Working group ‘Structural reforms’

Outline of the break out session on transparency

Chair: Noël Vercruysse

Facilitator: Noël Vercruysse

Rapporteur: Aurelija Valeikiene

**Background:**

The Leuven Communiqué called for transparency of the diversity of the European higher education system in terms of institutions, programmes, … acknowledging that the missions of the higher education institutions are diverse as a response to the wider societal needs.

The ministers in Leuven note that there are (at that time) several current initiatives designed to develop mechanisms for providing more detailed information about higher education institutions across the EHEA to make their diversity more transparent. The Communiqué also stated that the transparency tools need to relate to the principles of the Bologna Process and that they should be based on comparable and adequate indicators to describe the diverse profiles of higher education institutions and their programmes.

The BFUG was asked to monitor the development of the transparency mechanisms and to report b back to the 2012 ministerial conference.

The work of the Transparency Working Group resulted in a report ‘Transparency Tools across the EHEA’ published in the beginning of 2012.

Mostly the debate on transparency tools has been connected to the debate on rankings and classifications. Rankings and classifications are prominent in public debates.

The report came to the following working description of transparency tools:

‘Transparency tools can be seen as having primarily an information provision function. Their users can be diverse, ranging from students and families to businesses, faculty and policy makers, such as HEI’s leaders and government officials. Within each category of beneficiaries, it can be expected that individuals have quite different information needs and expectations. It would be probably impossible that transparency tools could meet all individual needs at once.’

The report has analyzed the contribution of the main Bologna tools to transparency.

In another part the report provides a short analysis of rankings and classifications both at national and international level. The report identifies also some novelties that promise to improve transparency.

The Bucharest communiqué states that the ministers:

* Will strive to make higher education systems easier to understand for the public, and especially for students and employers;
* Will support the improvement of current and developing transparency tools in order to make them more user-driven and to ground them on empirical evidence;
* aim to reach an agreement on common guidelines for transparency by 2015;
* will develop EHEA guidelines for transparency policies and continue to monitor current and developing transparency tools.

**Key issues:**

1. The Bologna Process considers the diversity in European higher education as a highly valued feature of higher education in Europe;
2. For its second phase the Bologna Process has put forward transparency of diversity as a strategic objective;
3. As in all societal sectors also in higher education there is a growing need for transparency and accountability among all stakeholders; transparency becomes a major issue;
4. The level of convergence achieved by the Bologna Process has created the conditions for the development of both diversity and transparency enhancing initiatives;
5. There is the need to obtain valid information on higher education across borders although at this moment trustworthy evidence-based transparency producing instrument is lacking; information that could contribute to a better understanding of higher education;
6. A common European transparency framework may include
   1. The main characteristics of a higher education system;
   2. The programme specifications: what are the key elements?
   3. A general framework for demonstrating the quality of a programme to students, employers, policy-makers and the general public;
   4. A general framework for presenting evidence-based information about the performances: employability, time to graduation, the achieved learning outcomes ..
7. Could we imagine factors that could tell us something about the educational experience?
8. What could be considered as means of ensuring sufficient transparency of the diversity in EHE?
9. We should encourage HEI to collect evidence and to report their progress in improving the quality of their teaching and education;
10. HEI can do more to ensure that they are clear about their goals and outcomes;
11. A high degree of transparency about the higher education systems, the use of the qualifications framework, the programme specifications, the learning outcomes, the quality will facilitate the recognition and the acceptance of degrees across the borders in the EHEA.

**Background documentation:**

**Leuven Communiqué:**

*Multidimensional transparency tools*

**22.** We note that there are several current initiatives designed to develop mechanisms for providing more detailed information about higher education

institutions across the EHEA to make their diversity more transparent. We believe that any such mechanisms, including those helping higher education systems and institutions to identify and compare their respective strengths, should be developed in close consultation with the key stakeholders. These transparency tools need to relate closely to the principles of the Bologna Process, in particular quality assurance and recognition, which will remain our priority, and should be based on comparable data and adequate indicators to describe the diverse profiles of higher education institutions and their programmes.

