



House of Commons
Education and Skills Committee

The Bologna Process: Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report of Session 2006–07

Fourth Special Report of Session
2006–07

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The Education and Skills Committee

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Fourth Special Report

The Committee published its Fourth Report of Session 2006–07 (The Bologna Process) on 30 April 2007.¹ The Government's response was received on 14 June 2007, and is published as Appendix 1 to this Report.

Appendix 1

The Education and Skills Committee's recommendations are in bold text, and numbered according to the numbering in the section of the report entitled 'Conclusions and Recommendations'.

The Government's response is in plain text.

Some of the recommendations and responses have been grouped.

Introduction

The Government welcomes the fact that the Committee has recognised the importance of the Bologna Process and that it is vital that the UK should continue to be fully involved. It supports the emphasis that the Committee has placed on the importance of institutional autonomy, diversity and the process not becoming a top-down imposed set of rules.

The Government wishes to inform the Committee that the outcome of last month's Ministerial Bologna conference in London was, in its view, very successful. It represented a further step forward in the efforts of the participating countries to create the European Higher Education Area by 2010. The most notable achievements were approval of the proposal to create a European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies and endorsement of the strategies to take forward work on the social dimension and to promote the Bologna Process to the wider world. There also seemed to be a general acknowledgement in the discussions on what the European Higher Education Area should look like beyond 2010 of the need to ensure continued progress in the four main areas of curriculum reform, institutional autonomy, diversifying funding, and engagement with business and the wider community. The Government believes that this shows how the ongoing work in the Bologna Process will increasingly support the broader EU Higher Education modernisation agenda.

3. It will be essential to maintain a strong focus on the importance of institutional autonomy at the London meeting whilst recognising that the variability at present in university autonomy across the EC, and even more so across the European Higher Education Area, is an issue that cannot be shirked for the future.

The importance of institutional autonomy is increasingly acknowledged within the process. The President of the European University Association, Professor Georg Winckler, made clear in his presentation to the London Ministerial conference on 17–18 May 2007 that universities are major agents in creating the European Higher Education Area and that

¹ Fourth Report from the Education and Skills Committee, Session 2006–07, *The Bologna Process*, HC 205.

institutional autonomy is of fundamental importance. The Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education, Bill Rammell, also emphasised at the London Ministerial conference that autonomy needs to be a key characteristic of the European Higher Education Area. A copy of the London communiqué, agreed at the May conference, is attached for the information of the Committee.

5. It is clear to us that the Bologna Process is in intention and design about comparability and compatibility and not about standardisation of higher education systems across the European Higher Education Area.

6. We commend the clarity and consensus of the Government's position on the issue of comparability versus standardisation and recommend that more is done to communicate this message to the sector and to confirm that the intention of the Bologna Process is not to create a uniform or standardised European higher education system. We have been further assured in evidence that there is currently no appetite for a homogenised European Higher Education Area amongst the 45 signatory countries.

7. Some of our evidence, however, has demonstrated that anxieties still exist, despite the formal intentions, that working to achieve comparability across the EHEA might in practice lead in the direction of standardisation or uniformity—and therefore undermine the autonomy and flexibility of the UK system. Later in our report we address some of the issues that arise from these anxieties.

The Government is pleased that the Committee has recognised that the process is not about standardisation or harmonisation, but about greater comparability and compatibility. It agrees that there is a need for improved awareness and understanding of this in the HE sector. The Government continues to work closely with the UK HE Europe Unit on raising awareness about and improving engagement with the process. A booklet for the sector, which aims to address this and to highlight a number of examples of good practice and engagement with the Bologna reforms, was published by the Department for Education and Skills at the time of the London Ministerial conference.

8. We recommend that the Government be increasingly vigilant in guarding against a move towards bureaucratic, top-down, detailed agreements. It is of great credit to all those involved that the Bologna Process has so far maintained the pursuit of a flexible framework based on broad non-binding principles—keeping institutional autonomy at the heart of the process. This is integral to the key principle of maintaining national determination of education policy. We recommend that the Government and others work to ensure this continues—and that realistic criteria and timetables are set for the achievement of the Process's objectives to safeguard the voluntary nature of the process.

The Government is clear that it is vital that the process should remain on a basis of voluntary participation. It also needs to remain dynamic and not become a rigid set of static rules. In addition, the Government agrees that the process should continue to embrace the diversity and autonomy of all systems and institutions. Part of the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area will be the diversity it offers. Both the Secretary of State for Education and Skills and the Minister of State for Lifelong

Learning, Further and Higher Education emphasised this point at the London conference on 17–18 May 2007, and it is reflected in the London communique.

9. The Committee recommends that the Government does more to tackle, and encourages higher education institutions to do more to tackle, the likely restraints on mobility for UK students, namely: lack of recognition by the student's home institution of the value of study abroad; individual student's attitudes; lack of language competence; perceived financial concerns; and the absence of a mobility culture. This will take a concerted and consistent effort by universities and by the Government to promote the benefits of mobility and to encourage a cultural change in students and across the sector.

10. There is an urgent need for further research to identify those subject areas and universities where mobility is low and where funding and take-up may need to be targeted and prioritised.

The Government agrees with the Committee that more should be done to support student mobility. The Government is working with the British Council and other stakeholders in promoting mobility and addressing real or perceived barriers to mobility, with a view to increasing participation. Erasmus is the part of the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme which provides mobility opportunities for higher education students. As part of the launch of the new programme in January 2007, there was a number of promotional activities to raise the profile of the programme. Ongoing promotion to potential Erasmus students and higher education institutions should help to raise the number of UK students participating in the programme. The Government has also consulted with a number of Vice-Chancellors on what more might be done to help students take up mobility opportunities, and how good practice might be spread across the sector. This has resulted in the Department for Education and Skills working with the Council for Industry and Higher Education to put together some examples of the way in which higher education institutions are internationalising their provision and promoting outward student mobility. The intention is to make available later in the summer some examples of good practice that can be shared across the sector.

