

MEMORANDUM

“From Bologna to Bruges and far beyond. Equal opportunities for people with disabilities.”

This memorandum is the output of the Bruges Conference. The Bruges Conference *“From Bologna to Bruges and far beyond. Equal opportunities for people with disabilities”* took place in Bruges, Belgium from December 1st – 4th 2008. The conference was hosted by University College West Flanders and organised by a partnership of six national professional umbrella structures (Ireland, Sweden, Netherlands, Belgium (French Community of Belgium), Slovenia, United Kingdom) and the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education.

The conference was open to all countries of the European Higher Education Area and there were delegates from Belgium (Flemish and French Community of Belgium), Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark¹, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom to discuss the topic of studying and working with disabilities in higher education. The delegations from the participating countries were comprised of policy makers, disability and inclusion officers, as well as students and employees with disabilities.

This memorandum aims to draw attention to the importance of embedding studying and working with disabilities in higher education within the Bologna Process and far beyond. It also wants to emphasise the socio-economic role of higher education institutions in this process. The main challenge for this memorandum is to help raise awareness of the need for equal opportunities for people with disabilities with the aim being to increase the number of students with disabilities studying within the European Higher Education Area.

The ultimate objective for this memorandum is to have the topic of disability included within the Bologna Process work.

Therefore, this memorandum has been sent to all national representatives of the Bologna countries for their specific reference. In addition, the text is freely available through the conference website www.howest.be/bruges. This memorandum is inspired by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities², reports and communiqués from the Bologna Follow-up Group³ and texts from the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education⁴.

¹ The Danish delegates participated as observers at the Bruges Conference.

² <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

1. Preamble

- a. The UN Convention on Equal Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) advocates inclusive education⁵. There is no doubt that the realisation of inclusive higher education requires considerable efforts regarding time, energy, human and financial resources for a longer period of time. Nevertheless, every country should make inclusive higher education a target for future policy actions. It would be opportune if the definition as presented in this UN Convention was considered and adhered to in each country in the European Higher Education Area: "Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."^{6 7}
- b. Throughout the consecutive communiqués of the Bologna Process, social cohesion has increased in importance. The memorandum fully supports this tendency and aims to help enhance and reinforce this tendency in each country of the European Higher Education Area.
- c. Studying and working with disabilities is presented here as an isolated topic, although it is clear that this topic should not to be seen in isolation, but should in fact be included within all other themes of the Bologna Follow-up Process.
- d. The memorandum respects the autonomy of each country and its choice of any of the models on disability. Whilst it is not possible to present one model as the best model, it is suggested that every country should strive for an unambiguous specification of individual needs and that a person who is known to have a disability, special educational or additional need in his/her own country should profit from the necessary support services within their home institution, as well as the portability of facilities and services and access to reasonable adjustments in any host institution during international mobility.
- e. Overall, it is most important that every country should choose "one set of standards" in relation to identifying and then providing services and support to meet individual needs, however they are defined. These standards should function as a guideline and vision for the policy in this field of studying and working with disabilities.

³ http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/declarations_communique.htm

⁴ www.european-agency.org

⁵ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, article 24 - Education
<http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

⁶ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, article 1 - Purpose
<http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

⁷ the delegates at the Bruges Conference, this definition also included the group 'people with learning difficulties'. The full text of the memorandum also relates to this topic.

2. Topics

Topic 1: Mobility

1. As stated in the London Communiqué (May 2007), “mobility of staff, students and graduates is one of the core elements of the Bologna Process”⁸.

2. Mobility creates “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.”⁹ The barriers to international mobility for people with and without disabilities are in the main the same, but often have a more severe impact on the experience of people with disabilities.

3. Access to mobility opportunities for people with disabilities should be guaranteed in every country and in all international exchange programmes. Therefore extra attention is needed in relation to the provision of in-depth information as well as networking between countries and everybody involved in mobility opportunities within higher education. To achieve this, the promotion and co-ordination of financial and practical support to students and staff with disabilities should be embedded within all exchange programmes and activities.

4. Mobility should focus on a free choice of institution and be based on the educational opportunities an institution can offer a student with disabilities, not just based on the availability of specialised services.

Topic 2: Quality Assurance

The standards of education specified within countries need to be maintained in all situations, including in relation to students with disabilities. However, the pathway towards meeting those standards may be very diverse. The topic of supporting and empowering students with disabilities should be embedded within existing quality assurance procedures, with a code of practice and guidelines being seen as very important implementation tools. There should also be monitoring of the impact of the quality assurance system. If the full participation of people with disabilities in the educational system is to be realised then: firstly, higher education institutions have to work towards systemic changes that anticipate and then work to meeting a diverse range of students’ needs in a way that ultimately benefits all students; secondly, special attention needs to be given to the continuous professional development of staff (“teaching the teachers”).

⁸ http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/MDC/London_Communique18May2007.pdf page 2, 2.2.

