

## **Exploratory Meeting of the Regional Pathfinder Sub-group on Automatic Recognition**

**19 – 20 June 2013, Novi Sad, Serbia**

### **Draft minutes**

**Participants:** Margaret Waters (European Commission, Deputy Head of Unit, DG Education and Culture), Zoran Mašić (Serbia, State Secretary of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology Development), Mladen Dragašević (Head of building human capital and cross-cutting issues unit, Regional Cooperation Council), Ladislav Novak (Serbia, University of Novi Sad, coordinator of the Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation), Markez Đorđe (Bosnia and Hercegovina, University of Banja Luka), Ana Tecilazić – Goršić (Croatia, BFUG member), Polonca Miklavc Valenčič (Slovenia, University of Ljubljana), Sabina Zajc (Slovenia, ENIC-NARIC center, Ministry of Education, Science and Sport), Stojan Sorčan (Slovenia, BFUG member, Pathfinder group member)

**Apologies:** Miodrag Stojković (Serbia, Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Education, Science, Technological Development and the Information Society), Petar Marić (Bosnia and Hercegovina, BFUG member), Mirjana Vesović (Serbia, BFUG member), Biljana Mišović (Montenegro, BFUG member), Nadežda Uzelac (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, BFUG member), Borco Aleksov (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, BFUG member), Predrag Miranović (Montenegro, BFUG member)

### **Preamble**

The Bucharest Ministerial Communiqué (2012) committed participating countries to set-up a fast track for recognising each other's qualifications. Ministers of higher education pointed out an important statement which requires comprehensive and regional cooperation in order to establish mutual trust to achieve the long-term goal of automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees. Ministers of higher education declared: "We are determined to remove outstanding obstacles hindering effective and proper recognition and are willing to work together towards the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees, building on the tools of the Bologna framework, as a long-term goal of the EHEA."

Having in mind this policy statement the members of BFUG from countries of our Region have considered that we have a great opportunity to establish a broader initiative for intensive cooperation between countries of our Region on long term goal of European Higher Education Area on automatic recognition which shall give us new possibilities for setting up a track for recognising each other's qualifications.

The aim of the cooperation between the countries of the Region might be promotion of the concept of the automatic recognition, exchange of good practices between countries, region and broader, exploring to find specific paths toward integrated implementation of bologna tools, work on individual cases around which to organise a first phase of automatic recognition, organise regional meetings and international seminars. The work should be very closely with the Roadmap of Pathfinder group on automatic recognition which has been established by Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG).

Before meeting in Novi Sad we had many e-mail consultations with all BFUG members from the Region and two informal discussions between BFUG members from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia in Dublin (March 2013) and Zagreb (April 2013). All countries of the Region, including BFUG members from Montenegro and Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, support initiative for further cooperation on that specific area of work. We have found that there are common

interests and possibilities to work together in the area of automatic recognition. Decision has been taken in Zagreb that we are going to meet formally in Novi Sad on 19-20 June.

The meeting in Novi Sad was a result of synergy of two initiatives; Bologna Pathfinder Group and the Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation. These two initiatives have met in the joint effort to provide a platform for constructive dialogue on the establishment of the emerging Region of Automatic Recognition and to discuss necessary measures to be taken, to uphold genuine quality and ensure circle of trust in the Region.

We have put a few goals of our meeting in advance:

- Establish common understanding of the Automatic Recognition concept
- Determine interests and challenges that occur in recognition processes in the Region
- Exchange information and practices in the field of recognition with the purpose to determine current situation in the region
- Establish the group of people who will find ways to reconstruct higher education area in the region in the way to simplify and shift recognition procedures from individual concept of recognition to system based concept of recognition

## 1. Providing general inputs

### a. Stojan Sorčan (Pathfinder Group)

He presented a short history of the initiative for closer cooperation in the field of automatic recognition between countries of the Region which has been initiated by Bologna Pathfinder Group and supported by Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation. Objectives of cooperation and meeting objectives have been presented as well. Having in mind the complexity of the concept of automatic recognition and sensitivity of national recognition context the exchange of national information and practices on the implementation of different bologna tools which are relevant for academic recognition should be very important for future processes of building the circle of trust between countries of the Region.

