



Advisory Group 2 "Support for the Belarus roadmap"

FIRST DRAFT OF THE FINAL REPORT

Final Draft to be submitted to the BFUG meeting in February 2018 in Sofia

BELARUS ROADMAP FOR HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM¹

In view of the fact that Belarus will be joining the European Higher Education Area 16 years after the launch of the Bologna Process, the Belarusian authorities and the BFUG will work together on developing and implementing a roadmap for higher education reform in Belarus in accordance with the values, principles and goals of the EHEA, as detailed below.

Under this roadmap the Belarusian authorities would, in full respect of the powers of the Government, the national parliament, higher education institutions, and other stakeholders:

Introductory Remarks:

The AG has based its work on information gathered from, as well as on direct exchanges of views with, a broad range of stakeholders in Belarusian higher education. These include the Ministry of Education; the National Institute for Higher Education which has a public mandate with regard to the EHEA, representatives of the Rectors' conference; individual rectors and other institutional leaders; representatives of officially recognised student organisations as well as of student organisations that are not recognised by public authorities; and representatives of other stakeholder organisations, including the Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee and Ad Hoc Commission of EaP CSF Belarusian National Platform and the Office for a Democratic Belarus, some of which are not recognised by the Belarusian authorities. The AG has also consulted non-Belarusian organisations and individuals with good knowledge of higher education in Belarus. This broad gathering of information has been essential to the AG's work. On some issues, information provided by different stakeholders has been so divergent that it has proved almost impossible for the AG to establish a clear picture of the current factual situation.

Other Points to be mentioned in the introduction:

Ways of working in the AG 2, events, meetings, PLAs, cooperation, etc.

Short Introduction into the HE system in Belarus, (access with 17).

Higher education is mostly understood as leading to specific occupations.

Central regulation. Teacher centered vs student centered.

Quality Assurance and Enhancement vs. Quality Control

Delays in the implementation of the Roadmap. NQF, QA, Draft Education Code still under negotiation in Parliament. Underline that not all reforms asked for in the Roadmap need a legal basis, rather institutional practice.

Conflicting information from Ministry and civil society organisations.

Confusion of language, terminology and concepts.

¹ Text in Italics is taken from the Roadmap

Structural reforms

Qualifications framework

Commit to developing a National Qualifications framework compatible with the QF-EHEA.

Commit to establishing a timetable for this work and to identify a national steering group by the end of 2015 and to launch work on the NQF in the first half of 2016.

As part of this work, commit to introducing the three-cycle system on the agreed Bologna model, establishing a first degree of 180 - 240 ECTS credits and consequently to gradually phase out the remaining 5 year bakalavr degree, and subsequently measure student workload in ECTS, as stipulated in the revised ECTS Users' Guide.

Assessment:

The new draft revised Education Code of the Republic of Belarus looks as if it is generally in line with the Bologna model and meets some of the Roadmap requirements concerning the introduction of a three cycle higher education system. Yet, the fact, that the three cycle system was introduced while the former two cycle system is still in place, massively complicates the sound implementation of the Bologna model. Currently, two systems run in parallel and it is unclear how long and to what extent this situation is intended to last. In several countries, a limited number of study programs – medicine is a typical example – is not organised according to the three cycle system. However, in Belarus, the exceptions to the three cycle system are more numerous and the timetable of further reforms is uncertain. It still remains unclear when the revised Education Code will be adopted and how the BA and MA-cycles will be linked to the NQF.

- **National qualification framework (NQF):** The NQF is not yet in place. The new Education Code does not mention the NQF and also does not mention programs that are referenced to the NQF. The adoption of NQF has been postponed to November 2017. A national consultation with stakeholders has been conducted in 2017. The draft qualification frameworks presented to the advisory group has been rather an occupational standards framework than a qualification framework outlining generic competences laid down along the Dublin Descriptors. (The latest NQF draft presented in September 2017 still has to be checked).