⁹ http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/MDC/London_Communique18May2007.pdf page 2, 2.2.

Topic 3: Employability

For the purpose of the Bologna Follow-up Group, employability is defined as “the ability to gain initial employment, to maintain employment and to be able to move around within the labour market”¹⁰.

Following this, it is argued that all programmes and activities relating to employability bear in mind the topic of studying and working with disabilities. Moreover, specific action needs to be taken in relation to the topic of disabilities, such as awareness raising among employers, empowerment of people with disabilities and provision of specialist career and guidance services. The important aspects of access to work placements, full employment within higher education, the relationship between employment and lifelong learning and finally, the relationship between professional standards for employment and specific disabilities, all have to be taken into account.

Topic 4: Social Cohesion

The London Communiqué states that “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. [...] The population of higher education should reflect the diversity of our population. Therefore actions have to be taken to widen participation for persons with disabilities”¹¹.

Higher education faces a double challenge. Firstly, there is a need to make the student population more diverse. The population of higher education should reflect the diversity of European societies’ populations. Secondly, there is a need to make all people who are involved in higher education familiar with the topic of diversity. All stakeholders involved in higher education should be informed of current policy and good practice in relation to the full participation of people with disabilities. This awareness raising should be implemented in co-operation with people with disabilities. Each country should develop its own strategy for promoting and ensuring social cohesion and then act upon it, even if no common objectives are set for the European Higher Education Area to achieve. This strategy should include targets, action points and plans for monitoring implementation and effectiveness.

¹⁰ <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/actionlines/employability.htm>

¹¹ http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/MDC/London_Communique18May2007.pdf, page 5, 2.18

Topic 5: Co-ordinated Policy for Support Systems

Currently, support systems for people with disabilities are too often dispersed between education, welfare and health services and integrated action with a clear division of responsibilities is missing. This has a fundamental impact on the time and resources of people with disabilities and can hinder them in reaching their full potential. This memorandum advocates a co-ordinated, planned approach to the organisation of support systems that aim to achieve equal treatment for all students. Integrated support systems have to be provided on the level of the institution, the country (with close co-operation between the ministries of education, health, welfare, legal affairs and other relevant ministries) and within international mobility opportunities.

Topic 6: Participation of People with Disabilities

This topic covers two issues. The first issue is the low level, linked to the quality of participation of people with disabilities in higher education. There is a clear need for the complete removal of all material and attitudinal barriers in order to guarantee full participation of people with disabilities. People with disabilities should be empowered through access to information about their rights and responsibilities.

The second issue is the limited participation of people with disabilities in institutional, national and international policy development. The importance of the 'hands-on' expertise of people with disabilities within this process should be fully acknowledged. This expertise demands a place in all decision-making structures that then have impact on the participation of people with disabilities. This expertise should be supported in different ways – with information, as well as in terms of logistics and financing.

Topic 7: Data Collection and Research

The report on Social Dimension and Data on Mobility identifies that “there is no comprehensive survey which covers the necessary aspects of the social dimension: not all Bologna countries are covered, there is no common deadline for surveys, requirements for indicators need to be matched with data availability and comparability, statistics from different sectors need to be brought together to get a fair picture of the social dimension”¹².

Data on entry to, participation within and graduation from higher education by students with disabilities should be systematically collected. This data should inform the development of policy and practice on accessibility, inclusive teaching and learning and progression into the labour market. Systematic data collection should be complemented by qualitative research in the European Higher Education Area.

¹² Key issues for the European Higher Education Area – Social Dimension and Mobility. Report from the Bologna Process Working Group on Social Dimension and Data on Mobility of Staff and Students in Participating Countries, p. 10

<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/WGR2007/Socialdimensionandmobilityreport.pdf>

Research should aim to identify strategies within policy and practice that remove or overcome barriers to successful participation within higher education.

3. Suggestions for Action

This output from the Bruges Conference is aimed primarily at the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (April 2009), although it also aims to be an inspiration for “Bologna Beyond 2010” and far further than that.

This memorandum is guided by the principle that policy and practice that benefits students with disabilities benefits all students studying within Higher Education. The Bruges Delegates ask that the topic of disability be included in:

- the communiqué and suggest the following sentence: “We commit to taking necessary initiatives regarding the promotion of equal opportunities for people with disabilities within higher education in our own country.”
- the methodology of Stocktaking through systematic information and data collection focusing upon: “The national implementation of inclusive higher education for students with disabilities.”

The Delegates involved in preparing this memorandum suggest that inclusive higher education be seen as the mechanism for ensuring equal opportunities for people with disabilities. Inclusive higher education will enhance the democratic education and promote greater social cohesion. Inclusive higher education is a topic that is best included within all fields and action lines of the Bologna Process in particular and in the organisation of higher education in general. All relevant stakeholders - political or social - have to be involved in the implementation of inclusive higher education.