

STOCKTAKING WORKING GROUP: NOTES OF MEETING OF 12-13 FEBRUARY 2007, LILLEHAMMER, NORWAY

Present

Andrejs Rauhvargers, Latvia (Chair)
Marie-Anne Persoons, Belgium (Flemish Community)
Heli Aru, Estonia
Uta Grund, Germany
Sverre Rustad, Norway
Camila Sturza, Romania
Darinka Vrecko, Slovenia
Aybar Ertepinar, Turkey
David Crosier, EUA
Cynthia Deane, Options Consulting
Stephanie Oberheidt, Eurydice
Cornelia Racke (observer)
Ann McVie, Secretariat (notes)

Apologies: Foteini Asderaki, Greece

Welcome

1. Andrejs welcomed everyone to the meeting.
2. The agenda and minutes of the last meeting were adopted.

Update

3. Andrejs gave a report on progress since the last meeting. While only 8 National Reports had been received by the deadline of 15 December, most had been received by early in the New Year. One report remained outstanding. There was some variation in the standard of completion of the National Reports. Individual country scorecards had been issued for comments. The deadline for replies was 14 February. There would be an agreed process for resolving any outstanding issues about individual scores.

Trends V

4. David reported on the emerging findings from Trends V. The exercise was largely based on questionnaire responses, using questions from Trends 3 to allow comparison. There had been a good response rate. The findings from the questionnaires would be augmented by information from discussions with Rector's Conferences and site visits. There had been a particular emphasis on the newer member countries within the site visits.

5. Overall, the results suggested there was a positive attitude to the EHEA amongst European HEIs, with considerable progress evident on the implementation of Bologna reforms since 2003. Some HEIs accepted the changes with some reluctance. Others welcomed them.

6. There was considerable progress made on implementing the 3 cycle system, credit systems, Diploma supplements and ECTS. The linking of ECTS to the adoption of learning outcomes might however be an area for future development. There appeared to have been little progress on credit recognition. Employability was increasingly being cited as a driver for curriculum reform.

7. There were some concerns that overly intrusive and bureaucratic external quality assurance systems could be a barrier to effective institutional quality improvement. Awareness of national qualifications frameworks was low, both of their existence and their purpose. Only 16% of HEIs listed lifelong learning as being a high priority. Conversely, the social dimension was cited as being a priority, but there was little evidence of concrete measures to address the needs of under-represented groups. Increasing internationalisation was seen as being positive for mobile students. However, there was low recognition of the benefits of increasing internationalisation from home students. Overall, there was an increased perception of competition within the EHEA.

Eurydice Focus Report

8. Stephanie gave an update on the production of the Focus report. The draft comparative overview would be issued to all countries shortly for checking. Comments from working group members would also be welcomed. In particular, Stephanie asked the group to check the references to BFUG in the glossary in the comparative overview.

9. There was still some work to do to complete all individual country entries. Information was still missing from Azerbaijan, “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and the Ukraine. If needs be, information about those countries would be included in the comparative overview on the basis of their National Reports. There would be a footnote to that effect.

10. Eurydice was also working on three other reports that might be of interest to the group: Glossary of Quality Assurance Terms; Key Data on HE; and Governance in HE. Details would be issued to group members for information.

11. It was noted that there were some significant differences between the ways in which information was gathered by Eurydice and the National Reports. For example, Eurydice reported on the number of programmes in the 3 cycles, whereas the National Reports asked for the percentage of students following such programmes. It was recognised that one reason for the differences in methodologies was that the Eurydice questionnaires had been developed and issued before the Stocktaking Working Group had formulated the questions necessary for the stocktaking exercise and BFUG had approved the stocktaking indicators. In future, it might be preferable to co-ordinate the questions, with a view to achieving complete synergy between the two activities.

Stocktaking

12. Cynthia briefly outlined the approach taken to the current stocktaking exercise, and the current state of play. The indicators had been found to have been generally effective. The application of the scorecard had been piloted by Cynthia and Ann scoring the first few countries independently. Few discrepancies were found, suggesting the methodology was working effectively. While countries had been told in advance what the indicators would be, the responses in the National Reports showed that not all countries had considered this when preparing their reports. Some had been very frank, while others appeared to be trying to present their situation in the best light. Most had kept their reports to the prescribed length, but not all had replied directly to the questions asked. This had made it difficult to allocate scores in a number of instances. In cases where there was no information, it was considered that little progress had been made and, accordingly, low scores were allocated. In some cases, this might result in 'wrong' scores. Thus far, a few countries had suggested some of their scores should be adjusted, down as well as up. All were providing additional information to support their requests. Once the scores had been agreed with the country concerned, their scorecard would be augmented by a short commentary. The text would highlight progress since Bergen; future challenges; and provide some contextual information relating to 'low' scores. Countries would have the opportunity to comment on the draft text.

