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FROM LONDON TO LEUVEN/LOUVAIN- LA-NEUVE: THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE TO THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

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INTRODUCTION

The present document gives an overview of the Council of Europe's contribution to the European Higher Education Area since the London Ministerial conference in May 2007 as well as an indication of future plans.

The Council of Europe contributions to the Bologna Process have focused on:

- i) active participation in the BFUG and Board as well as in Bologna working and coordination groups;
- ii) recognition policy, including the role of the Lisbon Recognition Convention as the only legally binding text of the Bologna Process;
- iii) specific policy areas of relevance to the Bologna Process as well as to the basic values of the Council of Europe, in particular the public responsibility for higher education and research, the responsibility of higher education for democratic culture, higher education governance and quality assurance;
- iv) bilateral and regional activities assisting newer member states with the implementation of "Bologna inspired" policies at national level. These activities have in particular focused on countries that acceded to the Bologna Process in 2003 and later.

Not least, the Council of Europe has taken on responsibility for coordinating the sharing of experience in the elaboration of national qualifications frameworks compatible with the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA, as requested by Ministers in the London Communiqué.

In addition to the Chair of the Steering Committee on Higher Education and Research (CDESR) and the Council of Europe Secretariat, several members of the CDESR, its Bureau, the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee and the ENIC Network provide important contributions to the Bologna Process. The Parliamentary Assembly will consider a report and draft recommendation on the Council of Europe's contribution to the Bologna Process at its part session in April 2009.

QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

The overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA was adopted by Ministers in Bergen in 2005, and the development of national qualifications frameworks is within the competence and responsibility of the competent national authorities. It is recalled that Ministers committed to launching this work by 2007 and to complete it by 2010.

The role of the Council of Europe is therefore to facilitate the sharing of experience so that the competent national authorities can benefit from relevant experience from other

countries to the extent that the national authorities see fit to do so. This is in keeping with the London Communiqué:

We note that some initial progress has been made towards the implementation of national qualifications frameworks, but that much more effort is required. We commit ourselves to fully implementing such national qualifications frameworks, certified against the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA, by 2010. Recognising that this is a challenging task, we ask the Council of Europe to support the sharing of experience in the elaboration of national qualifications frameworks. We emphasise that qualification frameworks should be designed so as to encourage greater mobility of students and teachers and improve employability.

The Council of Europe chairs the Bologna Coordination Group on Qualifications Frameworks, which was set up by the BFUG at its meeting in Lisboa on October 2 – 3, 2007. The activities on qualifications frameworks have focused on:

- (i) the organization of European conferences, aimed at all members and consultative members of the Bologna Process;
- (ii) regional conferences;
- (iii) work with individual countries;
- (iv) developing a Bologna web site on qualifications frameworks;
- (v) the relationship between qualifications frameworks and the further development of recognition policies and practice, in the context of the ENIC and NARIC Networks.;
- (vi) developing the relationship between the development of national frameworks computable with the overarching framework of qualifications on of the EHEA and the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning.

The Council of Europe is a member of the EQF Advisory Board and has participated in working groups on criteria and procedures for referencing of national frameworks (completed) and sectoral qualifications in relation to the overarching framework (ongoing). Excellent cooperation has been established with the European Commission to ensure compatibility between the overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area and the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning.

The Council of Europe organized the first European Forum on qualifications frameworks at Council Headquarters in Strasbourg on October 11 – 12, 2007 and coorganized the third conference on qualifications frameworks in the 2007 – 2009 work program. This conference was coorganized with the Georgian Ministry of Education and held in Tbilisi on November 27 – 28, 2008. It focused on self certification of national frameworks.

The Council of Europe organized a regional conference on qualifications framework for South East Europe in Beograd on November 1 – 2, 2007, as a part of the program of the Serbian Chairmanship of the Council of Europe. This conference was followed up by a meeting in Cetinje on July 8 – 9, 2008, organized in cooperation with the Ministry of Education of Montenegro. This meeting launched a regional network for qualifications frameworks for South East Europe. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and Turkey participated in the launching meeting, and the Network is also open to participation by the competent authorities of Greece and Slovenia. The regional network will meet again in Slovenia on 29 - 30 June 2009, as a part of the program of the Slovenian Chairmanship of the Council of Europe.

