



**Network of Experts on Student Support in Europe (NESSIE)**  
**REPORT OF THE NETWORK OF EXPERTS ON STUDENT SUPPORT IN EUROPE (NESSIE)**  
**2009 - 2011**

## **Summary**

Following on from the deliberations of the Bologna Working Group on the Portability of Grants and Loans, the Ministers responsible for Higher Education in the countries participating in the Bologna Process agreed in the London Communiqué of 18 May 2007 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...”

The Network of Experts on Student Support in Europe (NESSIE) was subsequently established at a meeting of interested countries and organisations in Lisbon on 2 October 2007. The Network met again in its annual meetings in Stockholm (22-23 January 2008), Glasgow (16 March 2009), Dublin (7 May 2010) and Vienna (8 April 2011).

Representatives from Denmark, Ireland and Austria jointly chaired the Network from September 2009 to September 2011. Between the annual meetings of the Network, the Chairs also met together to organise the next steps of the Network. For this purpose the following actions were undertaken:

### **Database of information**

- The Network agreed on the most important data needed by experts on student financial support for their everyday work.
- Two templates were produced to facilitate the exchange of data.
- 15 of both two templates were completed by countries participating in the Network of Experts on student support.
- In cooperation with the BFUG Secretariat, the templates have been posted on the password-protected EHEA Back office area (long version template), respectively on the EHEA website (short version template).

### **Data exchange**

A template on data-protection was developed, but as long as the national laws on data protection continue to exist, the Network agreed to develop, as a first step, a template on data exchange with an overview of the number of students with portable student support in Europe and an overview of foreign students holding student support.

### **Future Steps**

The future actions of the network will be agreed upon in the coming period of the incoming joint Chairs of the Network 2011-2013. For further information please see the annex **Addendum to Network report**.

The outgoing joint Chairs of the Network 2009-2011 are:

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## Contents

1. Background
2. Work of the Expert Network – concrete actions
3. Conclusions and recommendations

Annexes

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Members of the Network (as at 21 July 2011): Austria, Belgium/Flemish Community, Belgium/French Community, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, England, France, European Commission, European Students' Union (ESU), Finland, Georgia, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Montenegro, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Scotland, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.

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## 1. Background

### Portability of grants and loans – From Berlin via Bergen, London to Leuven (2003-2009)

Mobility of students has always played a key role in the Bologna Process. In Berlin (2003) and Bergen (2005) the Ministers made a commitment to bring the facilitating of grants and loans forward in Europe:

*"[...] we confirm our commitment to facilitate the portability of grants and loans where appropriate through joint action, with a view to making mobility within the EHEA a reality."<sup>1</sup>*

The working methods in the Bologna Process have changed over time. Prior to 2005, the emphasis was put on official Bologna seminar and on specific topics. After 2005 the emphasis shifted to a working group structure. In a sense, this also reflects the development of the Process, from a broad exploration of key issues to increased focus on policy development.<sup>2</sup>

The working methods also apply to the matter of student mobility and portability of grants and loans. Between Berlin (2003) and Bergen (2005) the Dutch government, for instance, organised a seminar with the title '[Designing policies for mobile students](#)' where policy-makers and experts on student mobility in relation to grants and loans met for the first time internationally. To continue the exchange of information, the idea of an international network of grants and loans experts arose.

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<sup>1</sup> Bergen Communiqué, 2005 p.4

<sup>2</sup> See document BFUG\_HU\_AD\_24\_7a - Information on Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) Proceedings, p.3.

Consequently, between December 2005 and April 2006, 11 Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) members drafted a proposal to establish a Bologna working group on portability of grants and loans, referring to the Bergen commitment of the Ministers to facilitate portability of grants and loans.<sup>3</sup>The BFUG approved the establishment of the group in April 2006. This working group examined the desire of countries to implement portable student financial support, the obstacles in doing so, and the different grants and loans systems in the Bologna area. The results of the work of this group were handed to the Ministers at their meeting in London in 2007. During the work of the group, it became clear that there are indeed obstacles to portability of grants and loans and differences between the various student financial support systems. Upon advice of the working group<sup>4</sup>, the Ministers, in the London Communiqué, agreed 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."*<sup>5</sup>

In the Communiqué of the Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve Ministerial Conference, 28-29 April 2009, the Ministers agreed that

*"...mobility policies shall be based on a range of practical measures pertaining to the funding of mobility, recognition, available infrastructure, visa and work permit regulations. Flexible study paths and active information policies, full recognition of study achievements, study support and the full portability of grants and loans are necessary requirements..."*<sup>6</sup>.