11. We support the proposal by the DfES that internationalism should become a standard part of HEI's overall strategies. We also recommend that there should be specific, targeted funding to encourage international student mobility amongst a broader range of students—especially those who choose to live at home during their courses. There should also be a greater diversity of opportunities for overseas study, with more short-term study options available in addition to the standard year abroad.

The Government fully agrees that mobility opportunities should be available to a broad range of students, and that those from groups which have traditionally been less likely to spend time abroad should be encouraged to do so to enable them also to accrue the benefits that mobility brings. The Government continues to examine various options for the financial support of students embarking on periods of mobility and would encourage institutions to consider how they could make use of some of the additional revenue that they gain from variable fees to support mobility.

12. We further recommend that, whilst it will take several years for Lord Dearing's recent proposals concerning the teaching of modern languages to take full effect, the Government should act swiftly with measures that will help reverse the decline of language learning.

The Dearing Report on languages presents a co-ordinated package of proposals for supporting language take up, focused primarily at secondary school level but also setting out what could be done at other levels of the education system. In Higher Education, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) will be funding four regional consortia through the Routes into Languages programme, the aim of which is to stimulate demand for language learning in HE through outreach to schools and FE colleges. Lord Dearing has recommended that an additional £3m is given to this project over four years. The Government has committed £750,000 in the next financial year to support this and is looking at how this support might continue over the Comprehensive Spending Review period.

The Committee may also wish to note that the Association of University Language Centre in the UK and Ireland study for the years 2003/04 to 2005/06 shows that there has been a noticeable rise in the numbers of students taking a language either as an assessed part of their degree, (IWLP/UWLP), or as an extra curricular activity. Student numbers taking a language module as part of their degree rose from 27,986 in 2003/04 to 38,194 in 2005/06, and for students studying a language as an extra curricula activity the number rose from 25,516 to 30,402.

13. Increased mobility of high-level skills and labour can contribute to increased employment, productivity and growth. This is a major benefit of the Bologna Process that should be helping to drive it forward. These are distinct from the goals of the Lisbon Agenda and the Bologna Process must remain separate from that Agenda. We recommend that the Government does more to communicate its position: that whilst the Bologna Process is not fundamentally about achieving the objectives of the Lisbon Agenda, increased employment and competitiveness across the 45 signatory countries are important aims of the Bologna Process.

The Government firmly believes that the Bologna Process has a key role to play in promoting mobility and increasing the employability of students and graduates through equipping them with new skills and experiences. While the Bologna Process is a separate intergovernmental agreement and may not have been designed to achieve the objectives of the Lisbon agenda, the Government is clear that it can make a major contribution towards doing so and should not be seen in isolation. It can for example provide a real impetus to the European Union's modernisation agenda for higher education.

15. We commend the work that the Government and other agencies have been doing to help shape the modernisation process across the European Higher Education Area through the Bologna Process and support this continuing role in fostering a culture of respect for institutional autonomy and flexibility in higher education. We firmly believe that such modernisation is likely to be more successful and sustainable if it reflects a partnership between government and institutions within the higher education sector which encourages and enhances the innovative and creative capacities of their staff.

The Government thanks the Committee for its comments and agrees that modernisation can only be successful if all the parties concerned work together. It believes that it maintains a good close working relationship with the sector and representative bodies (eg Universities UK, QAA, UKNARIC etc) and that, in collaboration with the sector, it is able to promote a clear position on key policy issues.

16. The Leitch Report has recently emphasised the importance of a focus on life-long learning and the economic importance of developing such a culture. The action line that calls for a ‘focus on life-long learning’ is a good example of where the Bologna Process is fully consistent with existing priorities in the UK and, through a broad framework of flexible, non-binding agreements, can encourage important progress in this area across the European Higher Education Area.

The Government welcomes the fact that life-long learning has been identified in the London communiqué as a priority for the work programme of the Bologna Process over the next two years.

17. As a European leader in higher education, the benefits of engagement in the Bologna Process might not be as immediately obvious for the UK as they are for other signatory countries in the EHEA but this does not mean that there are none.

18. Many countries in the European Higher Education Area have a long and proud history of excellence in higher education and many European Universities are considered to be world-class institutions. In those countries in the EHEA where their higher education systems were already admired, the Bologna Process is being used to further improve and modernise higher education.

19. In a rapidly developing global market for HE it would be a mistake to think that the UK is in a sufficiently advantageous position as to be able to stand aside whilst other countries in the European Higher Education Area make progress through the Bologna Process.

20. The Bologna Process is a major development in the international market for higher education and is attracting significant international interest as a result. The government should be doing everything possible to articulate and promote the genuine advantages to the UK of being involved in the Bologna Process.

21. There are economic advantages to be gained for the UK through engagement in the Bologna Process: increasing employment and productivity; and increasing the competitiveness of the UK higher education sector through promoting the attractiveness and international reputation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). There are advantages for UK students in terms of increased mobility and employment opportunities. Finally there are advantages to UK universities through the increased market for both EU and international students within the EHEA, increased mobility of staff, sharing of best practice and expertise in a broad range of areas, and increased opportunities for research collaboration across the European Research Area.

22. Thus there are significant advantages for the UK in achieving the action lines stated in the Bologna Process, which increasingly reflect the policy priorities in the UK.

Furthermore, there are aspects of HE provision in other participating countries that the UK could learn from to improve its own structures and practices.

The Government is pleased that the Committee has recognised the importance of the UK being actively involved in the Bologna Process and that it would be a mistake for the UK not to engage with it.

