



POSSIBLE ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE FUTURE SECRETARIAT

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During the BFUG meeting in Amsterdam in March 2016, the BFUG Secretariat was asked by the BFUG members to prepare a document outlining different options for the arrangements of the future Secretariat. This document will be presented at the next BFUG meeting in Bratislava in December 2016.

This issue has come up incidentally but several times during the last fifteen years. In all past discussions from 2005 to 2015 (see annex), the topic was touched upon but never thoroughly dealt with, and except in 2010 when a position was taken, the discussion did not seem to come to any conclusion one way or another. In 2010, the Council of Europe proposed a permanent secretariat but the proposition was rejected by the Committee of Ministers.

If all BFUG members are to adopt a common position now to present to the Ministers in 2018, it is necessary to present the advantages and inconveniences of possible options. The choice seems to be between a rotating Secretariat, as it has been functioning up to now, and a permanent Secretariat, based on the model of associations such as EQAR for instance.

Whatever the option finally chosen, it seems that some important facts would remain unchanged:

- the Secretariat will remain under the authority of the BFUG members
- its task will be defined in its terms of reference after each ministerial conference
- the website will remain the same (www.ehea.info) giving access to all the archives.

First option: A rotating Secretariat

This is how the Secretariat has been working since its creation. The country(ies) hosting the ministerial conference also host(s) the Secretariat for two or three years. The European Commission gives financial support to the country hosting the Secretariat.

Up to now the Secretariat has worked either with a staff belonging to the hosting countries or with a staff internationally recruited.

This solution is an opportunity to highlight for a while a particular country and its priorities for higher education. In taking the responsibility of the Secretariat, this country becomes more directly involved in the Bologna process and the national stakeholders and experts have an opportunity to become more involved too.

The rotating Secretariat guarantees that every country that wants to be strongly involved in the Bologna process will have its turn.

This rotating structure is flexible, depending of the choices of the hosting country. This flexibility is in the spirit of the Bologna process which is an intergovernmental process based on the soft law. The structure and the staff are defined by the country hosting the Secretariat, taking into consideration the terms of reference.

Every two or three years, new dynamics are created by the new team.

Each new Secretariat needs time to get fully involved in the discussion and to get familiar with the different issues.

Second option: A permanent Secretariat

The term “permanent” refers to a permanent staff working within the Secretariat (vs a rotating staff). The permanent Secretariat will be a fixed point, whereas the BFUG members and the Ministers change.

There is no connection between the calendar of the ministerial conferences and the changes in the staff which are made necessary to maintain an efficient work force. It can also be assumed that a permanent secretariat is independent of the country hosting the ministerial conference and that the staff is international.

This option permits to have continuity in the work of the Secretariat and no break between each conference. The working rhythm is not broken and the members of the Secretariat are well informed of the issues.

The permanent Secretariat becomes the privileged interlocutor for all questions concerning the EHEA, in particular questions concerning the dialogue between EHEA and the outside countries and concerning EHEA's influence.

The members of the Secretariat are the same, whatever the country hosting the Ministerial conference, and they are well identified by each BFUG member and by the experts. They are the ‘memory’ of the debates. They become professionals of the Bologna process working full time on the different issues. This gives them an opportunity to take on responsibilities and be a force to bring forward proposals.

To set up a permanent Secretariat may have some consequences on the general governance of the process: the Secretariat may become an expert more up-to-date than the co-chairs and might gradually loses its neutrality, this tendency being reinforced by the changes of the BFUG members and the Ministers.

Whereas a rotating Secretariat brings dynamism there is a danger of routine work in the case of a permanent Secretariat. Some countries may feel left out.

Permanency would lead to more stable rules in the working of the Secretariat.

In the hypothesis of a permanent Secretariat some basic questions would have to be answered first.

How will the staff be selected? How long will the work contracts last?

The staff should be international (based on EHEA countries). According to the previous Secretariats, 5 people should work full time for the daily work (one head, two policy officers, one webmaster/community manager, one assistant in charge of the budget and all logistical aspects).

Many different ways of composition of the staff can be set up. The country hosting the ministerial conference could be interested in being represented by one person in the staff (not a permanent staff member); would there be an election of the staff members and by whom would they be elected? Who will define the work contract and their duration?