Moreover mobility of students and staff is featured prominently on the Bologna Process beyond 2010 report, stating that for EHEA countries will have to be physically mobile to achieve, the "20% graduates by 2020" across EHEA. To achieve these aims, the framework conditions to be created will need to be such that the granting of visas and work permits as well as the portability of grants will be made easier.

## **2. Work of the Expert Network – concrete actions**

### **Establishment of the Network**

The Network met for the first time in Lisbon on 2 October 2007. At the time, the following countries and organisations expressed interest in participating in the Network: Armenia, Austria, Belgium/French Community, Denmark, England, European Commission, ESU, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Scotland, Sweden, and Switzerland.

Some of these countries (Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway, Germany and the Netherlands) already offered grants and loans that could be taken along for studies abroad. These countries were interested in overcoming obstacles to data exchange between student financial support agencies.

In the meantime, Austria and Ireland also offer grants for complete studies abroad. Members like Scotland are considering making their grants and loans portable and want to learn from the experience of other countries. All network members without portability were generally interested in the processes in other countries in view of possible future implementation.

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<sup>3</sup> Report of the working group portability of grants and loans to the BFUG 2007

([www.bologna2009benelux.org/documents/WGR2007/Portability\\_of\\_grants\\_and\\_loans\\_final\\_report2007.pdf](http://www.bologna2009benelux.org/documents/WGR2007/Portability_of_grants_and_loans_final_report2007.pdf))

<sup>4</sup> Report of the working group on portability of grants and loans to the BFUG 2007

([www.bologna2009benelux.org/documents/WGR2007/Portability\\_of\\_grants\\_and\\_loans\\_final\\_report2007.pdf](http://www.bologna2009benelux.org/documents/WGR2007/Portability_of_grants_and_loans_final_report2007.pdf))

<sup>5</sup> London Communiqué, 2007

<sup>6</sup> Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, April 2009, par 19.

It was agreed that the Network should be a network of experts on student financial support. Having a network consisting of experts should help to continue the work of the former working group on portability of grants and loans and to carry out the request of the Ministers to identify and address obstacles to the portability of grants and loans.

### **Scope of the Network**

The scope of the Network is:

*to promote the portability of grants and loans in order to facilitate greater mobility of students across the European Higher Education Area;*

- *to support the related objectives of achieving more balanced flows of incoming and outgoing students across the European Higher Education Area and an improved participation rate from diverse student groups open to all social strata.*
- *to offer practical solutions for member countries in implementing schemes of portable student support;*
- *to share information on developments in relation to the portability of student grants and loans in order to ensure balanced and sustainable mechanisms to support the mobility of students;*
- *to raise issues of common concern in relation to the portability of student supports.*

### **Combined chair**

For the period of 2009-2011, the Network was jointly chaired by Ireland, Denmark and Austria.

### **New Members:**

Aiming to ensure a wider diversity and composition of the Network, a call was issued on February 2011 inviting BFUG members to consider a nomination of a national expert in the field of student financial support. A few countries have expressed their interest, thus compared to the 2007-2009 period, the following members joined the Network: Czech Republic, France, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Spain.

### **Projects groups**

In contrast to the 2007-2009 period, the work completed by the Network was not done by project groups, but by the whole group.

### **Information on student support systems**

While the Country Information Templates were updated and published on the EHEA Backoffice website, the Network created a new Template to be made available for the wider public on the EHEA website.

For this purpose the Network defined the most important data (see Annex A) from the existing Templates that experts on student financial support need for their everyday work (National and/or regional student finance agency or organization, Government department, any other useful higher education websites, and if the member countries offer grants or loans to study a full or a part time degree in another country).