The Bologna Process presents numerous advantages. The creation of a transparent and accessible European Higher Education Area should make European Higher Education more attractive and competitive in a global market. It will provide an impetus for colleges and universities to modernise so that they can enable society to deal with the economic and social challenges posed by the progress of global change. It will provide a wider range of educational programmes for students to choose from and the ability to move more freely between European universities will offer opportunities to acquire the experience, language skills, cultural maturity and other skills they will need to succeed personally and professionally, thereby enhancing their employability. As more countries move towards a common structure of Bachelors and Masters qualifications, this will in turn help employers to understand what each qualification represents in terms of learning outcomes, and therefore promote graduate mobility throughout Europe. Graduates will have access to an enlarged labour market and employers will have access to a larger pool of resources. There will also be significant benefits in terms of developmental opportunities for all staff. These include: greater scope for interaction and collaboration with colleagues and institutions in other countries; more opportunities to spend time in other European institutions; and more incentives to introduce an international dimension to the curriculum. All of these will enable people to learn new ways of living and working and provide skills and good practice that individuals can take back into their professional life.

However, the Government would emphasise that any advantages will only be realised if individual institutions engage with the process and make the most of the opportunities it presents.

23. We are concerned that use of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) means that the absence of a Treaty base poses little constraint on what the European Commission and Member States may do voluntarily in the area of education, and more specifically higher education. We ask the DfES to give their view on whether the European Commission are using the OMC to expand their involvement in higher education and whether this is a cause for concern.

The Department for Education and Skills does not believe that there is cause for concern over the Commission's role or the Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC). The OMC, although not strictly relevant to the Bologna Process, is a key means of spreading good practice and building sustainable partnerships across Europe to ensure universities make their full contribution to the Lisbon strategy. Indeed, the UK is working closely with the Commission and other Member States on compiling a compendium of good practice which it believes can contribute to the wider action on modernising universities.

Furthermore, Article 149 of the Treaty sets out how the Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by "encouraging co-operation between Member States and, if necessary, supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the

responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity". There are thus clear limits to how far the European Commission can get involved in higher education.

24. The Committee is encouraged by references to increasing recognition across the European Higher Education Area, and within the decision making structures of the European Community, of the importance of each country having an autonomous and flexible higher education system. It is concerned, however, to hear reports about the bureaucratic momentum behind Bologna and of the dangers of trying to achieve progress towards greater institutional autonomy by central direction.

25. The Government should continue to encourage increased autonomy in higher education across the European Higher Education Area but must guard against growing bureaucratisation. The Government must seek to uphold that the autonomy and flexibility of institutions by ensuring the Process only pursues its objectives within broad, non-compulsory frameworks.

The Government has emphasised the importance that it places on institutional autonomy in response to the Committee's conclusions 3 and 8. The Government is clear that the Bologna Process should not become a top-down imposed set of rules and emphasised this in the discussions at the London conference on the future of the European Higher Education Area. It would be perverse and contrary to the spirit of Bologna to allow it to become a rigid set of rules which cannot adapt flexibly to new challenges.

26. The European Commission, and the European Community more broadly, play an important formal role in the Bologna Process that is welcome. The expanding role of the European Community in the field of education, however, and the belief that it is seeking to expand its role through the mechanisms of the Bologna Process, is a common cause of concern to UK organisations and institutions. It is also this Committee's greatest concern regarding the future of the Bologna Process.

27. We recommend that the Government seeks clarification of the exact role of the Commission in the Bologna Process. Whilst the involvement of the Commission, including financial assistance, is of considerable importance for the success of the Bologna Process, a way must be found to ensure its involvement does not undermine the essentially voluntary and 'bottom up' approaches characteristic of its development to date.

28. It remains crucial to the success of the Bologna Process that it remains outside the framework of the EC. We agree with the Minister that the role of the European Commission must be appropriately circumscribed. This must be a priority issue for the government at the London Summit in May.

The Government believes that the European Commission has a role to play in supporting the Bologna Process and that this is consistent with its role in relation to higher education within the European Union. The responsibility for the organisation of higher education systems is however quite clearly a matter of Member States' national competence.

The European Commission is a full member in the Bologna Process. It can stimulate Bologna initiatives at the European level, for instance funding teams of Bologna experts in

countries to explain and promote the process to institutions or through its student mobility programmes, such as Erasmus. Its Tempus programme can also fund cooperation projects between EU and partner countries in the areas of curriculum development and innovation, university management, and structural reforms in higher education.

The Government agrees that the Bologna Process needs to continue to operate outside the framework of the European Union, not least because it involves 46 different European countries, many of them from outside the European Union. It is crucial that the process should complement the Commission's strategy for higher education reform, which is all about making higher education systems more flexible, more coherent and more responsive to the needs of society.

There are also other issues which are key to making higher education more competitive, but which are not strictly speaking part of the Bologna Process. These include university governance and autonomy, relationships with business and ensuring sustainable funding from a variety of sources. The Commission has a role in supporting EU Member States to address these too.

29. The UK operates a fundamentally different approach to quality assurance to the rest of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and this external "arm's length" approach is a major contributing factor to the success of the UK HE sector. The government and the Europe Unit, through the Quality Assurance Agency's involvement, are working to ensure that the UK keeps control of its own Quality Assurance (QA) arrangements whilst in parallel also working to shape and influence the development of QA systems across the EHEA. The Committee gives its full support to this approach.

30. The Government and others have a continuing role in persuading the rest of the European Higher Education Area to share its position: that each country must maintain control of its own independent system of quality assurance.

31. We believe that the Quality Assurance Agency were right to resist the original plan for a European Register for Quality Assurance. If a Register is to be implemented, however, we concur with the UK HE Europe Unit that "it will be vital that it does not become a regulatory tool or ranking instrument. There is also a need for the legal, ownership and regulatory issues linked to the development of a Register to be fully addressed."

32. We commend the work of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in playing an active and influential role in developing the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (a broad framework for within-country Quality Assurance arrangements), and in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) where the QAA's Chief Executive is currently President, and would wish to see such active involvement continue into the future.

The Government is clear that the primary responsibility for quality assurance and enhancement should rest with higher education institutions themselves within a framework determined by individual countries in line with national priorities. This principle is now enshrined under the Bologna Process with an agreed set of minimum standards and guidelines on quality assurance, which apply across the whole European

Higher Education Area. The Government is pleased that the London Ministerial conference resulted in the adoption of a proposal for a register of European quality assurance agencies which are considered to be substantially meeting the standards and guidelines. This will not be a pan-European accreditation body and will not undermine country-level and institutional autonomy with regards to quality assurance. It will however be helpful in providing a list of credible quality assurance agencies that meet the agreed European standards and guidelines for quality assurance and help to deal with the problem of bogus agencies. The register will be owned by the E4 group (the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), the European Students Union (ESU) and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)) and will importantly be independent of governments.