Remaining tasks: discussion of the NQF details, setting of a concrete adoption date and referencing higher education qualifications to it.

- **ECTS:** It is claimed that the ECTS system is applied in Belarusian HEIs, though ECTS credits are not explicitly mentioned in the draft Education Code. The previously used credit system is used in parallel (tbc). So far, ECTS, which is called “cumulative points” in Belarus, is solely understood as contact hours and workload. One “cumulative point” equals to 36-40 working hours by a student, and is far more than the typical ECTS range in the EHEA which ranges from 26-30 hours. Accumulation and transfer functions of ECTS credits are not employed. Learning Outcomes concept has not been introduced yet. ECTS User's Guide is translated into Russian and is available to HEIs.

Remaining task: Speeding up transition & development of documents for HEIs to facilitate the process of creating new programmes by using ECTS and Learning Outcomes appropriately. Make the ECTS User's Guide (2015) known to all in charge of creating study programmes and accreditation. Training of HEI academic and administrative staff has to be foreseen for proper implementation.

- **Two cycle higher education system:** The draft Education Code from 2017 will introduce shorter Bachelor programmes of up to 4-4.5 years (240-270 ECTS). The goal is to increase the number of 4 year programs, introduce 1-2 year Master programmes and to decrease long cycle programs (some up to 6 years), Each university has the right to handle the transition in its own way taking advice of the local employers into account.

Following the Roadmap, the New Code will introduce a three cycle higher education system by mentioning the terms “bachelor” and “master” but at the same time preserves the term “specialist”. By sticking to both models, the New Code complicates the incorporation of the Bachelor-/Master-system. (Question: Proportion how many BA/MA and long cycle???)

Concerning the doctoral qualification/third cycle. There are different levels of doctoral studies (aspirantura/adjunctura and doctoral studies) and two types of research qualifications (candidat nauk and doctor nauk).

The third cycle system is not part of the higher education system but under the responsibility of a specific council (the Highest Attestation Commission), since doctoral candidates are doing individual research. There are two types of degrees awarded: diploma of candidate of sciences (after the examinations, before thesis defence) and diploma of researcher delivered by an Accreditation Committee after the thesis defence.

Quality assurance

Commit to establishing, by the end of 2017, the legal basis for an independent quality assurance agency in conformity with the European Standards and Guidelines.

By the end of 2015, develop a timetable for establishing this agency.

Through the BFUG, invite foreign quality assurance experts to advise on the timetable and plans for establishing the agency as well as on the process leading to it being established.

Assessment:

A crucial part of the Bologna Process is the establishment of an internal and external QA system in line with the ESG, where an essential element is an independent QA agency, whose task is implementation of both quality assurance (in a form of evaluation, audit, accreditation etc.) and quality enhancement activities.

Unfortunately, in Belarus, quality assurance is still understood as quality control and is still completely in the hands of a unit as part of the Ministry of Education. It is being said that the need for an independent QA agency is still debated, therefore has not received a reflection in official documents yet. The draft Education Code does not foresee the establishment of an independent QA agency, nor does it mention the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area as commonly agreed set of principles. There is also no reference in the Education Code or in policy documents of which the AG is aware, of the need to constantly engage in support and development of quality culture within institutions. Quality is mainly understood as conformity to educational standards for study programmes or management standards such as ISO (certification of quality management systems is popular with Belarus HEIs).

There have been several occasions when experts from abroad took part in the events in Belarus, enabled by the financial support from the Council of Europe and the European Commission. Presentations were made on various topics, including ESG, individual country experiences, as well as more general overviews of how external QA is set up in other European countries. To the best of AG knowledge, no experts were invited to advise concretely on the timetable for the establishment of an independent QA agency, and review any draft documentation pertaining to evaluation criteria, methodologies and similar matters.

Remaining tasks: Provision of legal basis for the establishment of an independent QA agency that distinguishes assurance activities and quality enhancement activities. Drafting of a package of legal documents for implementation of external QA in line with ESG. Raising awareness of ESG and its application within HEIs. Capacity development of an independent QA agency staff. Piloting new evaluation procedures.