What kind of structure? what organization?

The most common structure used in this kind of matter, is the international association AISBL under the Belgian law (as EQAR is for example, and many international associations located in Brussels).

The internal organization of the Secretariat would have to be newly defined with the role of each member and the relationships between the Secretariat and the BFUG members – even if the Secretariat remains under the authority of the BFUG.

Where will the permanent Secretariat be located?

A permanent staff could be located in a permanent place. If the structure adopted were the international association AISBL under the Belgian law, the permanent Secretariat would have to be located in Belgium. If another legal status were adopted, the location might be somewhere else.

A permanent staff could also have a rotating location.

What sources of funds?

The budget would have to take into consideration current expenditure and at least four main categories of expenses: staff (the salaries would have to be defined – by whom?); travels and subsistence; premises and their flows; website maintenance.

Would the European Commission continue to contribute to the funds with a periodical subvention?

Unlike today, we can imagine that all participating countries would have to pay fees, since the Secretariat is working for all EHEA members and the community. Would the contribution of the organizations be the same as that of the countries? How to deal with countries/organization which might have some difficulties to pay?

Other options can be considered for example the funding of the staff fees by the country where they were employed before joining the Secretariat. This is how the current Secretariat is partly remunerated.

Conclusion

This document presents the two main options identified so far for the Secretariat of the Bologna Follow-Up Group. The issue is getting more crucial since the number of members has increased regularly during the last 15 years. Changing the structure of the Secretariat for a new structure would change the global governance of the EHEA since it would change the actual relationships between members and Secretariat. If the BFUG members and the Ministers decide to shift to a new structure for the Secretariat, they will have to rethink the governance of the Bologna process between 2018 and 2020, so as to start with the new system in 2020.

ANNEX: HISTORY OF THE QUESTION IN THE DEBATES OF THE BFUG

1. 2005 = European Commission

In 2005, the question arose as to whether the ministers consider asking “the European Commission to provide a permanent Secretariat. [...] This would imply that the Commission should not any longer be a member of the Follow-up Group”¹.

2. 2006 = European Commission and Council of Europe

In 2006, the discussion went on to support the continuing development of the EHEA. The proposal is to “build closer links to the Lisbon Process, including inviting the European Commission to provide a permanent Secretariat to support the Process”. [...]

“Advantages and disadvantages can be attributed to each option. The current arrangements are dependent on good will, but have the advantage of having worked well thus far and in many ways the willingness of countries to undertake the necessary reforms has been enhanced by the fact that the process is relatively straightforward and unbureaucratic. [...] Inviting the European Commission to provide a permanent Secretariat might be seen as leading to the exclusion of the 20 participating countries outwith the EU”².

3. 2010 = Council of Europe

During the BFUG meeting in Madrid in 2010, the Recommendation 1892 of the Parliamentary Assembly was presented³. In this text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 20 November 2009, it is specified that: “The Assembly appreciates the voluntary initiatives by the past and present ministries providing the secretariat services to the Bologna Process. It notes with concern that such secretariat structures depend on the availability and resources of particular ministries which have to serve primarily national interests, and that they become the owner of the archives. While the informal Bologna structure has served well during the development decade, a reformed steering process will be needed for the creation of the European Higher Education Area which is not led by European Union presidencies, in which chairmanship changes every six months, and a support process based on volunteer host countries providing a secretariat which changes hands every two years.”

This text was an opportunity to open the debate among the BFUG members. The main conclusions were as follows:

“In exchanges with the Parliamentary Assembly, the Council of Europe Secretariat and the CDES Bureau had underlined that there was no wish among the countries participating in the Bologna Process to change the existing arrangements and that even if the idea of a permanent secretariat came up, it would not automatically need to be placed within the Council of Europe.

The Vice-Chairs informed the BFUG that they had recently been approached by Lord McIntosh on this issue and that Austria and Hungary shared the view that there was no need to change the existing organisational structure, as the Ministers had clearly stated in the Leuven/ Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué.