Draft Scorecard

13. Andrejs presented the current draft of the overall scorecard. Overall, it looked quite 'green'. This might, however, be expected, given the progressive nature of the Process. The results were also broadly consistent with the Eurydice Focus report. When interpreting the results, the fact that the indicators were not the same as the previous exercise should be borne in mind. Based on the request from Ministers in their Bergen communiqué, the 2007 stocktaking included some new indicators. Further, the criteria had been made more demanding in the 2007 stocktaking, for those indicators that had been continued from the 2005 stocktaking exercise. This would have to be made clear in the final report. Nonetheless, there was evidence of considerable progress since 2005 in almost all of the areas covered by the scorecard.

14. Andrejs then led a discussion of the result of each indicator in turn.

In discussion, the following points were made:

- It should be made clear throughout the report that 'access' was being used in the sense of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.
- In the longer term, it would be beneficial to differentiate more clearly between the areas covered by stocktaking and the Eurydice Focus report.
- While almost all countries had started work on developing a national qualifications framework, as specified in the Bergen Communiqué, the results suggested considerable effort and support would be required in this area over the next 2 year period.

- For the next period, there might be a need for a group of indicators reflecting the use of learning outcomes, ECTS, and the development of national qualifications frameworks.
- The commentary in the report might also highlight the potential for confusion between the Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA and the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. The levels of qualifications defined in the recent EC Directive on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications might increase that confusion. Given this complexity, there was some concern that -the 2010 deadline might not allow sufficient time for appropriate consideration of all necessary aspects within an effective national qualifications framework.
- Application of the criteria on external quality assurance and the implementation of the E4 Standards and Guidelines suggested there was insufficient differentiation between the two indicators. The criteria for the indicator on the E4 Standards and Guidelines were supposed to be understood as building up from the requirements corresponding to lower scores, with each score including all the requirements from the previous criterion. It appeared however that the wording had not been clear enough and it was possible to interpret the indicator number 4 in a simplified way, i.e. as only requiring countries to have started working towards meeting all the Standards and Guidelines. The National Reports did however suggest that countries were continuing work to improve their quality assurance systems. Eurydice could provide useful information in this area too.
- It would be helpful to acknowledge in the text the limitations of the scorecard approach and underline the role of the analytical element of stocktaking...
- It would be helpful to include examples of good practice from countries who had already organised an external review of their Quality Assurance Agency.
- While there had been good progress in the involvement of students in quality assurance, this was not the case for international co-operation. Both should be commented on in the text.
- The National Reports suggested two main barriers to involving foreign experts in external review terms: language barriers and legislation concerning the governance of Quality Assurance Agencies. The text might also highlight the need to identify other ways of developing greater international cooperation and building mutual trust.
- It was agreed indicators 6a and 6b would be treated separately and accordingly renumbered to 6 and 7.
- Commenting on the progress made against indicator on the Lisbon Recognition Convention, it was noted that there would be scope to update the stocktaking report should any country ratify the Lisbon Recognition Convention between now and the sign off of the report at the April BFUG.

- It was agreed that a footnote should be included to explain Italy's position in relation to the Lisbon Recognition Convention.
- The results suggested that in most countries the legislation was broadly in line with the letter of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. As far as the practical implementation of the principles of the Convention were concerned, a number of suggestions were being put forward in the National Action Plans for Recognition.
- The scores for the indicator on implementation of ECTS required an explanation in the text as the mean score has somewhat receded since 2005. The 2007 criteria for this indicator were more demanding. However, the results could not solely be attributed to the inclusion of the new countries that had experienced some difficulties in introducing credit systems.
- The responses on the recognition of prior learning suggested both a low level of understanding of the concept and of implementation. There was a need to illustrate the concept by including some examples of good practice and highlighting the relationship between the recognition of prior learning, flexible learning paths and the development of national qualifications frameworks based on credit and learning outcomes.
- Thus far, there had not been any analysis of the future challenges identified by all participating countries. This would however be included in the final report.
- The results for indicator 11 demonstrated good progress in removing obstacles for joint degrees. A number of countries had adopted new legislation recently that allowed their HEIs to establish joint degrees, ensuring their recognition and stimulating recognition of foreign joint degrees.
- The suggested text on the 3rd cycle was broadly endorsed. It was noted it was consistent with the findings of Trends 5 and the Eurydice Focus Report.

