Dear Colleagues,

The major challenge facing the EHEA at this time arises for the complex interplay of multiple tools and initiatives being introduced at variable rates across the various member HE systems with consequent deferral of the network benefits that are intended from the overall reform. Some countries have, for example, effective quality assurance systems (demonstrably consistent with ESG) and some countries (not always the same ones) have NQFs that are self-certified as compatible with QF-EHEA. These countries have incurred and continue to incur costs in implementing these measures.  The measures may have had domestic benefits in the reform of these countries HE systems. However the Bologna Process promised that such measures would also generate external benefits in terms of enhanced recognition and mobility. Such benefits, as mutual, network goods, cannot be obtained unilaterally by the pioneer countries. This can result in a vicious cycle of perceived lack of return on reform investment for pioneers, leading other countries to reduce political commitment and delay reform, further postponing realisation of network benefits.

This is further exacerbated by the interplay between instruments. NQFs if not underpinned by transparent QA have diminished credibility at home and abroad. QA that is dominated by academic process and does not intersect with learning outcomes, particularly as articulated through NQFs, runs the risk of failing to engage stakeholders outside the academy leading to decreasing social, political and economic relevance.

It is very timely therefore that the new BFUG working group system brings together the strands of reform that had previously been addressed as separate, technical issues. Overall it is important to placed renewed emphasis on the inter-relatedness of the Bologna structural strands.

The ministerial meetings and the traffic lights reporting system have helped sustain the political momentum for Bologna. The overlap with the EU education and training reform programme, especially EQF, remains a potential source of confusion and diffusion of political momentum. On the one hand the integration of HE into lifelong learning, including the EQF, is surely a positive development both at a national and European level. On the other hand there are significant political challenges that arise in this integration at national and sub-national level (for example in tensions between general and vocational education systems) that threaten to derail or at least slow the overall pace of Bologna developments. In some ways it is more easier to imagine an integrated European HE space than it is to imagine an integrated LLL space within some individual member states.

Mention of the EU also flags up the issue of core and periphery as sometimes perceived in relation to the Bologna Process. So far all the NQFs self-certified are in states participating in ET 2020, as are all the registered agencies of EQAR. This pattern is reflected in many of the chloropleth maps presented to the ministers in Bucharest. At the same time the Bologna Global Forum and related activities such as the work the ASEM Education Secretariat and of ETF for VET in the partner countries, shows the deep attraction that the European models and tools are exerting on other parts of the world. This is giving rise to a convergent development of reform efforts (for HE, VET and the permeability between the two)  even beyond the EHEA that  at very least is making dialogue and transparency easier to undertake. This dimension needs to be sustained and developed. For smaller countries in Europe in particular this aspect of presenting to the wider world under a European “umbrella” is a significant benefit even in the absence of the intra-European networked goods discussed above. However if the EHEA brand is undermined by inconsistent implementation then this benefit may not be sustained.

The Bologna Process has developed through a unique interplay of multiple actors (states, HEIs, national agencies, European-level bodies and associations) that has generated remarkable trust capital in the absence of much in the way of dedication transnational legal structure or institutionalisation. It remains to be seen whether this capital can be sustained. Is the  “shame” of red traffic lights, perhaps incurred under a previous minister, or left to be dealt with by a successor, sufficient to maintain the sense of collective endeavour? Are the other actors (students, universities, agencies, employers, EU) sufficiently well focussed to defend threats to this capital if (when!) some member states renege on their commitments? If not are there other sanctions that can be applied and do these require new institutional forms and resources?

Bryan Maguire