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## **THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA BEYOND 2010**

As the Bologna Process leads to the establishment of the EHEA, we have to consider the appropriate arrangements needed to support the continuing development beyond 2010. At the Ministerial Conference in Bergen, time will be allotted for Ministers to have an open discussion on this issue. This paper may be helpful for setting the background.

### **1. The emerging European Higher Education Area**

In order to establish the European Area of Higher Education, the Bologna process set itself a first set of objectives spelled out in the Bologna declaration:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees;
- Adoption of a system essentially based on two cycles;
- Establishment of a system of credits;
- Promotion of mobility promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance;
- Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education.

In subsequent ministerial conferences these objectives were further specified and at the Berlin Summit the third cycle was added to the two-cycle system.

Building on achievements so far in the Bologna Process, the European Higher Education Area will be founded on the following structural elements:

- Within the overarching framework for the EHEA, all participating countries will have a national framework of qualifications based on three cycles in higher education, where the levels have a double function: to prepare the student for the labour market and for further competence building. Each level builds on the preceding level, and the qualification obtained will give access to higher levels.
- All participating countries will have national quality assurance arrangements implementing an agreed set of standards and guidelines for the EHEA.
- All higher education institutions in participating countries will recognise degrees and periods of studies according to the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

As first laid down in the Bologna declaration, the rationale behind the Bologna process has been to promote European citizens' lasting employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system. The Prague Summit has added a further dimension by supporting the idea that higher education should be considered a public good and that it will remain a public responsibility.

The social dimension of the Bologna Process is a constituent part of the EHEA and a necessary condition for the attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA. Higher education

should be equally accessible to all and students should be able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background.

Built on these fundamental objectives the European Higher education Area will encompass the following principles:

- Public responsibility for higher education;
- Institutional autonomy;
- Participation of students in higher education governance;
- Cooperation and trust between the participating countries and organisations.

## **2. The Bologna process in the context of the European Union and beyond**

From an EU perspective, the Bologna process fits into the broader agenda defined by the Lisbon agenda and by the Barcelona summit stating that the European education and training systems should become a “world quality reference”. In areas like quality assurance, recognition of degrees and study periods abroad as well the establishment of a European Qualifications Framework the European Commission plays both a supportive and a complementary role. In other policy areas the two directives on the mobility of students and researchers promote mobility across European higher education.

However, the Bologna process has its own identity as can be seen from the perception of the process outside Europe. This also means that the Bologna process should be able and willing to share its findings and experiences with those countries in geographical proximity that are willing to engage in quality assurance, qualifications frameworks and descriptors, or curricula for a changed degree structure. In line with the organising principle of the Bologna process providing this type of assistance and in a more general way giving information is a communal effort made by all participants. In order to make European higher education attractive in other regions of the world it is important to support universities that encourage quality in Europe and the perception of that quality outside Europe.

## **3. The governance of the Bologna process**

The Bologna process started off as inter-governmental cooperation, the Bologna Declaration having been signed by 29 ministers of education. However, from its very inception onwards the Bologna process has heavily relied on the participation of the academic community and of the student representatives. The Bologna process is thus based on cooperation and trust between the partners.

Moreover, the European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNESCO/CEPES have been associated in the shaping and in the implementation of the Process. The European Commission has increasingly contributed to organising and supporting various action lines and seminars through its programmes.

The Bologna process is thus a voluntary cooperation between different national systems overseen by the Bologna Follow-up Group and associating the various partners. There is no legally binding provision except for the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the arrangement being based on mutual trust.

Participating countries have adapted their legislation to the principles and objectives of the Bologna Process, and higher education institutions are committed to implementing them. The European Higher Education Area consists of 40/45 individual systems

However, developments in higher education will not stop in 2010. As the EHEA should be seen as a common framework for the time *after* 2010, Ministers should consider a continuing follow-up mechanism that may meet the challenges of a dynamic higher education sector.

#### **4. Questions that may be asked**

In Bologna, Ministers engaged in coordinating their policies to achieve the goals set forth in the Bologna declaration within the first decade of the third millennium. Halfway through the process it is not only time to take stock of the achievements so far, but also to start reflecting on the development of the European Higher Education Area after 2010.

The following questions may be used as a starting point for a discussion about the future development of the European Higher Education Area:

1. What should be included in an agreed description of the European Higher Education Area: principles, objectives, structures, a social dimension?
2. Is there a need to strengthen the organisation of the Bologna Process for the further development of the EHEA after 2010?
3. Can the European Higher Education Area be established as a sustainable structure without a formal / formally binding commitment from participating countries?