National Action Plans for Recognition

15. Andrejs presented a summary of the main points arising from the National Action Plans. The plans had demonstrated the great variation in the national procedures used for recognising foreign qualifications and included some examples of good and not so good practice. The results underlined a need for further analysis of the National Action Plans by the ENIC/NARIC networks and suggested a need for further action to make national recognition procedures more coherent. They suggested good progress was being made in implementing ECTS and Diploma Supplements, although more detailed analysis suggested some irregularities in the application of these recognition tools. It was agreed it would be helpful to include some examples of good practice in the stocktaking report.

Outline of Report

16. Cynthia presented the current outline of the stocktaking report. It had been amended to reflect the comments made at the last Working Group meeting.

In discussion, the following points were made:

- Chapter 2 should include a reference to the fact that the scorecard was only one element in stocktaking. It should refer to the other data sources and comment on the holistic, more analytical, approach taken, together with the intention to identify examples of good practice.
- Further consideration should be given to how best to illustrate the progress made since the previous exercise. Straightforward comparisons were not appropriate, given that the indicators had been revised to reflect the progress that might have been expected by 2007 and this aspect should be made clear in the report.
- The title of chapter 4 should be amended to refer to both the progress made and the issues arising from the 2007 Stocktaking. The text of chapter 4 should also include commentary on the points giving rise to the conclusions and recommendations in chapter 5.
- There was a need to reach an appropriate balance between reflecting on the progress made and looking ahead to the next period and 2010.
- It was not appropriate for the Stocktaking Working Group to recommend that there should be an external evaluation of the progress made towards the high level goals of the Bologna Process. This was a matter for BFUG.
- It was noted that the social dimension and mobility would be addressed by the Social Dimension and Mobility Working Group.
- It would be useful to comment on the support provided to newer country members over the last two years. Contributions provided for the General Secretariat Report could be helpful in this regard.
- Working Group Members were welcome to offer contributions to the text for the report.

Design Options

17. Ann explained that the DfES designers had been asked to consider publication formats for the final report. Comments were invited on the first draft.

It was agreed that:

- *Country scorecards would be two to a page, as illustrated.*

- *The first cover design should be used.*
- *Further options would be developed for presenting the scores across each indicator, based on coloured bars showing the percentage in each level.*
- *To underline the fact that no direct comparison could be made with the previous indicators, an alternative format would be used to show any scores from the previous exercise. Options would be worked up for discussion at the next meeting.*

First discussion of conclusions and recommendations

18. Cynthia led a first discussion on Chapter 5.

In discussion, the following points were made:

- The overall message should be that good progress was being made. This was evident despite the fact that the indicators were more challenging than for 2005 and 5 new countries had joined the process.

Other points for inclusion were:

- Progress had been slow against the 2 new indicators.
- There appeared to be too little interlinkage between quality assurance and recognition, and a low level of understanding of lifelong learning and national qualifications frameworks or the social dimension.
- There was considerable variation in recognition practices, which could be improved overall.
- There should be some suggestions about future stocktaking.
- There was a need to take forward work on developing national qualifications frameworks, based on learning outcomes and credit ranges, as outlined in the Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA.
- There should be a greater appreciation of the role of learning outcomes in fulfilling the Action Lines and of the interdependency of the Action Lines.
- The focus should be on whether the situation was improving for students rather than on whether the technical procedures for recognition had improved.
- There should be a focus on capacity building, sharing good practice and the full realisation of the agreed objectives.
- The success of the partnership approach should be highlighted, together with the effectiveness of peer pressure for driving change.

- The limitations of stocktaking, particularly the scorecard element, should be highlighted.
- The language should be simple and clear, bearing in mind the target audience.

It was agreed that:

- Group members would be welcome to contribute text on the conclusions and recommendations.
- Cynthia would revise the draft report to reflect the comments made, prior to circulation to BFUG.
- The publication would be embargoed until shortly before the Ministerial conference.
- The Secretariat would consider whether it might be appropriate to produce a flyer for issue to the Press.

Date of Next Meeting

26th-27th March, Lisbon.

19. The meeting would commence at 9am on the 26th, concluding by lunchtime on the 27th. The Secretariat would try to pre book accommodation for group members.

AOB

20. On behalf of the Group, Andrejs thanked Sverre for his hospitality and for arranging the meeting.

Ann McVie
Bologna Secretariat
26 February 2007