33. This Committee supports the important work to develop a broad and flexible credit framework across the European Higher Education Area with the aim of both increasing mobility and opening up a more flexible and accessible higher education system to a wider range of people. We concur with the Burgess Report that credit is a tool for assessing the equivalence of learning and achieved by an individual and, as such, requires framework or level descriptors that outline the general outcomes of learning expected at a given level. Consequently we conclude that the European Credit Transfer Scheme (ECTS), based solely on input or 'hours studied', is not fit for purpose.

34. Whilst we recognise that the Bologna Process makes no requirement for the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) to be the basis of any national credit system it does, however, carry an expectation that national systems can be readily mapped onto ECTS, and the Berlin summit of 2003 specifically called for ECTS to be used as an academic transfer and accumulation system across the EHEA. This concerns us and we urge the Government to address the problems that this may cause at the London Ministerial meeting.

35. We commend the work of the Burgess Group and recommend that the UK HE Europe Unit, in partnership with the sector, work to develop proposals for an alternative to the ECTS—a broad and flexible framework for credit that takes account of input, level of study, and outcome, along the lines of Burgess's recommendations for the UK, keeping in mind the three key principles that any framework should be as simple as possible, should be outcome-focussed, and should be on a voluntary basis in order to respect an institution's right to control its own academic standards.

36. The Committee agrees with the Royal Academy of Engineering that the Government should "press for the adoption of learning outcomes alone as the ultimate long-term basis for European HE Qualifications Framework."

37. The fact that the UK does not yet have a national credit framework in place is, arguably, not helping the case for moving towards this type of outcome-based credit framework across the EHEA.

38. We are encouraged that the European Commission has agreed to review the ECTS but remain concerned that the outcomes of such a review are by no means certain. We ask that the Government and the UK HE Europe Unit continue to lobby for the ECTS

system to be reformed and, more broadly, for a cultural change towards an outcome-focus to be adopted not just in theory but in practice across the European Higher Education Area. We hope a progress report on the review of ECTS will be made at the Ministerial meeting in May, and recommend that developing a more suitable credit system for the future should receive priority at that meeting.

39. The fact that UK credit systems do not map easily onto ECTS and that the Commission has specified a maximum number of credits for one year of study is of considerable concern because of the extent to which ECTS is used across the EHEA and because it seems to be, in the Minister's words, the "only show in town."

40. Because the European Commission's guidance on ECTS is non-compulsory, it is true to say that in theory there is no threat to the future of one-year Master's and four year integrated Master's Degrees. In practice, however, the situation is very different and the Government and other agencies involved must properly engage with these issues. The Government should seek a commitment from the European Commission for the removal of the 75 ECTS per calendar year reference from the new User's Guide.

The Government believes that credit can be a useful tool to enable transfer between programmes or institutions and that it can assist in removing obstacles to academic mobility. The Government commends the work of the Burgess Group and welcomes its recommendation that the higher education sector should work towards a national credit framework for England. The Burgess recommendations also addressed the need to develop a national credit system that could articulate with ECTS. The sector has now begun the process of producing such a framework and the Government is encouraging all institutions to credit rate their programmes as soon as possible in line with the Burgess recommendations.

Whilst the Bologna Process does not explicitly require use of ECTS, the fact is that it is used widely across Bologna participating countries as a mechanism for both transfer and accumulation. This suggests that any credit scheme that is used in a country should at least be compatible with ECTS. There is nevertheless agreement on the importance of learning outcomes and the need to translate this from theory into practice. The Government's view is that credit transfer therefore has to be about recognition of learning outcomes. This means that, to create more transparency about transfer, there needs to be a much clearer link between credit and learning outcomes.

The Government therefore shares the concerns expressed by the Committee and more widely in the sector that ECTS is not explicitly underpinned by the learning outcomes approach, but still retains a strong focus on workload. As there is widespread agreement within the Bologna Process of the importance of learning outcomes, the Government has raised this issue with the Commission, including the 75 ECTS per calendar year reference in the User's Guide, and emphasised the need to revisit the underlying approach of the system so that ECTS better reflects learning outcomes rather than simply the hours of study and student workload. The Government would not however agree that learning outcomes alone should provide the basis for the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, but would argue that there needs to be a better balance between learning outcomes, workload and levels so that ECTS is better able to function as an accumulation system.

The Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education met with Commissioner Figel during the London Ministerial meeting to discuss the Government's concerns and the Secretary of State for Education and Skills emphasised the importance of learning outcomes underpinning both credit systems and qualifications frameworks in his final address to the conference. The Committee will wish to note that the Commission is planning a meeting with Member State officials in late June to address the development of ECTS and that the UK HE Europe Unit is to lobby the Commission prior to that meeting.

41. Legitimate and serious concerns remain regarding the future of one-year Masters' Degrees and integrated four-year Masters' Degrees. These issues need to be fully debated within and beyond the academic community, and representatives at the Ministerial meeting in May need to be clear as to the UK's position should such points arise in formal or informal discussions.

The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, published in January 2001, identified the requirement that all Masters degrees, including those awarded for integrated programmes that include and build upon undergraduate study, should be demonstrably above that of a Bachelors degree with honours. These programmes are not simply to be longer than a Bachelors degree but must meet the learning outcomes ascribed to Masters level qualifications.

In addition, the UK has consistently argued within the Bologna Process for an approach that ensures that credit for assessing the equivalence of learning achieved by an individual is based on learning outcomes rather than simply on course duration. This approach has gained widespread acceptance and the Bergen communiqué re-emphasised its importance by adopting the Framework for Qualifications in the EHEA, comprising generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes that focus on credit ranges rather than time periods.

