

## **BUFGB13 6**

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# **POSSIBLE ARRANGEMENTS FOR SUPPORTING THE CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT OF THE EHEA POST 2010**

## **Introduction**

1. When the Board met in June, there was an initial discussion about how BFUG might fulfil the Ministers' request (contained in the Bergen communiqué) that BFUG "explore the issues" surrounding the arrangements necessary to support the continuing development of the EHEA beyond 2010. This paper invites the Board's views on a suggested way forward.

## **Background**

2. In preparation for the Ministerial meeting in Bergen, the Norwegians did some preliminary thinking on the appropriate support mechanisms for the EHEA post-2010 and tried to stimulate a first discussion amongst Ministers. In the event this was not taken up, but the Bergen Communiqué recognises that we have to consider the appropriate arrangements needed to support the continuing development beyond 2010 of the EHEA. It asks BFUG to explore the issues, but does not set a timescale for reaching any conclusion or making any recommendations.

3. The Work Programme agreed at the Manchester BFUG envisages that this would be discussed at BFUG in either the October 2006 or March 2007. The Work Programme also suggests that discussion of possible arrangements for supporting the continuing development of the EHEA might be linked to a wider discussion, proposed by UNESCO CEPES, on future developments in global and European competition and collaboration within higher education. The two themes are however only linked through their recognition that the world does not stand still, and there will be a need, longer term, to think beyond the immediate goals set through the Bologna Process.

## **Comment**

4. There is widespread recognition that the inter-governmental, partnership approach adopted within the Bologna Process has been successful in bringing about substantial changes at national and institutional level to create a series of independent, but increasing compatible, higher education systems. With its commitment to increasing the quality of European higher education, through curricula reform, increasing autonomy for higher education institutions, greater openness and transparency through compatible qualifications frameworks based on robust quality assurance systems, the Bologna Process is increasing the attractiveness and competitiveness of European higher education.

5. At the same time it is clear that change on the scale necessary takes time before it is fully embedded and implemented. In a number of countries, particularly but not exclusively those newer to the Process, it is quite likely that not all the Bologna action lines will have been fully implemented by 2010. And in any case, the

need to ensure the attractiveness and competitiveness of European higher education will not stop, come 2010. Higher education systems will continue to need to adapt and develop in response to new societal, economic and global demands. For all these reasons, there will be a continuing need to work together to maintain the strength of European higher education, working collaboratively to share good practice, to build capacity across the EHEA and ensure its continuing coherence.

6. In the earlier discussions during the 2003-05 period, a number of possible options were identified to support the continuing development of the EHEA. These included:

- maintain the current arrangements, i.e. continue with the current pattern of BFUG meetings chaired by the country currently holding the EU Presidency; work taken forward by a mixture of working groups and seminars in partnership with the key stakeholders (institutions and students); a Secretariat provided by the country next hosting the bi-ennial Ministerial conference.
- develop a form of self-certification against agreed characteristics of the EHEA, with the onus on individual countries to ensure they meet the agreed commitments and possibly some form of peer review;
- build closer links to the Lisbon Process, including inviting the European Commission to provide a permanent secretariat to support the Process;
- develop a legal instrument, along the lines of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, including inviting the Council of Europe to provide a permanent Secretariat. .

7. 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 reform has been enhanced by the fact that the process is relatively straightforward and unbureaucratic. Some form of self certification process is consistent with practice being developed within the Bologna Process, but possibly suggests a commitment to a fixed "ideal" which is not compatible with the pace of change in our 21<sup>st</sup> century world. 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. The process of agreeing and implementing a legal instrument is lengthy and complex, and as in the case of a self certification system, suggests a rigid set of criteria fixed at one point in time which would not be able to adapt. A further option might be to explore other, more fluid ways of supporting future developments, through a series of collaborative actions amongst communities of interest.

8. On the basis of this initial analysis, it is not clear that any of the alternatives identified above would necessarily be better than simply continuing the current, collaborative, partnership approach. Whilst not perfect, it has facilitated significant change and supported the concept of the EHEA as an area based on the increasing compatibility of diverse national HE systems.

## **Suggested approach**

9. Based on the initial analysis outlined above, we suggest that the Secretariat should develop a paper for discussion at BFUG, either in October or in March. The paper would be developed through electronic consultation with the Board. The outcome of the BFUG discussion would be reflected in the London Communiqué to be agreed by Ministers in London, May 2007.

## **Conclusion**

10. The Board is invited to:

- agree the suggested approach to developing options for supporting the continuing development of the EHEA beyond 2010
- advise whether the discussion should take place at the October or March BFUG meeting.

Bologna Secretariat  
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