### b. Margaret Waters (European Commission)

She presented the concept of the Automatic Recognition of comparable degrees for further studies and activities of the Pathfinder Group. The importance of regional cooperation, implementation of various bologna tools and simplification of recognition procedures has been particularly stressed.

### c. Ladislav Novak (Regional Platform)

He pointed out the value of international cooperation in the field of higher education in the broader region of Western Balkan countries which should not be limited only to the former Yugoslav republics. Concept of the automatic recognition has to be in the centre of the structural reform in higher education systems of Western Balkan Countries. That's the way the Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation put the promotion of integrated policy in quality assurance, qualification framework and the automatic recognition of qualification in their Regional Roadmap for the Promotion of Regional Higher Education Policy in the West Balkans.

**d. Polonca Miklavc Valenčič (University of Ljubljana)**

**(abstract of presentation)**

**e. Zoran Mašič (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology Development)**

He welcomed and supported the initiative for closer cooperation in the field of academic recognition which has been especially important for ongoing legislative changes in Serbia. Their recognition system has to be comparable with countries of European Union and they would like to share experiences and implement good ones in Serbia. He promised that Serbian BFUG members would take active role in this endeavour.

**2. Providing inputs from the region**

**a. Bosnia and Herzegovina**

**(abstract of presentation)**

**b. Slovenia**

Act on Assessment and Recognition of Education in the Republic of Slovenia was presented by Sabina Zajc and triggered a great discussion. The presentation was more focused on the recognition of education with a view to employment, for which the competent body for assessment is ENIC-NARIC centre with the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. Recognition for further education, which is also determined by the same law, was presented earlier by the representative of the University of Ljubljana.

The Act and the assessment and recognition process is focused on acceptance of qualifications, where the recognition process can really be a process of transferring ones rights that derive from ones education, from one country to another.

The development of legislation and procedure went from the equivalence (nostrification until 2005), to the concept of acceptance (assessment of education, from 2011 on).

During the presentation it was presented what the law regulates, what is assessment of education, how does the procedure schematically looks like, what kind of act is issued at the end of the procedure (not legally binding opinion), what is public information and how it can be used the same as the issued opinion, the use of foreign titles in the Republic of Slovenia, etc.

At the end some practical assessment cases were shown, were issues had been detected regarding Automatic recognition. The view on the Automatic recognition from the Enic-Naric perspective was stated at the very end of the Slovenian presentation. Her presentation is attached to the minutes.

**c. Croatia**

Ana Tecilazić-Goršić described the concept of the new draft of national recognition legislation, recognition process and the new role of the ENIC-NARIC centre in the recognition process in Croatia. Her presentation is attached to the minutes.

Both Croatia and Serbia are currently undergoing through recognition legislation changes.

### **Results of the discussion:**

The evident results which came out of discussion of Novi Sad meeting were better understanding of the concept of automatic recognition and provision of a valuable insight into different national contexts and experiences.

In the discussion it also became clear, that an integrated use of Bologna tools in the implementation of study programmes is a prerequisite for an efficient process of the recognition of foreign qualifications, especially genuine implementation of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and harmonisation of the National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF). In spite of some differences in the national legislation it has been largely accepted that only consistent implementation of the Bologna tools, as already recommended by 2012 Bucharest Communiqué, can lead to a systematic approach towards a simpler, faster and more credible recognition of foreign qualifications. Of course, there is a long way ahead to go, especially when the fulfilment of the standards and criteria for quality assurance (ESG) is considered but still, there is no doubt that the individual rights of the holders of the higher education certificates to continue studies in other country and to have access to the job market, have to be recognised.

Another issue which has been widely discussed was the status of the foreign qualifications and the problems of their portability to the other countries. In this process the transparency and access to the relevant information including the access to the national registers of qualifications have been recognised as important.

