

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

Assembly Recommendation 1892 (2009)

SUPPORT STRUCTURES

**Memorandum by Andrew McIntosh
Rapporteur and Chairman of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education
of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly**

**Submitted to the meeting of the Bologna Process Follow-up Group in Madrid
on 18-19 February 2010**

This note is not about steering structures. I assume that the present system of ministerial steering will continue. Individual member states should continue to take a leading role in organising ministerial meetings, and otherwise This approach mirrors, for example, the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education whose meetings are prepared thematically by a committee of senior governmental representatives, are organised by the Council of Europe and hosted and chaired by an individual member state.

I hope that the addition of Albania as co-president with Belgium from July will work well. It is important that the 19 non-EU countries which are now members of EHEA are fully integrated into both steering and support structures. In a very real sense, these 19 countries, including Turkey, Russia, and the south Caucasus, need to be a major focus of EHEA attention over the next 10 years. And the continued involvement in steering of the higher education sector and wider stakeholders must continue.

THE CHALLENGE

1. Bologna has worked well for years as a preparatory process for a European Higher Education Area with all 46 participants agreeing to carry out reforms which will make them more or less compatible and open to comparability along multiple dimensions. Bologna has successfully moved governments and the higher education sector towards enhanced cooperation in European higher education, in the belief that 'a Europe of knowledge' is, as the original Bologna Declaration of 1999 says 'an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth and...an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich European citizenship'. Examples are developments in the mutual recognition of qualifications, in quality assurance, and related thinking about the curriculum, and in making barriers to free movement of academic staff and students a political issue.

2. But the EHEA is not Bologna. As the Bologna Declaration says, an EHEA will require 'constant support, supervision and adaptation to the constantly evolving needs' of higher education. It must continue with the development of those reforms where work is still required. But it must now be responsible for implementing the reforms – for assuring governments, the higher education sector, and wider society that the reforms are being implemented, and are benefiting education and society. One specific challenge for the EHEA is to achieve greater input from its 19 non-EU

member states, in order to ensure that EU borders do not become dividing lines for the EHEA. Recognising the responsibility of its member states for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems under Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the EU shall foster co-operation with third countries and the competent international organisations in the field of education, in particular the Council of Europe (Article 165 paragraph 3).

3. And higher education needs help. Financial and economic crisis provides a challenge for the EHEA. It has led many member states to give priority to recovery from recession, and to enforce drastic cuts in higher education funding. The sector therefore needs increased political and public support, not least from parliaments represented in the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, which include all shades of the political spectrum.

SUPPORT STRUCTURES

4. Assembly Recommendation 1892 (2009) includes recommendations to the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers to promote the EHEA in all its member states; to encourage non-signatories to sign and ratify the Lisbon Recognition Convention; and to allocate more resources to its Steering Committee on Higher Education and Research [CDESR] to provide greater support to the EHEA.

5. The CDESR itself, composed of government and higher education representatives, has identified the need for stability, impartiality and openness in support structures. It is difficult to see how this can be assured in the longer term by a shifting secretariat provided by countries hosting the ministerial meetings.

6. Nothing can or should be done to interfere with the support structures proposed for the next two years, which are primarily the responsibility of the hosts of the ministerial meetings in Austria and Hungary in 2010, and Romania in 2012.

7. However, support structures for the longer term should not be left for consideration until closer to 2012. Indecision and uncertainty would be damaging not only for governments, but for the higher education sector itself.

8. An opportunity exists, which should not be lost, for plans to be set in train for a more stable, impartial and open support structure, which could take advantage of the willingness of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, as evidenced by Recommendation 1892, to give practical effect to its commitment to the EHEA.

9. This need not, and should not, involve submerging the EHEA in a Council of Europe bureaucracy. Nor should it affect the welcome participation of the European Union in the steering and programmes of the EHEA.

10. Options which have been offered by the Parliamentary Assembly, and which deserve the considered support of the Bologna Follow-up Group, include:

- Entrusting the Council of Europe with the task of storing and making available the collective records of the Bologna Process and the EHEA. This would involve minimal resources from the Council of Europe and would require a decision of BFUG transfer – for instance electronically – the various national archives.
- Creating new synergies with CDESR, the committee on the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and the permanent secretariat of the Standing Committee of European Ministers of Education, perhaps by seconding national experts to work with

the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. The Council of Europe's regulations allow for such temporary secondments. Office space and technical equipment could be provided by the Council of Europe without requiring additional budget. A continuing physical presence would reduce moving costs and ensure greater accessibility for all participants.

- Exploring, with the Committee of Ministers and representatives of the higher education sector, the possibility of establishing a more stable secretariat for the EHEA at Strasbourg.

11. An excellent model for this third option for a more stable secretariat could be an enlarged partial agreement, open to membership by states, associations of higher education institutions and students. This model has worked well with the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport, established in 2007, which has provided an effective platform for states and sports associations, to promote sport through policy and standard setting, monitoring, capacity building and the exchange of good practice.

ACTION PROPOSED

12. The Parliamentary Assembly addressed these recommendations to the hosts of the coming ministerial conferences in Austria, Hungary and Romania, which will lead the secretariat for these meetings and can distribute these recommendations to all stakeholders for consideration.

13. The Committee on Culture, Science and Education is keen to facilitate discussion of the follow-up to Recommendation 1892. We invite the education ministers of the three next host countries, the EU Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, the associations representing higher education institutions and students, the chair of the BFUG, and the Council of Europe Director General of Education, Culture and Heritage, Youth and Sport, to an exchange of views at one of its next meetings, providing an inter-parliamentary platform to the EHEA.

14. I urge the Bologna Process Follow-up Group to seize the initiative now available to set in hand the task of developing the project of establishing such stable, impartial and open longer term support structures for the EHEA. I submit to the BFUG also the other issues contained in Recommendation 1892.

15. I suggest that BFUG should now authorise its Bureau to explore, with Council of Europe officials, the practical issues involved in establishing such support structures, and to report back to its next plenary session.

Andrew McIntosh
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