Up to July 2011 the templates were completed by the following members involved in the project: Austria, Belgium Flemish Community, Belgium/French Community, Croatia, Denmark, England, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Scotland and Sweden. They were then published on the EHEA website (<http://www.ehea.info/wrk-news-and-documents.aspx?wkgroupld=15>) to allow members of the Network, as well as all other

organisations interested, to use the information for their work concerning portability of grants and loans.

### **Template on data exchange**

During the 2007-2009 period a template on data-protection was developed, but due to existing laws on data protection the project was not pursued.

Instead, the Network agreed on a template on data exchange with an overview of the number of students with portable student support in Europe and an overview of foreign students holding student support.

At the Vienna meeting on 8 April 2011 the Danish Chair presented the results of the data collection exercise. 10 member countries contributed data for an overview of the number of students with portable student support in Europe and an overview of foreign students holding student support (see Annex B).

Between the Nordic countries there is a data exchange system in place, which allows a follow-up on the student support for each individual.

### **European Court of Justice cases:**

On 18 December 2009 the Commission of the European Communities brought an action against the Kingdom of the Netherlands (Case C-542/09), because it considered that the Netherlands had failed to fulfil its' obligations under Article 45 TFEU and Article 7(2) of Regulation (EEC) No 1612/68 by requiring that migrant workers and family members for whom they still provide must fulfil a residence requirement (the '3 out of 6 rule') in order to be eligible for the funding of educational studies abroad.

### **Query response mechanism**

This informal electronic forum for sharing policy and practical information has evolved as part of the on-going e-mail communication within the Network. It has become an important tool for sharing information on policy level and it has developed an effective response mechanism function on European grants and loans queries.

During the 2009-2011 period many queries were undertaken, for example, tuition fees, default and non-repayment of loans, incentives for students who leave the country after graduation within the student support regulations and a general inquiry concerning loans. The result of the latter (inquiry concerning loans) was published on the EHEA Back office website.

### **Green Paper Consultation**

NESSIE representatives met with the EU Commission (DGEAC – Higher Education) on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2009 as part of the consultation process in relation to the Green Paper - *Promoting the learning mobility of young people*, given that mobility was a common objective of both the EU and the broader Bologna process. They commended the publication of the Green Paper in the context of the Bologna objective of 20% of students having a study period abroad by 2020 and welcomed the Commission's support for this objective. The network representatives, while appreciating the Commission's intention in proposing guidance in the complex and evolving area of law on the portability of grants and loans, suggested instead that the provision of factual information, rather than guidance, might more appropriately assist the interpretation of community law at national level and that a more structured co-operation between the Commission and the network in the matter would provide a useful and practical first step in that regard.

## **Student Lending Facility at European Level**

The NESSIE chairs were represented at a workshop organised by the European Commission, DG EAC in Brussels on 11 January 2011, on the “Feasibility Study to examine the potential need for a Student Lending Facility at European Level” (EAC 47/2009). The presentation examined a draft report on the added value, the policy options and the implementation of a European loan scheme for students designed to promote mobility at Masters level. The consultants engaged by the Commission presented the main aspects of the study and the possible design of such a loan scheme:

- It was proposed that the loan scheme would initially address support for one- and two-year masters level education programmes in higher education.
- Since less than optimal repayment of loans would always be a concern, the question of who would be left to cover this shortfall would be an issue.
- The draft report favoured the administration of the loan scheme by a new agency at European level. Again, the cost involved was likely to be an issue for the College of Commissioners.

With the possible introduction of loan schemes at European level, a necessary outcome to be analysed would be the impact of a loan scheme on social mobility and on the development and future functioning of existing national loan schemes.

### **Terms of Reference:**

With reference to Paragraph 19 of the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009), to promote the portability of grants and loans in order to facilitate greater mobility of students across the European Higher Education Area, the new terms of reference for the Network agreed at the Dublin network meeting in May 2010 were sent to the Bologna Follow-up Secretariat in advance of the Alden Biesen meeting in August 2010 and presented by a representative of the chairs to the BFUG at that meeting.

