Kazakhstan's willingness to implement all Bologna action lines and committed to adhering to the underlying principles of the Bologna Process, mentioning in particular institutional autonomy, student participation and public responsibility.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

Kazakhstan applies for accession 5 years after the latest round of accessions to the Bologna Process: those of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in 2005¹. Comparison is therefore difficult and Kazakhstan applies for access to a Bologna Process that is at the threshold of its second decade, as the European Higher Education Area.

The report gives the impression of a country that has undertaken serious efforts to develop and implement the main structural reforms of the Bologna Process. Implementation is not perfect and much remains to be done in many areas. On a couple of points, the report is difficult to read and seems to contain some inconsistencies. In some areas, especially as concerns lifelong learning and flexible learning paths, little has so far been done.

In the three main areas of structural reform – quality assurance, qualifications frameworks/degree systems and recognition – Kazakhstan does have considerable achievements even if much also remains to be done. If admitted, Kazakhstan will not rank among the Bologna countries that have achieved the highest degree of implementation of Bologna goals but it will at the same time not be the lowest achiever either. It should also be kept in mind that few Bologna members would achieve anything like a "perfect score" were they to fill out national reports today.

¹ The accession of Montenegro in 2007 was a special case, since Montenegro was a member of the Bologna Process from 2003 to 2006 and acceded again in 2007 following its declaration of independence.

Overall, the report gives the impression of a country seriously engaged in a reform process in which much has been accomplished in a relatively short time and in which much remains to be done. The report seems to give sufficient reason to recommend accession and insufficient reason not to. Accession should be recommended conditional on Kazakhstan's fulfilling the other main criterion: accession to the European Cultural Convention. This condition may well be fulfilled before the Budapest/Wien conference; should it not be, accession could be granted from such time as the instrument of ratification shall have been deposited.

Proposed action:

- If Kazakhstan on February 24, 2010 is invited to join the European Cultural Convention:
- Advise the Ministers to accept Kazakhstan as new participating country of the Bologna Process / the European Higher Education Area, once Kazakhstan has ratified the European Cultural Convention by depositing its instrument of ratification.