Romania, which as host of the next Bologna Secretariat had also been approached recently, supported the position of Austria and Hungary and stressed that such issues should generally be discussed by the BFUG and decided by the Ministers in the framework of the Bologna Process, not of the Council of Europe.

Several BFUG members stressed the constructive and supportive role played by the Council of Europe in the Bologna Process, which should not be jeopardized by taking over the Bologna

¹ « The European Higher Education Area – A common understanding or a legal instrument? » BFUG4 14. 16 February 2005

² « Initial discussion on possible arrangements for supporting the continuing development of the EHEA post 2010 » BFUG9 10_ArrangementsPost2010, 12-13 October 2006.

³ <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-EN.asp?fileid=17791&lang=en>

Secretariat and the related obligation to act impartially. Apart from that, the BFUG unanimously agreed that there was no need for action concerning the Bologna Secretariat, as the Ministers had just endorsed the existing organizational structure as fit for purpose. The Chair was asked to communicate this decision to Lord McIntosh and the BFUG members were asked to inform the respective members of the CDESR accordingly.”⁴

In its “Reply” in September 2010, the Committee of Ministers⁵ expressed the following statement: “The Committee of Ministers takes note of the suggestion made by the Assembly to the member states which are to host the future ministerial conferences of the Bologna Process to establish a more stable secretariat of the European Higher Education Area at the Council of Europe (paragraph 16.3). It informs the Assembly that the discussions in the Bologna Follow-up Group have shown a lack of support for this proposal among the members of the Bologna Process. **Thus the Ministers, in their Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, confirmed that the present setup, which arranges for a secretariat to be provided by the host country of the forthcoming ministerial conference, should continue.** Consequently the Committee of Ministers cannot support the recommendation on this specific issue.”

4. 2014 = “The future of the EHEA”

In 2014, during the extraordinary BFUG seminar held in Rome on 18 September 2014, the paper on “the future of the European Higher education Area” proposed a synthesis of the previous years and came back to the question of the role of the Secretariat: “According to its terms of reference, the role of the Secretariat is “to provide neutral support to the further consolidation of the EHEA under the exclusive authority of the BFUG and its Chairs and Vice-Chairs”⁶. “To carry out this task, so far the Secretariat has been based in the country hosting the next meeting and has changed every two, three years. For the future, the terms of reference of the Secretariat should be developed after the evaluation of the organizational structure of the EHEA is completed. A more stable setup might be envisaged with a permanent secretariat established in one of the member states, decoupled from the organization office in the host country of the Ministerial conference. Moreover, an international composition of the staff may be considered, through secondments from other countries and some sharing of expenses. If continuity were guaranteed, the Secretariat would be able to play more of a “driver” role in the management of the process with a long-term vision, better targeting and greater dynamism. Of course, the process of selecting the secretariat must be transparent.”⁷

It is to noted, that in the final version of this document, the case of the Secretariat was no longer included.

5. 2015 = “Selection of the host for the Ministerial Conference and the Bologna Secretariat”

In 2015, during the presentation of the French application for hosting the Ministerial conference in 2018 and having a “Secretariat provided under French authorities but open for secondments from other countries”, **it was underlined “that it is very important to determine after the Yerevan Ministerial Conference the tasks and conditions of the Secretariat after 2018 and perhaps not in January 2018 but in 2016-2017.** Moreover, setting up of the Secretariat should be done with a view of securing continuity to 2020 with as much international expertise as possible while the idea of having expertise for keeping the contact with the regions outside the EHEA is most welcome.”⁸

⁴ Draft outcome of proceedings, item 13 « Recommendation 1892 (2009) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe “Contribution of the Council of Europe to the development of the European Higher Education Area” BFUG (BE/AL) 21_3 19/03/2010.

⁵ <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=12533&lang=en>

⁶ Reference to the document BFUG_CY_BA_33_4a

⁷ « The Bologna process revisited: The future of the European Higher Education Area » BGUG_IT_VA_42_4 Last modified: 07.11.2014.

⁸ « Meeting of the Bologna Follow-Up group, Riga, 26 January 2015 – 27 January 2015. Draft outcome of proceedings” BFUG Board_LV_IS_44_3b, item 9 “Selection of the host for the Ministerial Conference and the Bologna Secretariat in 2018”.