Recognition

By the end of 2016, review legislation and practice with a view to identifying any modifications needed to bring them into conformity with the obligations undertaken by Belarus as a State party to the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

By the end of 2017, implement any required modification of practice that does not require amending legislation.

By the end of 2017, develop a timetable for the implementation of required legislative modifications.

Assessment:

The Belarusian Center of the European Network of Information Centers (ENIC) has been peer reviewed by Belgium (Flanders) and the so far only orally provided feedback was positive. It is an active member of the ENIC Network and contributes to its activities.

The draft Education Code mentions the terms recognition, equivalence (also in New Draft Code?) and compliance. The predominant logic in recognition in Belarus is still to assess “equivalence” of qualifications and not the logic of the LRC of substantial difference and the reversed burden of proof. Therefore, it is important to clearly state that recognition is granted unless substantial difference according to agreed six aspects to the qualification (level, profile, workload, content, learning outcomes, quality) is identified. Belarus authorities assess foreign qualifications on a case by case basis but do not take NQF-referenced qualifications or ECTS of study programmes into account. Although the New Education Code gives more leverage to higher education institutions concerning the recognition and determination of the study duration, the Code still does not link this procedure to the ECTS credits nor to the learning outcomes.

Moreover, the New Education Code does not mention the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC), which is the legally binding international convention to be applied in EHEA of which Belarus is a signatory.

The predominant logic in recognition in Belarus still seems to be to assess “equivalence” of qualifications and not the logic of the LRC of substantial difference and the reversed burden of proof. Recognition practice should therefore evolve in the direction to be fully in line with the LRC, subsidiary texts, and also making use of good practices as in the EHEA using the European Area of Recognition (EAR) and EAR-HEI-Manual.

Remaining tasks: Recognition decisions should be fully based on the LRC. The modification and creation of study programmes should be left to higher education institutions (at the moment 35-40% of the core curricula defined by Associations). To do this, all Bologna tools need to be implemented appropriately (BA/MA, NQF, ECTS, external QA). This, of course is rather a governance issue than a recognition issue.

Transparency instruments

By the end of 2015, develop a plan to implement ECTS in accordance with the revised ECTS Users' Guide by the end of 2017, with a strong focus on learning outcomes, curriculum design, delivery as well as assessment and applied to mobility programmes.

By the end of 2017, develop a plan to issue the Diploma Supplement in the format developed by the Council of Europe, the European Commission and UNESCO to all students automatically, free of charge and in a widely spoken language (other than Russian).

Assessment:

The establishment and the development of certain transparency instruments are ongoing. Belarus has started to incorporate the ECTS into its higher education system making use of the ECTS Users' Guide. Also the development and adaption of curricula and academic mobility has started but not yet coherently and globally for all higher education institutions.

The automatic and free of charge delivery of the Diploma Supplement in a widely spoken language is not conducted systematically across all higher education institutions. (Students still have to make efforts to ensure receiving their DSs.) The New Education Code does not yet guarantee an automatic and free of charge issuance of the DS, but Belarus has already agreed to add a paragraph to the New Code guaranteeing the (revised) DS is free of charge and delivered automatically in Belarusian and another widely spoken language.

Mobility of higher education staff and students and internationalisation

In autumn 2015, launch work on a plan to facilitate, develop and diversify the international mobility of staff and students to as well as from Belarusian higher education institutions. Such a plan would be expected to include changes to the current system of mobility permits, to allow longer periods of mobility within the EHEA for both staff and students, without ministerial approval. The plan should be completed by the end of 2016 and should outline policy measures as well as any required legislative measures required to

increase and diversify academic mobility from Belarus to its partners in the EHEA. Any required legislative measures should be introduced by mid-2017.