Nevertheless, the Government is aware that there continue to be concerns about the compatibility of one year Masters and four-year integrated Masters with the Bologna Process. The Government however is clear that such concerns are unfounded.

There is no definition of the second cycle course length within the Bologna Process. Provided that 12 month taught Masters and four-year integrated Masters courses meet the Bologna requirements for learning outcomes and credit ranges, there is no reason to suggest that they cannot be compatible with the Bologna principles. The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland, which includes 12 month taught Masters and integrated Masters, has been certified against the Bologna Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

The UK HE Europe Unit published a note for institutions in 2005 which provided advice on the compatibility of such courses and the Bologna Process. It is important that institutions offering such courses ensure that they genuinely do meet the Bologna requirements in terms of learning outcomes and credit ranges and so receive appropriate recognition.

42. We welcome and commend the active and influential role of a number of UK academics in the development process of the third cycle (doctoral level) agreements of the Bologna Process. We support Professor Ritchie's recommendation that the UK

holds its line on two issues: first, to continue to uphold the importance of professional doctorates as being real doctorates; second, to ensure that there is no shift towards accrediting doctorates through the ECTS.

43. With respect to third cycle, doctoral level studies, as in so many other aspects of the Bologna Process, it is imperative that UK members of the Follow up Group and other committees and working groups, and UK representatives at the two-yearly Ministerial meetings, remain closely in touch with specialists in individual subjects, groups of subjects and professional fields to ensure that initiatives by other countries and international organisations relevant to UK policy and practice are identified and considered in appropriate depth at a sufficiently early stage. In this respect the efforts of the UK HE Europe Unit have already proved to be valuable, and need to be maintained and if necessary further developed as the European Higher Education Area becomes a more significant element in the academic planning of UK institutions.

The Government welcomes the Committee's findings on the doctoral cycle. It agrees that the value and importance of professional doctorates should be upheld as 'real' doctorates, and that the use of ECTS should not be extended to the doctoral cycle. It is pleased that the Bologna Process has recognised the diversity of existing doctorate programmes, including part-time doctoral level study, and that durations vary. The Government believes that it will be important for institutions to engage with their European counterparts to promote a better understanding of what different qualifications entail and represent.

44. It has not been possible to include a detailed look at Foundation Degrees in our inquiry, but we have noted views expressed to us and we encourage the Government to consider them—particularly with regard to proposals to give FE Colleges Foundation Degree awarding powers. We will consider this further in our inquiry into the future sustainability of higher education: purpose, funding and structures.

Foundation Degrees are an important part of the commitment to a culture of lifelong learning. The Government is clear that Foundation Degrees are compatible with the Bologna Process. The Bergen communiqué specifically provided for the possibility of intermediate qualifications such as Foundation Degrees within national HE systems. Allowing Further Education institutions to apply for the power to award Foundation Degrees will not alter or undermine the status of the Foundation Degree as a Higher Education qualification.

45. The predicted lack of acceptance within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) of the UK's new accelerated two-year degrees raises broader concerns about attitudes of signatory countries within the EHEA, namely that flexibility and a focus on learning outcomes have not yet been fully accepted across the EHEA as being more important than length of study.

Accelerated two year degrees are currently being piloted as part of a wider focus on flexible learning and delivery. They are delivered over two full calendar years, continuing throughout the traditional summer holiday periods. The pilots are subject to the same university validation and quality assurance processes, deliver the same learning outcomes and would attract the same number of credits under the new proposed credit framework for England as similar 3-year Bachelor degrees. This is a novel and flexible way of

delivering a first cycle qualification. It will be important that those institutions taking part in the pilot engage with their counterparts in other countries to promote a better understanding of the learning outcomes associated with such programmes.

46. The Social Dimension of the Bologna Process, embracing the widening of participation in higher education in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, social-economic origins, and level of study, is an important area that reflects existing UK priorities. We recommend that the UK continue to play an active role in defining and progressing the Social Dimension.

The UK was a member of the working group that has taken forward work on the social dimension over the last two years. The Government believes that the social dimension (i.e. that higher education is open to all sections of society) is an important part of the Bologna Process and welcomes the fact that Ministers agreed at the London conference that strategies in this area are a matter for national governments. The Government will continue to work together with the sector to play an active part in the ongoing development of work in this area.

47. It is important that signatory countries maintain autonomy in their grants and fees policies. We support the proposals for portability of student grants and loans for home students studying abroad but urge the government to maintain its strong opposition to a system of host country funding because of the disproportionate costs this would entail for the UK as the largest net importer of EU students.

The Government continues to believe that a system of host country funding is inappropriate because of the disproportionate costs that this would entail for the UK as the largest net importer of EU students. The Committee may wish to note that it is in fact the home country principle that is preferred by EU Member States. The Government welcomes the fact that Ministers agreed at the London conference that a network of national experts should be set up to share information and help to identify and overcome obstacles to the portability of grants and loans.

48. Evidence submitted to us suggests that the Europe Unit, based in London and financed by a number of higher education funding agencies, is seen to play a valuable role in dissemination. Whilst it is important to avoid adding to bureaucracy, it is important that the work of the UK HE Europe Unit is kept under review and if necessary strengthened in ways that ensure UK interests are well served.

The UK HE Europe Unit is a body financed by the higher education sector and therefore independent of government. The Government agrees that the UK HE Europe Unit has an important role to play in both raising awareness of the opportunities and challenges of the Bologna Process and in helping the sector to implement the key tools. The Government will continue to work closely with the Europe Unit as the process moves towards 2010.

49. Whether or not the Higher Level Policy Forum and European Co-ordinating Group provide sufficient opportunities for inter-agency co-operation and co-ordination is something we would be grateful for the DfES' view on when it responds to this Report.

The Government believes that it maintains a good close working relationship with the sector and representative bodies, such as the UK HE Europe Unit. The Department for

Education and Skills appreciates the opportunities that both the High Level Policy Forum and the European Co-ordinating Group provide for discussion about key Bologna issues. Both these mechanisms are effective channels for communication and provide a proactive and positive way of working. The Department hopes that they will continue to operate as the process develops further.

