**‘Structural Reforms’ Working Group Co-Chairs 1-st Meeting (version 1)**

**Brussels, 03 October 2012, 09:30 – 15:30**

**Main conclusions**

**Participants:**

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| Council of Europe | Sjur Bergan |
| Belgium/Flemish Community | Nöel Vercruysse |
| Belgium/Flemish Community | Magalie Soenen |
| Holy See | Padre Friedrich Bechina |
| Poland | Bartłomiej Banaszak |
| BFUG Secretariat | Gayane Harutyunyan |

Sjur Bergan, as coordinator, opened the first meeting of the Co-chairs of the Structural Reforms WG by welcoming its participants. He introduced the agenda of the meeting with its main points:

* Goals of the ‘Structural Reforms’ WG;
* Working methodology;
* The role of each of the Co-chairs;
* The role of the BFUG Secretariat;
* Terms of Reference of the WG
* Main points for the first meeting of the WG;
* Documents, date/venue of the first meeting.

It was stressed that the WG should be oriented towards EHEA policy development and implementation of its overall principles. Thus, on one hand, it has to make policy recommendations related to the four policy areas covered by its mandate (quality assurance, recognition, qualifications frameworks, transparency) to foster the further development of the EHEA and, on the other hand, it has to ensure further application of the structures and implementation of policies agreed by now. The importance to have close interaction with the other working groups was also underlined.

Noel Vercruysse, as the host of the meeting, welcomed the participants and wished a fruitful meeting. He underlined that a WG that covers nearly all the important EHEA policy areas has a double dimension: policy oriented and technical. He agreed that the four areas should contribute to implementation of the EHEA goals. In that respect, it was deemed necessary to try once again to understand and define **what are the main principles/goals of the EHEA and the way they are used**. Taking into account the ever changing context of higher education the co-chairs highlighted the need to study the further development of these four issues while trying to be creative and innovative in approaches. It was suggested to use the tables from the Pavel Zgaga’s paper published in “European Higher Education at the Crossroads” (2012) as a background document for launching discussion during the first meeting of the Structural Reforms WG. In those tables, the author shows how the main goals/principles of the Bologna Process have evolved throughout the years and how they are formulated in the Communiqués. Co-chairs agreed with the proposal.

The next important issue raised was the relation **between the four structural reform areas.** It was stressed that one of the reasons why thattheBFUG established the Working Group is that previously the coherence between the various components of the structural reforms has not always been explicit as stated in the Bucharest Communiqué. In this context the WG has to pay special attention to the learning outcomes taking into account their crucial role for the further development of the Structural reforms and their interrelation. Such an approach should have also an impact on the working methods as we should avoid the meeting model based on variable composition according to topics.

The Co-Chairs of the WG noted that the review of the EHEA goals will also help to identify future development policies reflecting political trends and priorities. The importance to look at the HE developments in the different regions of the world, e.g. in Asia-Pacific region, was also underlined. Thus, it was agreed that the WG has **to study the developments beyond EHEA and consider their impact over EHEA.**

Bartłomiej Banaszak mentioned that the name of the WG used in the 2012-2015 workplan was misleading, since the main objective of the WG is to show how these four areas are interrelated. The Chairs favoured the **Structural Reforms** as a name for the Working Group.

There has been a lot done in the four areas and now there is a need to be more explicit on how these four interact: how the qualifications frameworks relate to recognition; what is the role of the quality assurance in development of national qualifications frameworks; how employability and quality are linked, etc. Furthermore, it was deemed necessary to consider from the opposite direction i.e. the impact of the structural reforms on the Bologna goals.

Since one of the main EHEA goals is ‘quality higher education for all’, the Co-Chairs proceeded to discuss the relation between quality and quantity. Widening access to higher education is a respond to the societal needs and there is a need to ensure quality while addressing dilemmas of mass higher education. Therefore, **quality and widening access** should be one of the areas for the WG.

Mobility is another EHEA goal and is regarded as a one of the characteristics of the national education systems and it should be looked not only within the EHEA, but also in relation with other areas. The Co-Chairs also mentioned that recognition is not enough, as there are persisting problems, e.g. in relation to issuing visas and others. It is visible in “Mobility Strategy” that transparency tools and mutual trust are a necessary prerequisite for mobility. Further developments of qualification frameworks in addition to other transparency tools will foster the quality. In this context co-chairs addressed the issue of recognition of quality assurance decisions of EQAR-registered agencies on joint and double degree programmes as well as the need of further worldwide cooperation between different QA systems.

The Co-chairs’ discussion addressed the link between **employability** and structural reforms. Employability is a transversal issue and it is important to understand how it is interrelated to quality, learning outcomes and other tools. It was underlined that the WG has the prime responsibility for the issue of employability as the main solutions for improvement of graduates’ employability, within the framework of the Bologna Process, are related to the structural reforms.

The need and significance of the national qualifications frameworks were discussed: including the problems related to the short cycle, school leaving certificate, progression from professional qualifications to academic qualifications. Different country examples were brought in this context. It’s necessity to have a broader policy approach in order to reflect the EHEA diversity.

The relation of qualifications frameworks, quality and recognition and learning outcomes was discussed. Thus, the role of learning outcomes gets special significance in developing of common understanding of **substantial differences**. Therefore, **learning outcomes** can be one of the topics for the WG. Additionally, the WG can is related to the learning outcomes.

