**BFUG Structural Reforms Working Group**: reflections on the key higher education policy challenges and the ways to address them, and goals of the Bologna Process from the national perspective, by Ana Tecilazić Goršić, Head of Sector for Development of Higher Education, Ministry of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia

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With the objective to prepare the ground for the work of BFUG Structural Reforms Working Group the members are invited to submit a brief summary on how they perceive the main challenges the EHEA is facing taking into account the major political, economic, social and technological developments, the extent to which the EHEA Structural Reforms are suitable to address those challenges and the way those reforms can be reinforced and the main political goals of the Bologna Process of yesterday, today and tomorrow.

The purpose of this paper is to present our views in the context of most recent developments in the Croatian higher education system and policy. The paper is structured according to some main elements of the EHEA structural reforms, namely mobility and internationalisation, qualifications frameworks and recognition, financing and management of higher education institutions, social dimension and lifelong learning, while quality assurance remains a common underling issue of all the structural elements and is not treated separately.

When talking about **mobility and internationalisation** there are four challenges we should stress out. Firstly, we fear that the outgoing mobility target of 20% by 2020 is unfeasible due to insufficient funding of existing mobility schemes. Croatia, with 2% of mobile students[[1]](#footnote-1), is likely to fail in reaching this target. However, EHEA structural reforms may contribute to increasing the number of mobile students mainly by addressing the issues of academic recognition. In Croatia particularly, ERASMUS, being the main mobility scheme could act as a role model for other mobility schemes in terms of regulating and assuring recognition of study period abroad prior to students’ leaving the home university.

Secondly, we believe that there is a difficulty but also necessity to develop and formalise accreditation procedures and criteria for cross border higher education (CBHE). Based on the findings of the report presented in the DG HE meeting in Nicosia, there are huge differences between countries in the extent to which CBHE is regulated by national legislation. Croatia, being among countries that have not regulated CBHE, could benefit thus from the peer learning activities facilitated by both the EC and the BFUG.

Furthermore, it is the tendency of opening up to quality assurance agencies outside of country of accrediting institution. Although already being a practice in some of the EHEA countries, we believe that there is a need for additional enhancing of mutual trust among EHEA countries and QAAs listed in EQAR by providing more transparency on the standards and procedures of external evaluation of the QAAs implementing ESG in accrediting institution and study programmes EHEA-wide.

Finally, simplified accreditation of joint degrees as a result of more flexible criteria and procedures remains a challenge for majority of the EHEA countries.

When it comes to development and implementation of the **qualifications frameworks and recognition of qualifications**, the most challenging for the EHEA might be to make the NQFs part of the mainstream policies and practices instead of keeping it as an isolated abstract initiative that terminates with reporting on the referencing and self-certification process.

Furthermore, although the Bologna Declaration stated that “the degree awarded after the first cycle shall be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification” the Croatian labour market has still not recognised qualifications of the first cycle. Moreover, some of the universities (faculties) have kept so called integrated study programmes (integrated first and second cycle) and thus, creating obstacles for international and national mobility of second degree qualifications. Consequently, even students of “non-integrated study programmes” still tend to enrol in the second cycle immediately after finishing the first one. The EHEA could support additionally implementation of the transparency instruments such as DS including learning outcomes, reference to the EQF (and the QF – EHEA?) level in each new qualification in order to promote the first cycle qualifications among employers.

Moreover, it is an additional challenge for the NQFs contributing to the simplification of the recognition procedures both those of qualifications awarded abroad and also recognition of learning realised outside of formal sector and possibly abroad, whereas (non)formalised in the country of origin. Following the Lisbon Convention principles and aspiring for the automatic recognition of qualifications in some of the EHEA countries, we are still struggling with rigid recognition procedures, more particularly of those qualifications for regulated professions. On the other side, the procedures seem not to be rigid enough when it comes to recognition of qualifications with doubtful quality based solely on mutual trust and without proper prior validation process. The EHEA structural reforms should contribute to the modernisation of Directive on professional qualifications by introducing the learning outcomes-based approach. Moreover with the full implementation of the NQFs worldwide, supported by the EHEA structural reforms, the recognition procedures may be reviewed and readjusted on the basis of the qualifications levels indirectly referenced to the EQF and self-certificated to the QF-EHEA.

With regards to the **social dimension**, the main challenge the EHEA is facing taking into account the major political, economic and social developments is the need to raise employability. There is a lack of data, not only in Croatia but in some other EHEA countries, on employability of graduates. Development of a good quality tracking system, with stronger emphasis on employability of graduates as a criterion for quality assessment and basis for public funding remains a challenge we are all facing.

Secondly, although, with the introduction of the Bologna Process at the Croatian universities, students have become an important factor in the decision making process, there is still room for improvement in opening up of the universities towards inclusion of other stakeholders, notably from the economic sector, in the university management.

Furthermore, with recent economic and demographic changes, keeping equal opportunities and access to higher education to all potential students with the objective to reach EU2020 target of 40% of those having tertiary degree, becomes difficult. All successful students (55+ ECTS per year) in Croatia have been granted a possibility for free studying. It will however remain a challenge to provide good quality education, with limited resources, and to reach the target at the same time. Moreover, it is one of the common challenges for the EHEA countries to find a good balance between widening opportunities and investing in excellence.

Finally, enhancing research activities of the universities that would contribute to the quality of teaching and equally to economic development and society as a whole might be equally regarded under the social dimension of structural reforms.

Last but not least, although not formally recognised by the BFUG as one of the major issues for structural reform, **financing and management of higher education institutions** are of crucial importance for Croatia.

Since Croatia joined the Bologna Process all of the universities in Croatia have started implementing significant structural reforms. One of the main obstacles for efficient university management and institutional development is dysfunctional organisation, whereby the constituent parts (faculties) have autonomy to create their own policies independently from the overall academic and administrative activities at the university level. One of the main challenges for the higher education structural reformin Croatia is thus, financial, functional and legal integration of the university that prescribes a more efficient organizational model by correlating different parts and activities at the university with the objective of improving efficiency of public funding.

In the light of the economic crisis, university public funding, today more than ever calls for serious changes. Lack of long term strategic planning both at institutional and national level and absence of evidence based decision making have become severe difficulty in efficient financing of higher education. Traditionally, in Croatia, university funding has been based on demand, taking into account number of students and teachers, quality of teaching rooms and laboratories and other facilities. Due to significant budgetary cuts and with the perspective of introducing a more efficient funding model, Croatia is turning towards **programme-based funding** defined according to the main national and institutional strategic priorities and objectives in line with the EU2020 and the ET2020 targets. After three years of piloting the new funding model, the most challenging will be full shifting to programme-based funding of public higher education institutions.

1. Although there is no a trusthfully data basis of students' mobility, according to some estimations outgoing mobility in Croatia is cca 2% (source: EUROSTUDENT IV). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)