50. The Diploma Supplement, which is a detailed description of a qualification gained, is an important development to come out of the Bologna Process. We encourage universities to meet the Bologna requirements and issue Diploma Supplements for all graduates and for the DfES to play a more active role in promoting the Diploma Supplement.

51. The Committee have repeatedly found that the language used within the Bologna Process (and indeed the name itself) has obscured meaning in an unhelpful manner. The lack of clarity in terms such as the ‘Diploma Supplement’ or the ‘Social Dimension’ only serves to hamper what is otherwise a good process. We urge the Government and others to be more thoughtful in their translation of such terms and suggest that ‘Diploma Supplement’ could be replaced with ‘Qualification Transcript’ as a more descriptive and easily-recognised name.

The Government welcomes the Committee’s recommendation that all institutions should issue Diploma Supplements to all graduates. The Government continues to promote the key role of the Diploma Supplement in underpinning the principle of easily readable and comparable degrees. The Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education wrote to every institution on 4 May 2007 to encourage them to ensure that they issue the Diploma Supplement automatically to all their graduating students.

The term ‘Diploma Supplement’ is a recognisable and widely used term across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The Government does not believe therefore that altering the name of the document would facilitate greater mutual understanding, but would be more likely to hinder such understanding across the countries of the EHEA and create confusion.

52. The UK must take full advantage of the opportunity afforded by this year’s London Ministerial meeting to seek greater clarity among participating countries concerning the respective roles of their Ministers and of their higher education institutions in advancing the Bologna Process.

53. The UK should make it clear, both within the UK HE sector and across the European Higher Education Area, that whilst policy initiatives in this field are necessarily the responsibility of Government, operational decisions will continue to rest with institutions and will need to be discussed, stimulated and evaluated within the sector.

The Government believes that its main role is to create the framework in which higher education operates so as to ensure that it provides the high level of skills and knowledge needed for society as a whole to meet the challenges of globalisation as well as to develop individuals so that they are best able to maximise their opportunities in this modern society. The main responsibility for implementation is essentially a matter for the sector

itself. This balance of responsibilities is becoming increasingly recognised under the Bologna Process as the importance of institutional autonomy grows.

54. It is in the interests of higher education in the United Kingdom, and of the government, institutions, agencies, staff and students directly involved in funding, providing and managing such education, as well as those of employers and of the wider society, for the United Kingdom to continue to be actively involved as a lead partner in the Bologna Process.

The Government welcomes the Committee's conclusions and in particular that the Committee has recognised the importance of the process and that it is vital for the UK to continue to be fully involved.

55. We welcome the emphasis that we believe UK representatives at the London Ministerial Meeting intend to place on the importance of the voluntary principle in the development of the Bologna Process. We agree that there is a need to maintain a flexible and varied pattern of awards and qualifications across the European Higher Education Area, within which compatibility will be underpinned by effective within country quality assurance systems.

The Government would refer the Committee to the comments it has made in response to the Committee's conclusion 8.

56. The European Commission, and the European Community more broadly, play an important and welcome role in the Bologna Process. In considering evidence submitted to this inquiry, however, the expanding role of the European Commission in the Process has become our greatest concern. It is crucial to the success of the Bologna Process that it remains outside the framework of the EC. We agree with the Minister that the role of the European Commission must be appropriately circumscribed and recommend this be sought at the London Summit in May.

The Government has set out its view of the Commission's important role in response to the Committee's conclusions 23 to 28.

57. We regard the creation of a European Higher Education Area as a continuing project, capable of yielding benefits at each stage of its development, and one to which adequate time must be given if the necessary basis of trust is to be established and understanding are to be both strong and sustainable.

The Government agrees that the creation of the EHEA is an ongoing project and that, given the number of partners involved, it is a significant task that will take time. The UK will continue to support the process and work in partnership to develop an EHEA based on institutional autonomy and diversity.

18 May 2007

London Communiqué

Towards the European Higher Education Area: responding to challenges in a globalised world

1. Introduction

1.1 We, the Ministers responsible for Higher Education in the countries participating in the Bologna Process, have met in London to review progress made since we convened in Bergen in 2005.

1.2 Based on our agreed criteria for country membership, we welcome the Republic of Montenegro as a member of the Bologna Process.

1.3 Developments over the last two years have brought us a significant step closer to the realisation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Building on our rich and diverse European cultural heritage, we are developing an EHEA based on institutional autonomy, academic freedom, equal opportunities and democratic principles that will facilitate mobility, increase employability and strengthen Europe's attractiveness and competitiveness. As we look ahead, we recognise that, in a changing world, there will be a continuing need to adapt our higher education systems, to ensure that the EHEA remains competitive and can respond effectively to the challenges of globalisation. In the short term, we appreciate that implementing the Bologna reforms is a significant task, and appreciate the continuing support and commitment of all partners in the process. We welcome the contribution of the working groups and seminars in helping to drive forward progress. We agree to continue to work together in partnership, assisting one another in our efforts and promoting the exchange of good practice.

1.4 We reaffirm our commitment to increasing the compatibility and comparability of our higher education systems, whilst at the same time respecting their diversity. We recognise the important influence higher education institutions (HEIs) exert on developing our societies, based on their traditions as centres of learning, research, creativity and knowledge transfer as well as their key role in defining and transmitting the values on which our societies are built. Our aim is to ensure that our HEIs have the necessary resources to continue to fulfil their full range of purposes. Those purposes include: preparing students for life as active citizens in a democratic society; preparing students for their future careers and enabling their personal development; creating and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base; and stimulating research and innovation.

1.5 We therefore underline the importance of strong institutions, which are diverse, adequately funded, autonomous and accountable. The principles of non-discrimination and equitable access should be respected and promoted throughout the EHEA. We commit to upholding these principles and to ensuring that neither students nor staff suffer discrimination of any kind.