A regional conference for countries of the New Independent States was held in Yerevan on September 8 – 9, 2008 with the participation of representatives of Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine. The conference was organized by the Ministry of Education of Armenia and the Council of Europe.

The Council of Europe organized a national conference on qualifications frameworks in Azerbaijan on June 12 – 13, 2007 and contributed to a national conference in Turkey on September 27 – 28, 2007.

RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS

The Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention is the only legally binding text of the Bologna Process. As of April 20, 2009, 42 Bologna members have ratified the Convention, while 4 members have yet to do so¹. The total number of ratifications – including non-members of the Bologna Process – is now 48 while five countries – including three members of the Bologna Process – have signed but not ratified the Convention. The development of policy and practice in recognition is furthered by the ENIC and NARIC Networks, which are served jointly by the Council of Europe, UNESCO/CEPES and the European Commission.

The Council of Europe will continue to play a leading role in recognition policy, in close cooperation with UNESCO and the European Commission. Recognition issues in the Bologna Process will remain high on the agenda of the ENIC and NARIC Networks, which – through their connection to other UNESCO regions – will also play an important role in facilitating recognition between qualifications from the EHEA and those from other areas of the world. The ENIC and NARIC Networks will in particular continue to develop policy and practice with a view to arriving at a greater measure of common

¹ A constantly updated list of ratifications and signatures may be found at <http://conventions.coe.int/>; search for ETS 165. The four “Bologna countries” that have yet to ratify the Convention, as of April 20, 2009, are Belgium, Greece, Italy and Spain. Of these four countries, all except Greece have signed the Convention.

practice in the interpretation of “substantial differences”. This key concept of the Lisbon Recognition Convention designates differences between a foreign qualification and similar qualifications from the host country that are sufficiently important to warrant non-recognition or partial recognition of the foreign qualification. The aim of the ENIC/NARIC work on this issue is to ensure that this concept is interpreted reasonably and that it is not given a too narrow interpretation. The annual ENIC/NARIC meetings in București in June 2007 as well as in Malta in June 2008 included an extensive discussion of this issue. The Working Group, for which the Council of Europe provided the Secretariat, has now completed its work, but the issue will remain on the agenda of the Networks and a publication on the topic is under preparation in the Council of Europe Higher Education Series.

The ENIC and NARIC Networks have also analyzed the national action plans on recognition with a view to identifying common issues and potential problems. The analysis has been carried out by a working party for which the Council of Europe has provided the secretariat. Andrejs Rauhvargers is the main author of the report, which was submitted to and accepted by the BFUG at its meeting in October 2008. It will also be the subject of a publication in the Council of Europe Higher Education Series.

The ENIC and NARIC Networks will continue to consider the impact of qualifications frameworks on the recognition of qualifications, and qualifications frameworks will be an element in developing the understanding of the concept of substantial differences.

A new working party on recognition in a global context was launched in December 2008 and will present input to a major discussion at the 2009 ENIC/NARIC meeting, to be held in Cyprus on June 14 – 16.. The Council of Europe provides the secretariat for this group.

STATEMENT ON QUALITY ASSURANCE, RANKING AND CLASSIFICATION

At its 2009 plenary session, the Steering Committee on Higher Education and Research (CDESR) adopted a statement on quality assurance, ranking and classification in the light of the missions of higher education. The text of the statement will be found in Appendix 1 to the present document.

OTHER SPECIFIC POLICY AREAS

Beyond the work on qualifications frameworks and recognition, outlined above, the Council of Europe is fully prepared to continue to contribute to the development of other policy areas within the Bologna Process. In particular, the Council has contributed to three major policy areas.

Firstly, the Council of Europe contributed to the working group on the *Bologna Process in a global context*. The ENIC and NARIC Networks has recently set up a working group on recognition in a global context, see above. It is also worth noting that the

Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention has been ratified by 6 “non-Bologna” countries (Australia, Belarus, Israel, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and New Zealand) and signed by two further countries (Canada, United States) pending ratification.