Assessment:

The international mobility of staff and students is a stated goal of the Belarussian authorities. Students are eligible to study abroad provided they can prove/demonstrate above average grades and if they have the signed approval of the rector of their higher education institution. The real issue is the actual use of this formal regulation. In the best of cases, it is an unnecessarily complicated system that risks creating bureaucracy and slowing down applications. In the worst of cases, the system has the potential of being used to sanction students and staff perceived as “problematic” Even if it has proved impossible to establish whether the system is used in this way, the potential use is of concern. The same is true for academic staff. The fact that both staff and students do not have to receive the approval of the Ministry of Education anymore is only a minor progress considering the necessary approval from the rector of a higher education institution.

Based on the first Erasmus+ feedback, it appears that students are still facing problems in the recognition of their study abroad. Recognition of learning outcomes is not yet in place, since programmes are not using learning outcomes. So far, ECTS credits have not been recognised even if a learning agreement had been signed between sending and receiving higher education institutions prior to the study time abroad.

Remaining tasks: find better and more efficient administrative arrangements that encourage mobility while ensuring that legitimate administrative concerns are met, and that reduce the potential for using the system to punish students and staff perceived as problematic – or that give the impression of doing so.

Lifelong learning and the social dimension of higher education

By the end of 2015, develop a plan for the recognition of prior learning and implement the plan by the end of 2017.

By the end of 2016, review the obligation for students whose education is financed by public funds to accept work placements on graduation with a view to limiting it to specific professions for which there is a significant unmet need in the country and taking into account practice in other European countries.

By the end of 2017 review the criteria for financial support for students with a view to ensuring social equity unaffected by applicants' gender, race, colour, disability, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status.

Assessment:

The New Education Code does not introduce any legislative changes concerning the work obligation for students whose tuition fees are covered by public funds. Students who studied with the support of public funds still have to accept work placements for two years upon graduation regardless of whether if they are specialised in the assigned job or not. Some countries have a similar system for very specific professions or study programs. Military higher education would be a typical example – officer students are often obliged to work in the armed forces for a given period or to reimburse the costs of their education. In some countries, medical doctors and dentists are required to work in peripheral areas of the country for a given period of time. In the case of Belarus, however, the work obligation is general for any students whose studies have been financed by public funds. The AG is not aware of any similar, generalised work obligation tied to public funding in any other EHEA country. Even if the AG notes that the Belarussian authorities argue that the system is intended to offer graduates assistance in obtaining initial employment, the AG finds it difficult to compare this system to career counseling that is now common in many European universities. The AG, in effect, questions whether this system is in accordance with the fundamental values upon which the EHEA builds and also whether the system is in fact an efficient way of ensuring that peripheral areas benefit from a highly educated labour force. Incentives would seem to be a more efficient solution than enforcing obligations. The AG has been unable to establish definitively whether allegations of the system being used to punish students perceived as problematic are in fact true, but it recognises that the system has the potential of being used in this way – or of giving the impression of being so used.

Remaining tasks: Since the freedom of choosing one's profession is a fundamental right in Europe, the obligatory work placement system should be reviewed and changed in accordance to the Roadmap.

Fundamental values of the EHEA

Implement the commitments made by the ministers at their meeting in Yerevan, as stipulated in the Yerevan Ministerial Communiqué.

By mid-2017, the Ministry will conduct an analysis of national legislation and submit to Parliament proposals for required measures to incorporate the principles of the Magna Charta Universitatum and Council of Europe recommendation Rec/CM(2012)7 on the public responsibility for academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

By mid-2016, develop a plan detailing legislative and policy measures aimed at enabling students and staff to organise freely and to register their organisations. By mid-2017, introduce any required legislative measures.

Assessment:

The draft revised New Education Code mentions neither the terms "academic freedom" nor "institutional autonomy". Moreover, the New Code fails to elucidate the fundamental students' or academic staff rights while it also does not explicitly restrict these rights.