2. Progress towards the EHEA

2.1 Our stocktaking report, along with EUA's *Trends V* report, ESIB's *Bologna With Student Eyes* and Eurydice's *Focus on the Structure of Higher Education in Europe*, confirms that there has been good overall progress in the last two years. There is an increasing awareness that a significant outcome of the process will be a move towards student-centred higher education and away from teacher driven provision. We will continue to support this important development.

Mobility

2.2 Mobility of staff, students and graduates is one of the core elements of the Bologna Process, creating opportunities for personal growth, developing international cooperation between individuals and institutions, enhancing the quality of higher education and research, and giving substance to the European dimension.

2.3 Some progress has been made since 1999, but many challenges remain. Among the obstacles to mobility, issues relating to immigration, recognition, insufficient financial incentives and inflexible pension arrangements feature prominently. We recognise the responsibility of individual Governments to facilitate the delivery of visas, residence and work permits, as appropriate. Where these measures are outside our competence as Ministers for Higher Education, we undertake to work within our respective Governments for decisive progress in this area. At national level, we will work to implement fully the agreed recognition tools and procedures and consider ways of further incentivising mobility for both staff and students. This includes encouraging a significant increase in the number of joint programmes and the creation of flexible curricula, as well as urging our institutions to take greater responsibility for staff and student mobility, more equitably balanced between countries across the EHEA.

Degree structure

2.4 Good progress is being made at national and institutional levels towards our goal of an EHEA based on a three-cycle degree system. The number of students enrolled on courses in the first two-cycles has increased significantly and there has been a reduction in structural barriers between cycles. Similarly, there has been an increase in the number of structured doctoral programmes. We underline the importance of curricula reform leading to qualifications better suited both to the needs of the labour market and to further study. Efforts should concentrate in future on removing barriers to access and progression between cycles and on proper implementation of ECTS based on learning outcomes and student workload. We underline the importance of improving graduate employability, whilst noting that data gathering on this issue needs to be developed further.

Recognition

2.5 Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components of the EHEA, both internally and in a global context. Easily readable and comparable degrees and accessible information on educational systems and qualifications frameworks are prerequisites for citizens' mobility and ensuring the continuing

attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA. While we are pleased that 38 members of the Bologna Process, including Montenegro, have now ratified the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European region (Lisbon Recognition Convention), we urge the remaining members to do so as a matter of priority.

2.6 There has been progress in the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC), ECTS and diploma supplements, but the range of national and institutional approaches to recognition needs to be more coherent. To improve recognition practices, we therefore ask the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) to arrange for the ENIC/NARIC networks to analyse our national action plans and spread good practice.

Qualifications Frameworks

2.7 Qualifications frameworks are important instruments in achieving comparability and transparency within the EHEA and facilitating the movement of learners within, as well as between, higher education systems. They should also help HEIs to develop modules and study programmes based on learning outcomes and credits, and improve the recognition of qualifications as well as all forms of prior learning.

2.8 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.

2.9 We are satisfied that national qualifications frameworks compatible with the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA will also be compatible with the proposal from the European Commission on a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning.

2.10 We see the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA, which we agreed in Bergen, as a central element of the promotion of European higher education in a global context.

Lifelong Learning

2.11 The stocktaking report shows that some elements of flexible learning exist in most countries, but a more systematic development of flexible learning paths to support lifelong learning is at an early stage. We therefore ask BFUG to increase the sharing of good practice and to work towards a common understanding of the role of higher education in lifelong learning. Only in a small number of EHEA countries could the recognition of prior learning for access and credits be said to be well developed. Working in cooperation with ENIC/NARIC, we invite BFUG to develop proposals for improving the recognition of prior learning.

Quality Assurance and a European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies

2.12 The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA adopted in Bergen (ESG) have been a powerful driver of change in relation to quality assurance. All countries have started to implement them and some have made substantial progress. External quality assurance in particular is much better developed than before. The extent of student involvement at all levels has increased since 2005, although improvement is still necessary. Since the main responsibility for quality lies with HEIs, they should continue to develop their systems of quality assurance. We acknowledge the progress made with regard to mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions, and encourage continued international cooperation amongst quality assurance agencies.

2.13 The first European Quality Assurance Forum, jointly organised by EUA, ENQA, EURASHE and ESIB (the E4 Group) in 2006 provided an opportunity to discuss European developments in quality assurance. We encourage the four organisations to continue to organise European Quality Assurance Fora on an annual basis, to facilitate the sharing of good practice and ensure that quality in the EHEA continues to improve.

2.14 We thank the E4 Group for responding to our request to further develop the practicalities of setting up a Register of European Higher Education Quality Assurance Agencies. The purpose of the register is to allow all stakeholders and the general public open access to objective information about trustworthy quality assurance agencies that are working in line with the ESG. It will therefore enhance confidence in higher education in the EHEA and beyond, and facilitate the mutual recognition of quality assurance and accreditation decisions. We welcome the establishment of a register by the E4 group, working in partnership, based on their proposed operational model. The register will be voluntary, self-financing, independent and transparent. Applications for inclusion on the register should be evaluated on the basis of substantial compliance with the ESG, evidenced through an independent review process endorsed by national authorities, where this endorsement is required by those authorities. We ask the E4 group to report progress to us regularly through BFUG, and to ensure that after two years of operation, the register is evaluated externally, taking account of the views of all stakeholders.

Doctoral candidates

2.15 Closer alignment of the EHEA with the European Research Area (ERA) remains an important objective. We recognise the value of developing and maintaining a wide variety of doctoral programmes linked to the overarching qualifications framework for the EHEA, whilst avoiding overregulation. At the same time, we appreciate that enhancing provision in the third cycle and improving the status, career prospects and funding for early stage researchers are essential preconditions for meeting Europe's objectives of strengthening research capacity and improving the quality and competitiveness of European higher education.

2.16 We therefore invite our HEIs to reinforce their efforts to embed doctoral programmes in institutional strategies and policies, and to develop appropriate career paths and opportunities for doctoral candidates and early stage researchers.