The Chairs discussed how the EHEA Structural reforms relate to the national plans. Moreover, it was mentioned that in many cases there is little correlation between policy developments at national and EHEA levels, and most of the national strategy development plans do not include any reference to the EHEA structural reforms. There is an obvious gap that needs to be bridged.

The Co-Chairs discussed the issue of quality not only in relation to the individual institutions, as it is usually done, but also in relation to education systems. It was stressed that there should be a conversation on quality of education systems as a whole. The understanding of and criteria for system quality differ from that to the individual institutions. **There should be a shift from merely speaking about quality to demonstrating evidence-based quality of education systems.** But here a major question arises: how can the countries demonstrate that they have a good education system? In some cases, system quality can be associated with the existence of high quality research or with the provision of high quality education programs, etc. Moreover, there are still different approaches to quality within the EHEA. Therefore, there is a need of creating more trust and transparency through the provision of adequate and relevant information on higher education.

The point was also made that quality needs to be defined in relation to a set of purposes. The quality of a first degree education program cannot be assessed according to the same criteria as the quality of a doctoral program or a research program. It must be legitimate ofr HE institutions to have different goals (e.g. comprehensive research institution, specialized institution teaching primarily at first degree level) but there had been little consideration of these more nuanced aspects in the overall quality debate.

Further on, the Co-Chairs pointed at another complicate issue: how to deal with the qualifications that are not part of the national education systems. Two approaches were put forward: a. they can be left out concern of the national authorities; or b. they can be controlled through the learning outcomes. It was also mentioned that it should be enough information available to the public in order to ensure transparency.

Thus, the challenge of the WG is to bring the four areas closer to each other. At the same time, the WG should be in a position to come up with a valuable input, avoiding being too technical and general.

With regard to the **main objectives of the WG** the Co-chairs agreed on a set of topics for the work:

* How do quality, qualifications frameworks, recognition and transparency link and interact?
* What are the main obstacles for developing the coherent policies and practices for structural reforms and how can they be overcome?
* How to transfer structural reforms into political goals? How to include structural reforms in the general HE strategies of the States?
* What is the Influence of the main EHEA political goals on and their relation to the structural reforms and how they relate to major purpose of HE?
* How to develop a common understanding of and practices with learning outcomes? How do learning outcomes facilitate the implementation of the structural reforms as well as that of other policy areas?
* What is the impact of the structural reforms on the EHEA policy developments?

The Terms of Reference of the WG should be revised taking into consideration the above mentioned topics and would be discussed during the first meeting of the WG in December 2012.

It was also agreed to ask the members of the WG to submit a brief summary on how they perceive the main challenges of the Structural Reforms as well as the main political goals of the Bologna process (yesterday, tomorrow) with the particular view on their own country or organisation. It was agreed that based on the information received by the members of the WG Fr. Friedrich Bechina will prepare a synthesis report that will be discussed during the first meeting of the group.

While discussing the **working methodology** for the WG, the Chairs underlined the importance to keep the holistic view of the group. Since the of the working group is rather big, it is vital to ensure that the group functions efficiently. For this purpose the members of the group should be prepared for the meetings, read the required common documentation and contribute to each meeting.

The role of the Bologna Secretariat will be to provide administrative and operational support to the WG and its Co-Chairs including planning of meetings, preparing background papers and minute-taking.

Generally, there will be one WG meeting scheduled for each semester. The four Co-Chairs will function like a bureau and will held their meetings in between the group meetings. The chairing of the meetings will be divided between the four co-chairs. The WG will be required to submit a written report to each BFUG meeting.

The Co-Chairs of the WG would maintain contacts with all other WGs. One of the Co-Chairs will represent the Structural Reforms group in the Implementation working group and the Co-Chairs will also ensure close contact with the network of national correspondents and the ad-hoc working group on the ECTS and the third cycle. One of the Co -Chairs of WGs on Mobility and internationalisation and Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning will be invited to the meetings of the Structural Reforms WG to guarantee exchange of information and interaction. Related to revision of European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) ,the Structural WG will comment as appropriate on draft amendments to ESG. In case of the pathfinder group on automatic recognition, the group will comment on their findings.

The duration of the meeting will be 1,5 day and they will be held mainly in plenary session format. To discuss specific topics the WG may need to split into smaller ad-hoc groups but this should be done in a such a way so as to ensure the interaction of the four policy areas. It is therefore expected that all members of the WG engage in all issues.

The first meeting of the Structural Reforms WG was decided to hold on December 13-14, 2012 in Brussels in the premises of the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training. The meeting will start in the morning of 13 December and end early to mid-afternoon of December 14.

The Co-Chairs agreed on the following schedule of the meetings:

* Two meetings in 2013, possibly in May and in September.;
* Three meetings in 2014, possibly in December, 2013 or January 2014, in May or in June and in September or in October.

The Co-Chairs agreed that they may need to meet between the meetings of the full group. They agreed to meet in Strasbourg on February 22, on the day after the next plenary session of the Council of Europe’s CDPPE.

The Co-Chairs discussed agenda of the first meeting and it was agreed that Magalie Soenen will draft it accordingly.