Concerning the legislative measures regarding students' and staff rights to register independent organisations, the New Code does not mention any relevant governance models (e.g. academic councils, etc.). The Code does not provide any information on the election of student or staff representatives.

The practice of direct Presidential or governmental responsibility for appointing and dismissing higher education leaders is not compatible with the values of the EHEA, and of democratic higher education².

There is no structured consultation with stakeholders (students, staff, employer organisations, trade unions) on higher education reform.

Consequently, there are no significant improvements in the higher education institutional, staff or students' organisational autonomy.

Implementation

Commit to providing the necessary data for the 2018 Implementation report, in the format and by the date that will be determined by the BFUG.

Commit to appointing a contact person for the 2018 Implementation report exercise. The contact person will coordinate the gathering of information for Belarus and will ensure that all information requested is provided in English within the deadlines stipulated by the BFUG. The contact person should have a good knowledge of English orally and in writing.

General Assessment:

The Roadmap will not be fulfilled by 2018. Some limited progress has been made in areas of the Roadmap, but the overall understanding of the interplay and interdependence of Bologna tools needs to be developed. Some major requirements of the Roadmap are still to be implemented and the lack of progress concerning the fundamental values of education such as academic freedom, autonomy and the establishment of student unions remains as an important task. There are still efforts needed when it comes to student mobility, the setting up of an independent quality assurance agency or a sound

² Rectors of public higher education institutions are appointed by departmental ministers (for HEIs that are within departmental subordination) upon the agreement of the President of the country. The President directly appoints only rector of Belarusian State University and Academy of Public Administration under the Aegis of the President of the Republic of Belarus. Rectors of private higher education institutions are appointed by the Minister of Education the proposal of the founder of a private HEI. Rectors of public higher education institutions are dismissed from their position by departmental ministers (for HEIs that are within departmental subordination). The President of the country directly dismisses from their position only rector of Belarusian State University and Academy of Public Administration under the Aegis of the President of the Republic of Belarus. Rectors of private higher education institutions are dismissed from their position by the Minister of Education on the proposal of the founder of a private HEI.

implementation of a national qualifications framework. Also the obligatory work placement system needs to undergo significant changes in order to meet the requirements of the Roadmap. In general, the understanding of the interplay of the different Bologna Tools (BA, MA, PhD, NQF, Quality Assurance, ECTS, learning outcomes, Diploma Supplement etc.) is still underdeveloped.

Participation in the work programme

Appoint a delegation of 1-3 members to the BFUG with good working knowledge of English. It will attend meetings of the BFUG and will ensure continuity in its representation throughout the work period.

Ensure participation in relevant seminars and peer learning activities and is welcome to nominate candidates for working groups in the 2015 – 18 EHEA work programme.

Assessment: Fulfilled

Cooperation with the BFUG

This roadmap will be implemented by the Belarusian authorities and stakeholders in cooperation with the BFUG. The BFUG will appoint a coordination group of members and consultative members that will facilitate cooperation, seek to identify possible partners for developing specific policy areas, and advise the BFUG on progress in the implementation of this road map. The Belarusian authorities will facilitate the work of this group and provide a contact person or contact group for this work. The coordination group will, among others, cooperate with the Belarusian delegation to the BFUG. The coordination group and Belarus will meet at least twice a year to discuss developments. The coordination group will report back from these meetings to the BFUG.

Recommendations by the Co-Chairs:

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List of events in the framework of Advisory Group 2 Belarus Roadmap

AG 2 meetings

19/01/2016 – Chisinau

2-3/06/2016 – Minsk

4-5/10/2016 – Rome (also PLA on QA)

24-25/01/2017 – Berlin (also PLA with 60 rectors from Belarus with Technical University and Humboldt University in Berlin)

April 2017: Contact Seminar with 60 representatives from German and Belarus Universities. Several national Seminars, Peer Learning Activities organised by Belarus authorities.

18/05/2017 – Minsk (Conference with 200 participants from over 16 Bologna countries on Bologna Implementation)

18-19/10/2017 Rome