

Draft-paper for the discussion “Mobility through portability”

Bologna process, Manchester meeting October 2005

In the Bergen communiqué the ministers adopted the next phrase on mobility:

“We recognise that mobility of students and staff among all participating countries remains one of the key objectives of the Bologna Process. Aware of the many remaining challenges to be overcome, we reconfirm our commitment to facilitate the portability of grants and loans where appropriate through joint action, with a view to making mobility within the EHEA a reality. We shall intensify our efforts to lift obstacles to mobility by facilitating the delivery of visa and work permits and by encouraging participation in mobility programmes. We urge institutions and students to make full use of mobility programmes, advocating full recognition of study periods abroad within such programmes.”

A growing number of students want to follow a smaller or greater part of their studies abroad, but a lot of those students can't realise that ambition. One of the obstacles to overcome for students is the matter of financing their study abroad. This obstacle appears especially when students want to stay abroad for a longer period. During short periods the students remain enrolled in their 'home-institutions'. So, with respect to student-support-systems, they are regarded as 'home-students', and they will receive the same support as students that do not leave their country. Special funds that provide extra funding for mobile students do exactly that: they provide extra funding. Funds that provide basic support for the mobile student are mostly limited to small numbers of students.

To make studying abroad as accessible as studying at home, the regular student support systems should be available for students regardless of the fact that they are studying at home or abroad.

Home or host country responsibility?

Although a system where the hosting country takes full responsibility for the support of incoming students is not inconceivable, the current state of affairs makes it clear that to make mobility a reality, a system of portable student support is necessary. Looking at recent events in the European Union (the new directive on free movement for persons and the Bidar case), a mixed system emerges: the hosting country has to provide fee-support for incoming students (when national students receive this kind of support) but can deny support for the cost of living, either by way of direct discrimination or by way of indirect discrimination— at least for the first years a student resides in the hosting country. And, of course, non-EU-students do not benefit from EU-obligations at all. All in all, it is fair to say that there is a necessity for portability of student support if we want to make mobility a reality.

Making portability work

Student support systems do not provide support for every citizen. For instance, you have to be a student. This seems very logical, but in practice, you want to be able to check whether a person claiming to be a student, is in fact enrolled in an institution. Within one country it is easy to organise checks to make the system work. By law an institution can be obliged to inform the government which students are enrolled in which programmes.

When a student X from country A enrolls in an institution in country B, the authorities in country A can not enforce the institution in country B to inform the authorities in country A about X's enrolment. Of course, the authorities in country B can enforce the institution to provide the necessary information. So, country A depends on the cooperation of country B to make its support system work.

By agreeing on delivering each other the requested information on (former) students, the support systems from both countries can function in a normal way.

Kinds of information

When looking at the student support systems, countries need different sorts of information.

A quick scan (far from complete) of the variation of information needed:

- in what kind of programme is the student enrolled? (Because students are entitled to support only when enrolled in certain programmes);
- what is the duration of the programme? (Because students are entitled to support for the nominal duration of the programme);
- does the student accumulate any credits or does he/she complete the programme with a degree? (because the support is performance related);
- what is the current address of the student? And of his parents? (Because students living with their parents are entitled to less support than if they would live on their own);
- what is the income of the student during his studies? And of his parents? Or of the partner of the student? (Because the support system is means tested);
- what is the income of the former student? (Because a loan has to be paid back in accordance to the income of the former student).

The last example shows that exchange of information can also be helpful for countries that do not provide portable support, but (have to) provide support for incoming students (for example the aforementioned fee-support).

The hosting country can also inform the home country of the student whether the hosting country is providing any support. The home country could take this into account to prevent students receiving double support.

Conclusion and proposal

We appreciate the opportunity to communicate in the Bologna Follow-Up group on the realization of portability of loans and grants.

We propose the instalment of a working group of experts which aims at mutual agreement on exchange of needed information. The group should look at the technical, practical and legal aspects of these solutions. These solutions should enable countries to make multilateral agreements to support each other in facilitating portability, in order to make mobility a reality.

This proposal is endorsed by

..... (list of countries)