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**Bologna Process Revisited**

(to be discussed during the Rome BFUG meeting on 18-19 September 2014)

The present paper was prepared by the Bologna Secretariat upon the request of the Bologna Follow-up Group at its Athens meeting on 9-10 April 2014. The paper is based upon the non-paper[[1]](#footnote-1), and the Athens BFUG discussion.

The goal of this paper is to structure the discussion in the BFUG on the future of the Bologna Process.

The Bologna Process was launched in 1999 with the high aspiration of making Europe more competitive and attractive. By signing the Bologna Declaration and the subsequent communiqués, 47 countries have committed to the main goals/action lines of the Process. The Bologna Process was widely regarded as a successful and far-reaching instance of pan-European cooperation that has united education leaders aspired by the reforms and sharing a vision of an open EHEA. It is the agora where students, representatives from higher education institutions, government officials, members of international institutions and organisations engage in an intensive dialogue to design the EHEA. Moreover, it has opened a space for a worldwide dialogue on higher education policy issues.

The process embraced ‘soft’ working methodology with guidelines, indicators and peer review, benchmarking and sharing of good practice.

Based on political consensus, the Bologna Process has become a brand, which stands – also in other parts of the world, where other regions are trying to replicate it – both for cooperation and recognition. On the one hand, the impetus for joining the Bologna Process has been rooted in the wish to have leverage for bringing about change in higher education, domestically and internationally. On the other hand, being part of the Bologna Process is also about achieving international credibility for one’s own system. Up to 2010, the Bologna Process was a household name keeping higher education high on the political agenda while at the same time generating substantial political opposition – in other words it created a forward movement and was thus politically highly relevant.

After more than a decade of cooperation, the Bologna Process has achieved

* Comparable degree structures across 47 countries
* The wide use of ECTS within the EHEA
* A common understanding of quality higher education and quality assurance

However, the change brought about by the Bologna Process has been very uneven, with substantial disparities both within and between countries and regions. The latest more critical results of the 2012 Implementation report and a variety of reports written by stakeholders show several implementation challenges, e.g. the incoherent use of the three-cycle-system in general and in some disciplines (e.g. teachers, law and medicine), inconsistencies in quality assurance regimes across the EHEA, the inconsistent use of ECTS and the sound implementation of learning outcomes. And most importantly, problems of recognition of degrees for accessing another higher education system within the EHEA persist. In spite of the creation of EQAR, quality assurance decisions are not portable yet and the issue of trans-border quality assurance is not really touched upon, not even in joint (degree) programmes. Finally, the overall goal of student mobility and the accompanying access to programmes has not yet been reached. The implementation of the social dimension has been largely confined to an exchange of good practice. In other words, proper implementation lags behind the setting of goals and targets within the Bologna Process.

Moreover, the opportunities for a pan-European dialogue are not sufficiently exploited since Bologna can look like a closed shop essentially engaging a limited community of officials and experts and far less genuine practitioners.

A more worrying trend though is the decreasing participation of ministers in the ministerial meetings as well as the weak participation and even weaker commitments to reform of some countries, which might suggest that the Bologna Process is perceived as no longer having the necessary thrust. The issues dealt with by the Bologna Process, largely restricted to aspects necessary for cross-border cooperation, may have become irrelevant for the ministers' domestic political agenda (sources and efficiency of funding, overall adequacy of the higher education system in terms of meeting national needs, graduate outcomes), while at the international level the perception may be that it has gone as far as it possibly can.

Thus the main purpose of this document is to present the perspective of the Bologna Process after 2015 in order to keep it politically viable and attractive, to the countries and their national agendas, being able to respond to the existing challenges for our higher education systems, and identifying the ways to motivate countries lagging behind in the implementation of reforms. It reflects the various viewpoints of the EHEA member countries and consultative members on the content and the implementation of the main action lines as well as the governance structure of the Process expressed at the Athens BFUG meeting.

**Goals and their implementation in the Bologna Process**

The concern of the EHEA member countries and stakeholders regarding the shortcomings of the Process does not mean that there is no harmonisation taking place, but it shows that there are still differences among and within countries, between theory and practice, and there is an urgency to reinvent the process in order for it to become politically relevant again. In this respect, there is a need to redefine the ultimate goals and values of the Process with an aim to concentrate on a limited number of policy areas such as quality, innovation, and competitiveness.

The fact that the member countries have started from different points regarding compatibility of their higher education systems to the Bologna structures and tools needs to be taken into consideration. Whereas all countries should travel in the same direction, it is necessary to allow for reasonable flexibility within the Bologna realm.

The future success of the Bologna Process needs full commitment of all EHEA members. This can be achieved through identifying topics that are high on domestic agendas and of shared interest to Ministers, and embedding them in the Bologna agenda. The EHEA country representatives should have a strong backing from their Ministries and act as a link between their Ministry and the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG)/BFUG working structures. The role of practitioners should be reinforced by involving them in the elaboration of policies and ensuring a proper communication between them and the BFUG/BFUG working structures.

The implementation is a crucial issue in the Process. The regular stocktaking exercise is not sufficient. Research is needed to give the full and true picture of the situation. Peer learning and reviews can also serve as an efficient tool to monitor and evaluate the implementation in different national contexts. For this end, the countries that have been relatively successful in implementing Bologna action lines can support the countries that lag behind.

**Governance structure of the Bologna Process**

The implementation of the policy goals is strongly linked to the issue of governance structure. So far the BFUG as the main executive body has played an important role in the evolution of the Process. In order to increase the efficiency of the Process, the BFUG should be entrusted with more authority in decision-making process between Ministerials.

A central role should be given to the BFUG helping and guiding countries still lagging behind in implementing the Bologna reforms based on the findings of the stocktaking report.

As for the Ministerial Communiqués, the number of key recommendations should be limited. Furthermore, there is a need for simplification of key documents of the Ministerial events and filtering out some specific outcomes. The Ministers should be given a chance to discuss the Communiqués more extensively and make any changes they deem necessary. Finally, there is a need to rethink the organisation of the Bologna Policy Forums as well and make them more attractive and open for dialogues beyond the Ministerial meetings themselves.

At the same time the added value of the BP should not be disregarded. Despite the EHEA diversity, there is a possibility for translating from one system to another. Moreover, outside the EHEA the Process has become a strong and powerful symbol, however lacks continuity and consistency.

**Organisation of the discussion in the BFUG meeting in Rome**

The secretariat proposes to have a moderated discussion along the following questions:

* Are the priority goals of the Bologna process still (a) the implementation of a three-cycle degree structure, (b) a European approach to quality assurance across the EHEA, (c) recognition of degrees? Does the Bologna Process need to replace its goals by new ones?
* How do we keep its goals politically viable and attractive? Is their implementation the crux of the matter? In view of the uneven implementation of the goals, how do we guarantee coherence across the European Higher Education Area and how do we avoid fragmentation? Or could we accept a process of different speeds?

In order to have fruitful discussions, the meeting will be organised in such a way that allows small thematic working group and plenary discussions.

1. BFUG\_GR\_KZ\_39\_5a\_Bologna Process Revisited (developed by the Belgium (French Community and Flanders), Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, European Commission, European University Association, European Students Union and the Council of Europe) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)