With the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan and the Magna Charta Observatory, the Council of Europe organized a large scale national conference on the Bologna Process in Almaty on February 5 – 6, 2009 with contributions by key participants in the Bologna Process, including the Chair and Vice Chair of the BFUG as well as the Chair of the working group on the Bologna Process in a global context and ESU. The conference indicated measures and areas of possible relevance to further cooperation:

- (i) appointing an official contact point for cooperation with the European Higher Education Area;
- (ii) establishing a national information center on recognition;
- (iii) developing a national qualifications framework;
- (iv) quality assurance, with reference to the ESG;
- (v) student participation in higher education governance and in the life of higher education institutions;
- (vi) issues of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public responsibility for higher education;
- (vii) exploring the extent to which existing EU programs might be used to develop activities of relevance to the Bologna Process.

Secondly, the Council of Europe has also – we believe – played a constructive role in *considering how the European Higher Education Area should develop beyond 2010*, and contributed to the preparation of this topic in preparation of the 2009 Ministerial meeting. The Council of Europe chaired one of the three working groups at the BFUG meeting in Sarajevo in June 2008.

While structural reform will remain an important feature of the European Higher Education Area, the Council of Europe believes it will be essential to the further development of the EHEA that the roles and functions of higher education in modern societies be put on the EHEA agenda in broader terms. In particular, it would seem essential to include the role of higher education in developing and maintaining democratic culture and in furthering intercultural dialogue as important elements of the EHEA beyond 2010. The Council of Europe’s project on “the University between Humanism and the Market” considers the role and functions of higher education in modern society, with particular emphasis on democratic culture and intercultural dialogue, will constitute an important contribution to this work. A conference on the campus as a site of intercultural dialogue was held in Strasbourg on March 4 – 5, 2008 and will lead to a publication in the Council of Europe Higher Education Series. A Forum on “Converging Competences: Diversity, Higher Education, and Sustainable Democracy” was organized in cooperation with the US Steering Committee of the

International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy on October 2 – 3, 2008 at Council of Europe Headquarters in Strasbourg. A second conference on the role of higher education in furthering intercultural dialogue, focusing on its role in broader society, will be held in Moskva on June 2 – 3, 2009.

The reflections on the EHEA beyond 2010 may also include a consideration of how to assist countries that may fall significantly short of implementing key “Bologna goals”. Possible measures may include offers of advice and assistance in devising national policies in specific areas and offers of sharing of experience from countries that have experienced - and overcome – similar problems.

Thirdly, the Council of Europe has undertaken work on the definition of the *public responsibility for higher education and research* in modern societies, following the statements by Ministers in Praha and Berlin to the effect that higher education is and should remain a public good and a public responsibility. The Council’s work has, among other things, led to a Recommendation by the Committee of Ministers².

While this is a significant text, the Council of Europe believes the public responsibility for higher education and research should remain high on the EHEA agenda, and that this should include a consideration of the interaction between higher education policies and other areas of public policy. In September 2008, the Council of Europe presented reflections on “Public responsibility and institutional autonomy – where is the balance?” at the 20th anniversary conference of the Magna Charta Observatory in Bologna. At its 2009 plenary session, held in Strasbourg on March 5 – 6, the CDESR decided to launch a new activity on institutional autonomy, with particular emphasis on the public responsibility for ensuring that institutional responsibility remain a key feature of European higher education. This work will be conducted in close cooperation with the Magna Charta Observatory and it will build on Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1762 (2006) on academic freedom and university autonomy. A first aim is to submit a feasibility study to the 2010 plenary of the CDESR, which will be held on March 24 – 25 next year.

STEERING COMMITTEE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

The Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research (CDESR) is a pan-European forum in which delegations of the 49 States party to the European Cultural Convention – 46 of which are also members of the Bologna Process - are made up of academic as well as government representatives. In addition, important intergovernmental institutions as well as non-governmental organizations active in higher education policy have observer status with the CDESR, which is one of the main pan-European fora for higher education policies.

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<http://wcd.coe.int/com.instranet.InstraServlet?Index=no&Command=com.instranet.CmdBlobGet&DocId=1108590&SecMode=1&Admin=0&Usage=4&IntranetImage=156249>

Developments in the Bologna Process have been an important item on the agenda of the CDESR plenary sessions over the past few years, as they were at the plenary sessions held between the ministerial conferences in London and Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve.