In particular the BFUG is asked:

To monitor the development of the transparency mechanisms and to report

back to the 2012 ministerial conference;

**Bucharest Communiqué:**

Improvement of data collection and transparency to underpin political goals

We welcome the improved quality of data and information on higher education. We ask for more targeted data collection and referencing against common indicators, particularly on employability, the social imension, lifelong learning, internationalisation, portability of grants/loans, and student and staff obility. We ask Eurostat, Eurydice and Eurostudent to monitor the implementation of the reforms and to report back in 2015.

We will encourage the development of a system of voluntary peer learning and reviewing in countries that request it. This will help to assess the level of implementation of Bologna reforms and promote good practices as a dynamic way of addressing the challenges facing European higher education.

We will strive to make higher education systems easier to understand for the public, and especially for students and employers. We will support the improvement of current and developing transparency tools in order to make them more user-driven and to ground them on empirical evidence. We aim to reach an agreement on common guidelines for transparency by 2015.

*At the European level, in preparation of the Ministerial Conference in 2015 and together with relevant stakeholders, we will:*

Develop EHEA guidelines for transparency policies and continue to monitor current and developing transparency tools.

**Council conclusions on the modernisation of higher education, Council meeting Brussels, 28 and 29 November 2011**

Support the Member States in their efforts to reform their higher education systems, making

full use of EU programmes in the field of education and training, and by means of an

improved evidence base, detailed analysis and increased transparency, including by:

a. developing, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, an independent, performancebased

transparency tool for profiling higher education institutions ("U-Multirank"),

which takes account of the specificity of national higher education systems and

acknowledges the diversity of higher education institutions across Europe, as well as

allows users to create individualised multidimensional rankings;

**COMMUNICATION**

**Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher**

**education systems** {SEC(2011) 1063 final}

*The European Commission will:*

**Launch U-Multirank**: a **new performance-based ranking and information tool for**

**profiling higher education institutions**, aiming to radically improve the transparency

of the higher education sector, with first results in 2013. By moving beyond the research

focus of current rankings and performance indicators, and by allowing users to create

individualised multidimensional rankings, this independently run tool will inform choice

and decision-making by all higher education stakeholders.

In co-operation with Eurostat, **improve data on European higher education learning**

**mobility and employment outcomes,** and work towards a **European Tertiary**

**Education Register.**

**COMMUNICATION**

**Europe 2020 Flagship Initiative Innovation Union SEC(2010) 1161**

In 2011 the Commission will, on the basis of the current preparatory work11, support

**an independent multi-dimensional international ranking system to benchmark**

**university performance.** This will allow the best performing European universities

to be identified. In 2011 further steps will be proposed in a Communication on the

reform and modernisation of higher education.

**Conclusions of the WG Transparency Tools:**

Currently, in the EHEA there are different tools, structures, and processes that contribute to enabling understanding of both cross-border and domestic higher education diversity. It seems rather unlikely that a single transparency tool can address all needs for information regarding higher education; hence the logical way forward is to look for the appropriate mix of tools. The national governments' perceptions of the current transparency tools are varied.

Some of the existing transparency tools, structures and processes were developed in the governmental and intergovernmental realm, but there are also other demands for information that are met using tools developed by non-governmental entities. In most cases, it may prove more beneficial to look for synergies between these tools, rather than trying to replace the ones with the others. The merits of the market have to be acknowledged, while the governments remain the custodians of the public interest also in the sphere of

transparency.

The Bologna tools, structures and processes have the potential to significantly increase the EHEA level of transparency. But even if they realise their full potential, information gaps still remain, mainly regarding the substantive educational experience (issues like student mentoring and support, as well as the quality of teaching), and the employability of graduates. Meaningful comparison between educational alternatives is not easy, especially regarding the quality of teaching, and the regional and community engagement of higher

education institutions.

There are also comprehensive data sources at national level, which can generate information that may be found relevant by the beneficiaries of higher education institutions. A better use of the national databases may contribute to filling in some of the information gaps.

New tools, processes, indicators and methodologies are being developed, at national and supra-national level. They can provide some of the pending solutions. Therefore, the recommendations touch upon continuing the monitoring of transparency tools and on developing common understanding and guidelines for transparency at EHEA level.