2.17 We invite EUA to continue to support the sharing of experience among HEIs on the range of innovative doctoral programmes that are emerging across Europe as well as on other crucial issues such as transparent access arrangements, supervision and assessment procedures, the development of transferable skills and ways of enhancing employability. We will look for appropriate opportunities to encourage greater exchange of information on funding and other issues between our Governments as well as with other research funding bodies.

Social dimension

2.18 Higher education should play a strong role in fostering social cohesion, reducing inequalities and raising the level of knowledge, skills and competences in society. Policy should therefore aim to maximise the potential of individuals in terms of their personal development and their contribution to a sustainable and democratic knowledge-based society. We share the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations. We reaffirm the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. We therefore continue our efforts to provide adequate student services, create more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education, and to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity.

The European Higher Education Area in a global context

2.19 We are pleased that in many parts of the world, the Bologna reforms have created considerable interest and stimulated discussion between European and international partners on a range of issues. These include the recognition of qualifications, the benefits of cooperation based upon partnership, mutual trust and understanding, and the underlying values of the Bologna Process. Moreover, we acknowledge that efforts have been made in some countries in other parts of the world to bring their higher education systems more closely into line with the Bologna framework.

2.20 We adopt the strategy "The European Higher Education Area in a Global Setting" and will take forward work in the core policy areas: improving information on, and promoting the attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA; strengthening cooperation based on partnership; intensifying policy dialogue; and improving recognition. This work ought to be seen in relation to the OECD/UNESCO *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education*.

3. Priorities for 2009

3.1 Over the next two years, we agree to concentrate on completing agreed Action Lines, including the ongoing priorities of the three-cycle degree system, quality assurance and recognition of degrees and study periods. We will focus in particular on the following areas for action.

Mobility

3.2 In our national reports for 2009, we will report on action taken at national level to promote the mobility of students and staff, including measures for future evaluation. We will focus on the main national challenges identified in paragraph 2.3 above. We also agree to set up a network of national experts to share information, and help to identify and overcome obstacles to the portability of grants and loans.

Social Dimension

3.3 Similarly, we will report on our national strategies and policies for the social dimension, including action plans and measures to evaluate their effectiveness. We will invite all stakeholders to participate in, and support this work, at the national level.

Data collection

3.4 We recognise the need to improve the availability of data on both mobility and the social dimension across all the countries participating in the Bologna Process. We therefore ask the European Commission (Eurostat), in conjunction with Eurostudent, to develop comparable and reliable indicators and data to measure progress towards the overall objective for the social dimension and student and staff mobility in all Bologna countries. Data in this field should cover participative equity in higher education as well as employability for graduates. This task should be carried out in conjunction with BFUG and a report should be submitted to our 2009 Ministerial conference.

Employability

3.5 Following up on the introduction of the three-cycle degree system, we ask BFUG to consider in more detail how to improve employability in relation to each of these cycles as well as in the context of lifelong learning. This will involve the responsibilities of all stakeholders. Governments and HEIs will need to communicate more with employers and other stakeholders on the rationale for their reforms. We will work, as appropriate, within our governments to ensure that employment and career structures within the public service are fully compatible with the new degree system. We urge institutions to further develop partnerships and cooperation with employers in the ongoing process of curriculum innovation based on learning outcomes.

The European Higher Education Area in a global context

3.6 We ask BFUG to report back to us on overall developments in this area at the European, national and institutional levels by 2009. All stakeholders have a role here within their spheres of responsibility. In reporting on the implementation of the strategy for the EHEA in a global context, BFUG should in particular give consideration to two priorities. First, to improve the information available about the EHEA, by developing the Bologna Secretariat website and building on EUA's Bologna Handbook; and second, to improve recognition. We call on HEIs, ENIC/NARIC centres and other competent recognition authorities within the EHEA to assess qualifications from other parts of the world with the same open mind with which they would expect European qualifications to be assessed elsewhere, and to base this recognition on the principles of the LRC.

Stocktaking

3.7 We ask BFUG to continue the stocktaking process, based on national reports, in time for our 2009 Ministerial conference. We expect further development of the qualitative analysis in stocktaking, particularly in relation to mobility, the Bologna Process in a global context and the social dimension. The fields covered by stocktaking should continue to include the degree system and employability of graduates, recognition of degrees and study periods and implementation of all aspects of quality assurance in line with the ESG. With a view to the development of more student-centred, outcome-based learning, the next exercise should also address in an integrated way national qualifications frameworks, learning outcomes and credits, lifelong learning, and the recognition of prior learning.

4. Looking forward to 2010 and beyond

4.1 As the EHEA continues to develop and respond to the challenges of globalisation, we anticipate that the need for collaboration will continue beyond 2010.

4.2 We are determined to seize 2010, which will mark the passage from the Bologna Process to the EHEA, as an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to higher education as a key element in making our societies sustainable, at national as well as at European level. We will take 2010 as an opportunity to reformulate the vision that motivated us in setting the Bologna Process in motion in 1999 and to make the case for an EHEA underpinned by values and visions that go beyond issues of structures and tools. We undertake to make 2010 an opportunity to reset our higher education systems on a course that looks beyond the immediate issues and makes them fit to take up the challenges that will determine our future.

4.3 We ask BFUG as a whole to consider further how the EHEA might develop after 2010 and to report back to the next ministerial meeting in 2009. This should include proposals for appropriate support structures, bearing in mind that the current informal collaborative arrangements are working well and have brought about unprecedented change.

4.4 Building on previous stocktaking exercises, *Trends*, and *Bologna With Student Eyes*, we invite BFUG to consider for 2010 the preparation of a report including an independent assessment, in partnership with the consultative members, evaluating the overall progress of the Bologna Process across the EHEA since 1999.

4.5 We delegate the decision on the nature, content and place of any Ministerial meeting in 2010 to BFUG, to be taken within the first half of 2008.

4.6 Our next meeting will be hosted by the Benelux countries in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve on 28–29 April 2009.