At the 2007 plenary session, the CDESR elected Professor Radu Damian, a government member from Romania, as its Chair and Professor Virgílio Meira Soares, an academic member from Portugal, as its Vice Chair. They were reelected at the 2009 plenary session.

PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

The Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly is made up of representatives of the national parliaments of the Council's 47 member states. It is expected that the Parliamentary Assembly will consider a draft report and recommendation on the contribution of the Council of Europe to the European Higher Education Area at its part session beginning on April 27, 2009. The Rapporteur is Lord Andrew McIntosh (United Kingdom), and a hearing was organized by the Assembly's Education and Culture Committee on March 10. Radu Damian (Chair of the CDESR), Stefan Delplace (Secretary General of EURASHE), Germain Dondelinger (Vice Chair of the BFUG and a member of the CDESR Bureau) and Per Nyborg (former Chair of the CDESR and former head of the Bologna Secretariat) as well as Sjur Bergan (Head of the Council's Department of Higher Education and History Teaching) participated in the hearing.

WORK WITH SPECIFIC COUNTRIES OR REGIONS

Within the Bologna Process, the Council of Europe has been given specific responsibility for cooperation with the newer members of the Process, and the Council has played an important role in developing the Bologna Process into a truly European Higher Education Area.

In 2007 – 2008, the Council of Europe is in particular engaged in two major projects for the reform of higher education in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Serbia, respectively. Both projects have been undertaken at the request of the competent public authorities of the countries concerned, and both focus on quality assurance, qualifications frameworks and recognition. Both projects also have an element on the development of policies, standards and, where required, legislation. The project in Bosnia and Herzegovina was completed by the end of January 2008, and a final conference was held in Sarajevo on January 18. It has been followed up by a new project that was launched in February 2009. The project in Serbia was launched in September 2007 and is ongoing.

The Council of Europe has also carried out several bilateral or regional cooperation activities per year, with a strong focus on countries that have acceded to the Bologna Process in 2003 or later and with a thematic focus on legislation, quality assurance, qualifications frameworks and the recognition of qualifications.

As mentioned in the section on qualifications frameworks, the Council of Europe has been a coorganizer of three regional meetings on this key topic, in Armenia, Montenegro and Serbia, respectively.

PUBLICATIONS

The Council of Europe Higher Education Series³ is by now well established. Several of the volumes published since December 2004 address key issues in the Bologna Process, and we will aim to continue to contribute to the EHEA also through the Higher Education Series.

Four volumes have been issued since the London conference:

- *Qualifications: Introduction to a Concept* (author: Sjur Bergan) was issued in September 2007;
- *Higher Education and Democratic Culture: Citizenship, Human Rights and Civic Responsibility* (editors: Ira Harkavy and Josef Huber) was issued in January 2008;
- *The Legitimacy of Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (editors: Luc Weber and Katia Dolgova-Dreyer) was also issued in January 2008;
- *New Challenges in Recognition: Recognition of Prior Learning and Recognition in a Global Context* (editors: Andrejs Rauhvargers and Sjur Bergan), was issued in March 2008.

In all, the Higher Education Series now comprises 10 volumes. Four further volumes – on the campus as a site of intercultural dialogue, on substantial differences, on national action plans as instruments for recognition and on “higher education for modern societies: competences and values” – are at various stages of preparation.

WEB SITE

The Council of Europe’s higher education web site was thoroughly revised in 2005 and now presents an up to date overview of the Council’s activities as well as of higher education policies in Europe. It can be accessed at http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/Default_en.asp.

³ http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/Resources/HEseries_en.asp

APPENDIX 1

QUALITY ASSURANCE, RANKING AND CLASSIFICATION IN THE LIGHT OF THE MISSIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Statement by the Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research (CDESR)

1. Quality assurance is a key policy area in the European Higher Education Area. To ensure a common understanding of quality assurance throughout the European Higher Education Area, to develop good practice and to make European practice in this area transparent, Ministers of the Bologna Process have adopted Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (Bergen 2005)⁴. In 2008, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education⁵ was established. The EQAR is open, on application, to all quality assurance agencies complying with the Standards and Guidelines regardless of their geographical location.