The revised terms of reference incorporate the specific tasks of the Network (Data exchange, Database of information, Query response mechanism and the Liaison with the Bologna Social Dimension Working Group and the Mobility Coordination group) and can also be found on NESSIE’s area on the EHEA website.

### **3. Conclusions and recommendations**

The Expert Network has progressed work on important baseline data collection issues concerning the portability of grants and loans in the EHEA:

- a) It has made available data on the portability of grants and loans of countries participating in the Network.
- b) It has produced a template on data exchange with an overview of the number of students with portable student support in Europe and an overview of foreign students holding student support.

### **The EHEA Website and the EHEA Backoffice area**

In the first year of its existence, the work of the Expert Network was based on meetings of the Network and the Chairs and e-mail contact between the working groups. In the meantime, most of the information needed by the Network was published on the EHEA Backoffice restricted area, providing information and the latest news on:

- Portable grants and loans in the member states of the Expert Network;

- Contact details of colleagues in various countries who are responsible for the implementation of portable grants and loans;
- Outcome of annual meetings;
- Queries on different issues related to portability of grants and loans.

In addition to the Backoffice, NESSIE has a reserved area on the EHEA permanent website. Here information are provided concerning the composition, purpose, activity and focus of the Network as well as the Country Information Templates gathered from 10 NESSIE member countries and uploaded on the website.

With the European Court of Justice cases and the exchange of good practice between members, for example, the work of the Expert Network, continues to be based on the annual meetings of the Network, and the Chairs and e-mail contact.

Countries that are not members of the Expert Network yet, can use – as a first approach- the EHEA website to find out more about the work of the Network.

### **Annual meetings**

NESSIE's Chairing team for the term for 2009-2011 was responsible for two annual meetings from Dublin (May, 2010) and Vienna (April 2011). Throughout these meetings the Expert Network has focused on:

- to provide networking possibilities for the members (to get to know each other)
- to inform each other about recent developments,
- to work together on problems or projects,
- to welcome new members to the Expert Network,
- to elect new Chairs.

Such annual meetings of the members of the Expert Network could also be combined with a seminar or conference for a wider public.

### **Chair**

NESSIE's Chair should consist of two or three member states of the Expert Network and its functions should be:

- to monitor the content of the website,
- to represent the Expert Network,
- to organise the annual meetings of the Expert Network,
- to keep the members of the Network informed and to stimulate bilateral and multilateral cooperation between the members,
- to interact with and report to the BFUG.

The Chairs of the Network are elected for a period of two years.

### **Extending the Expert Network**

To share information and to encourage more countries to introduce portable grants and loans, all countries participating in the Bologna Process are invited to join the Network.

At the moment (July 2011) the Expert Network consists of 24 members.

### **Outlook:**

The network has embarked on a consultation process around future actions and that it is anticipated that these will be agreed upon in the coming period of the joint Chairs of the Network 2011-2013 (Germany, Norway and Romania).

**Annex A: Template to gather information on student support systems in all Bologna countries for public information**

**Contact Information**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Country</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• National and/or regional student finance agency or organization</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Government department</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Any other useful higher education websites.</li></ul>	

**Portable Grants and Loans**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Do you offer your own students grants or loans to study a full or a part degree in another country (not ERASMUS etc.)</li></ul>	
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## Annex B: Overview of the number of students with portable students support in Europe

Students holding student support from:

	Austria	Belgium - Flemish	Belgium - French	Bulgaria	Cyprus	Czech Republic	Denmark	England & Wales	Estonia	Finland	France	Georgia	Germany	Greece	Iceland	Ireland	Italy	Latvia	Lithuania	Luxembourg	Malta	Montenegro	Netherlands	Norway	Poland	Portugal	Romania	Scotland	Slovakia	Slovenia	Spain	Sweden	
<b>For studies in:</b>																																	
Austria	-					17				68	5		4242		26									73								268	
Belgium - Flemish	24	-				7				31	1168		296		6								57									124	
Belgium - French			-																														
Bulgaria	1			-						3			23										3									5	
Cyprus					-	1					1		12										1									5	
Czech Republic	13					-	4			6	1		219		5	2							281									217	
Denmark	45						-			118	5		551		1068								2543									2087	
*England & Wales								-																									
Estonia	6					3			-	454			50		2								15									17	
Finland	77					17				-	4		518		3								60									214	
France	109					57				95	-		2403		27	2							494									1449	
Georgia												-																					
Germany	236					189				240	58		-		60	2							454									1078	
Greece	7					1				3			140	-	1	16							28									75	
Iceland	10					44				13					-	10							52									42	
Ireland	44					13				48	36		405		1	-							146				6					179	
Italy	110					30				76	27		866		41		-						166									804	
Latvia	8					1				7			56					-					58									72	
Lithuania	3					1				6	1		62						-				7									36	
Luxembourg						3					37		38		1								1										
Malta	6					1							51										2									83	
Montenegro																						-	6									5	
Netherlands	78					114				171	20		6320		99	3							-	456								482	
Norway	36					209				73	2				58																	669	
Poland	23					19				15	4		450		4	1							1281	-								1012	
Portugal	32					4				5	24		215		1								62			-						68	
Romania	8					4				8	42		120										39									381	
*Scotland																																	
Slovakia	1					1				2			29		5								271									79	
Slovenia	13					1				4	1		37																			12	
Spain	190					67				94	88		2781		40								316									-	1744
Sweden	112					424				877	1		1210		160	1							892									-	
United Kingdom	139					1393				1629	602		4237		315	826							3592									5007	

\*Figures combined under United Kingdom

## Annex B: Overview of foreign students holding student support

Foreign students with support from:

	Austria	Belgium - Flemish	Belgium - French	Bulgaria	Cyprus	Czech Republic	Denmark	England & Wales	Estonia	Finland	France	Georgia	Germany	Greece	Iceland	Ireland	Italy	Latvia	Lithuania	Luxembourg	Malta	Montenegro	Netherlands	Norway	Poland	Portugal	Romania	Scotland	Slovakia	Slovenia	Spain	Sweden
<b>Country of origin</b>																																
Austria	-					16		10	5		286		1	3									2				85			48		
Belgium - Flemish	6	-				26		8	1055		35				6											105			23			
Belgium - French			-																													
Bulgaria	26			-		83		28			208			7									4			540			40			
Cyprus	0				-	1		2	1		2			1									2			155			21			
Czech Republic	38					22		21	1		376			18									2			250			21			
Denmark	1					-		17	5		11			10	1								32			18			304			
*England & Wales							-																									
Estonia	2					71		-	805		34			26									1			195			118			
Finland	4					78		-	3		31			1	5								16			405			846			
France	14					100		26	-		193			5	49								5			1015			89			
Georgia	3										-			0																		
Germany	319					1516		137	56		-		14	65									36			1180			417			
Greece	4					26		11			866		-	3												455			60			
Hungary						44								2	15																	
Iceland	0					677					2			-	2														122			
Ireland	1					34		20	34		26			-													1635		21			
Italy	17					70		54	25		1381			6	44	-										250			101			
Latvia	3					105		38			99			2	117			-								300			86			
Lithuania	4					157		43	1		124			4	158				-							690			107			
Liechtenstein															1																	
Luxembourg	3									37	11			3												55						
Malta	1					1		2			1			1												20						
Montenegro	2																															
Netherlands	10					241		24	19		195			21												155			103			
Norway	0					507		22			6			3	1														409			
Poland	116					466		68	4		1274			10	294											1525			337			
Portugal	3					24		8	24		326			18												100			32			
Romania	59					149		46	41		211			17												-	355		81			
*Scotland																																
Slovakia	67					12		9			54			2	46											185	-		11			
Slovenia	34					2		5	1		35			1	8											25		-	8			
Spain	3					59		45	80		270			3	54											240			132			
Sweden	6					564		201	1		35			4	14										84	485			-			
Switzerland						30								6																		
United Kingdom	12					531		114	567		222			4	734										43				246			
Other						3769									649																	

\* Figures combined under United Kingdom