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Requirements and Procedures for Joining the European Higher Education Area

Introduction

To prepare to possible future applications, the BFUG at its meeting in Madrid on 18-19 February 2010 agreed to review the criteria for accession to the Bologna Process/the European Higher Education Area and to assess whether they are still fit for purpose or need to be updated.

Requirements for membership of the EHEA

The existing criteria for admission of new members to the European Higher Education Area were set by the 2003 Berlin Communiqué:

Countries party to the European Cultural Convention shall be eligible for membership of the European Higher Education Area provided that they at the same time declare their willingness to pursue and implement the objectives of the Bologna Process in their own systems of higher education. Their applications should contain information on how they will implement the principles and objectives of the declaration.

The decision to use the European Cultural Convention as a criterion was meant to provide a clear definition of the possible geographical scope of the European Higher Education Area, given that all 48 countries party to the Convention at the time were considered part of geographical Europe and it was not expected that any additional country would be invited to join the Convention. It was also intended to ensure that this definition was decided by competent political authorities since accession to the European Cultural Convention is subject to a decision by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and hence by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, see below.

In the meantime, the number of countries that are party to the European Cultural Convention has risen to 50, as Serbia and Montenegro replaced the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Kazakhstan joined in March 2010.¹

Although primarily directed at the members of the Council of Europe, the European Cultural

¹ For a full list of countries that have ratified the European Cultural Convention, search for Treaty 018 on <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/ChercheAvecSTE.asp?CM=1&CL=ENG>.

Convention (article 9.4) also foresees the possibility of other European countries joining:

“The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe may decide, by a unanimous vote, to invite, upon such terms and conditions as it deems appropriate, any European State which is not a member of the Council to accede to the present Convention”.

The decision on whether or not to admit a country – and to define whether a country is to be considered a “European State” – thus rests with the member states of the Council of Europe, represented in the Committee of Ministers by their Foreign Affairs Ministers.

For accession to the European Higher Education Area, the criterion of being party to the European Cultural Convention was complemented by a second criterion to ensure commitment to and implementation of the goals and principles of the Bologna Process/the EHEA.

In the context of previous accessions, applicant countries were requested to confirm their adherence to the following principles:

- International mobility of students and staff;
- Autonomous higher education institutions
- Academic freedom;
- Student participation in the governance of higher education;
- Public responsibility for higher education;
- The social dimension of the Bologna Process.²

National Report

The application had to be complemented by a Report, detailing the higher education policies of the country in the light of the Bologna Process and outlining how the principles and objectives of the Bologna Process had been and/or would be implemented.

The most recent Report for accession also covered the following topics:

- General information on the higher education system
- Partnership

Degree System

- Stage of implementation of the first and second cycle
- Stage of implementation of the third cycle
- Relationship between higher education and research
- Access and admission to the next cycle

² See BFUG B3 7 fin; REQUIREMENTS AND PROCEDURES FOR JOINING THE BOLOGNA PROCESS, published on the Bologna website by the UK Bologna Secretariat in November 2006; BFUG_ES_20_4a.

- Employability of graduates/cooperation with employers
- Implementation of national qualifications framework

National Implementation of the Standards And Guidelines For QA in the EHEA (ESG)

- Review of the the QA system with respect to the ESG and national support for implementation
- Internal quality assurance in higher education institutions
- Stage of development of external quality assurance system
- Level of student participation
- Level of international participation

Recognition of Degrees and Study Periods

- Stage of implementation of Diploma Supplement
- National implementation of the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention
- Stage of implementation of ECTS

Lifelong Learning

- Recognition of prior learning
- Flexible learning paths

Joint Degrees

- Establishment and recognition of joint degrees
- Removing obstacles to student and staff mobility
- Portability of loans and grants

The Attractiveness of the EHEA and Cooperation with other parts of the world

- Implementation of strategy

Future Challenges

- Main challenges for higher education

Social Dimension of the Bologna Process

- Current state of affairs
- Progress towards a more inclusive higher education system (strategy for the future)
- Information on the national responsibility for the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the national strategies.

In summary, **the two criteria for accession to the European Higher Education Area** at present are:

- being party to the European Cultural Convention and
- commitment to the principles and objectives of the Bologna Process, to be demonstrated through a National Report.

Procedure for application

The decision to accept new members to the European Higher Education Area is taken by the Ministers responsible for higher education in the countries participating in the Bologna Process – so far, this has always happened at Ministerial Conferences.

Countries wishing to join the Bologna Process were asked to send an application for membership to the Minister(s) responsible for higher education in the host country/countries of the next Ministerial Conference and the countries chairing the Bologna Process, with a copy to the Bologna Secretariat. The application had to be signed by the (national) Minister responsible for higher education, submitted by a given deadline, and be complemented by the required National Report.

When an application was received, a confirmation of receipt was sent to the applicant country and the BFUG Chairs, assisted by the Bologna Secretariat, verified that the application satisfied the prescribed procedures. The BFUG (with support from Chair, Vice- Chair, Secretariat, Council of Europe and/or BFUG Board) assessed the application with the accompanying national report on the basis of the criteria for admission described above and agreed on the recommendation to be given to the Ministers. On the basis of this recommendation, the Ministerial Conference then decided whether or not to admit a country as a member of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area.

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