2. Quality assurance aims at ensuring the continuous improvement of the quality of higher education as well as at ascertaining whether a given higher education institution or programme meets a defined quality standard without weighting it and without comparing it to any other institution or programme.

3. As opposed to the objective of enhancement inherent in quality assurance, rankings aim to show the relative strengths of higher education institutions and programmes. Some rankings are prominent in the public view like the ones established by the *Times Higher Education Supplement* or Shanghai Jiao Tong University. The criteria and indicators used for those comparative exercises vary, but they tend to put great importance on the institution's research strength in a global setting. Even if they explicitly set out to do so, they are often perceived as providing information on the institution's overall performance including those areas that are outside research. Moreover, these are mostly individual, private initiatives undertaken in the absence of a framework of reference as the one that exists for quality assurance, i.e. the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance. Rankings and classifications, therefore, raise some fundamental issues.

4. The issue that has given rise to most debate is the extent to which the criteria used for ranking or classification convey the overall purposes of higher education. For the Council of Europe this lack of scope inherent in some rankings is a concern. Recommendation Rec (2007) 6 by the Committee of Ministers to member states on the public responsibility for higher education and research, prepared by the CDESR, points to four main purposes of higher education:

- preparation for sustainable employment;
- preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;

⁴ http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/EN/BASIC/050520_European_Quality_Assurance_Standards.pdf

⁵ <http://www.eqar.eu/index.php?id=32>

- personal development;
- the development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base.

5. These are the overall purposes of higher education and research. In the EHEA characterised by the diversity and the autonomy of its institutions, each institution may fulfil one or more of a wide range of missions and it may do so at varying levels and degrees.

6. Whatever their stated missions, higher education institutions should aim to carry them out with excellence, and public authorities and other stakeholders should encourage higher education institutions to develop and maintain excellence in their chosen missions. The criteria and indicators used for any type of evaluation must match the missions that the institution has defined for itself. In other words, the evaluation must fit the purpose of that institution.

7. So, while criteria and indicators must both cover the whole scope of higher education as laid down in the Recommendation cited above and in their application fit the purpose of the individual institution, they must also be such that they are not a straightjacket for the institution. Even the best constructed system is of little use, and can potentially be harmful, if it encourages institutions to chase after rankings rather than focus on their core mission.

8. Moreover, in the case of rankings differences are not necessarily meaningful. While ranking and classification systems may give an appearance of an order of magnitude, the difference between institutions ranked as, say, number 25 and 40 on a given index is unlikely to be significant or indeed stable. Indeed, the missions of institutions can evolve frequently. Any ranking or classification system needs to be able to accommodate such changes if it is to be meaningful.

9. The CDESR – composed of academic and governmental representatives of the 49 States party to the European Cultural Convention - remains committed to the continued enhancement of the quality of higher education in Europe, but given the fundamental concerns about ranking and classification systems, questions whether they have a role to play in quality assurance. In the Committee's view, it is more important that higher education institutions continue to develop the quality of their activities and provide clear information about their missions. Public authorities should continue to provide for external quality assurance in accordance with the European Standards and Guidelines and should, in accordance with Recommendation Rec (2007) 6, seek to ensure that the higher education system for which they are responsible covers the whole range of missions of higher education.

10. Ranking or classification exercises risk thwarting the efforts to develop a diversified higher education system in Europe or being detrimental to the implementation of Bologna Process reforms. It is with regret that the CDESR draws attention to the fact that the

ranking and classification exercises developed so far do not seem to meet the essential requirements set out in this statement.

11. The CDESR recommends that the Communiqué from the 2009 Ministerial meeting of the Bologna Process include a statement on the importance of further developing policies that take due account of the variety of missions of higher education. The key to this is the development of adequate and reliable transparency tools. To that end, classification of higher education institutions should be multi-dimensional, designed in a way that helps institutions develop profiles that emphasize one or more of the main missions of higher education and that recognize the value of all these different missions. Moreover, the development of these transparency tools requires the full involvement of stakeholders.