Presentations and discussions have proved that legal frameworks and procedures for recognition of qualifications differ to some extent across the Region and some of them even involve unnecessary level of bureaucratic procedures. The importance of the simplification of recognition procedures, without compromising the quality and the rights of the individual students to have fair admission to foreign HEIs for the continuation of education, has an ultimate priority. Transparency of the recognition processes as well as the provision of relevant data is very much important. In this regard each country from the Region has to make further efforts in shaping its legislation and procedures, both at system and institutional level.

It has been also agreed to invite BFUG members from Albania and representatives of the relevant higher education authority of The Republic of Kosovo (Kosovo still have no representatives in BFUG) to participate as an observer in the future events concerning automatic recognition in the Region.

Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation and Regional Cooperation Council, already agreed to act as observers in this process and to provide assistance in bringing the concept of AR to the attention of Regional stakeholders.

### **3. Establishment of the Regional Pathfinder Group**

The meeting agreed to establish a Regional Pathfinder Sub-group. Representatives of BFUG from the Region will jointly act as the Regional Pathfinder Sub-group for Automatic Recognition with the following general terms of reference:

- Members of the Regional Pathfinder Sub-group for Automatic Recognition are national BFUG representatives or their nominees of the countries from the Region.

- The representatives of the Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation and Regional Council for Cooperation participate in the activities and meetings of the Regional Pathfinder Sub-group as observers.
  
- The Sub-group will work at regional level to:
  - Promote the culture of an open minded approach in treating/processing foreign higher education certificates/diplomas, having in the very focus individuals and their rights to continue education or/and to have access to the job market without unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles.
  - Foster an integrated approach in the usage of Bologna instruments in the course of making the automatic recognition of qualifications in reality, including genuine implementation of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and harmonisation of the National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF).
  - Work on automatic recognition of generic levels of qualifications by moving away from individual to system-based recognition, placing students on an equal footing irrespective of the origin of their academic degree.
  - Break down barriers to academic recognition through a series of regional initiative and identify elements which can be transferred to other countries for strengthening cross border cooperation.
  - To coordinate the activities of the Regional Pathfinder Sub-group with the activities of the Regional Platform of Benchmarking and Cooperation and to use this platform to bring the idea of automatic recognition closer to the Regional higher education stakeholders.
  - Examine a fast track of recognising each other's qualifications through establishing regional circle of trust underpinned by regional external examiner system.

We use here the word 'Region' in the generic sense, not being restricted necessarily to the WB region only. The initial members of the Regional Pathfinder Sub-group are BFUG representatives from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia and at this stage we already have envisaged the inclusion of the BFUG representatives of Albania and representatives of The Republic of Kosovo as an observer to the Subgroup. Next meeting of the Regional Pathfinder Sub-group in September 2013 in Dubrovnik, which will be hosted by Croatia and the Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation, will provide an opportunity to complete the Sub-group and to make final touch in its action plan.

The Regional Pathfinder Sub-group will:

- Regularly report to the Bologna Pathfinder Group and, depending on the individual decision of the BFUG members, to the ministers as well.
- Regularly refresh the priorities as the Region evolves in the future.
- Use the Open Method of Coordination developed within the educational and social arena of EU policy with a view to fully respect the sovereignty of participating

countries, institutions and authorities within a transparent and collective endeavour to advance towards achieving the common goals.

**4. The immediate actions:**

1. To collect data and fulfil the questioner of BFUG Pathfinder group on different degree types in the Region and the table of Overview Substantial Elements of Automatic Recognition, in order to analyse current situation in the Region (Slovenia will take responsibility for collecting and analysing the data).
2. To organise next meeting of the Regional Pathfinder Sub-group in Dubrovnik, on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2013 in cooperation with the Regional Platform and to ensure that all BFUG members or their nominees from the Region will attend the meeting (Croatia and Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation will co-host this meeting).
3. To organise a joint meeting of the BFUG Pathfinder Group and the Regional Pathfinder Sub-group in Dubrovnik on 28<sup>th</sup> September (Croatia, BFUG Pathfinder Group and Regional Platform will co-host this meeting).

05 July 2013