Report on the Workshop with Belarusian Higher Education Institutions on academic freedom and institutional autonomy, held at the National Institute for Higher Education Minsk, Belarus on 26-27 November 2015

Introduction

The workshop followed the admission of Belarus to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in May 2015, the agreement to the Belarus Roadmap for Higher Education Reform and the workshop facilitated by the MCO and ODB-B in Minsk in November 2014. Its purpose was to assist with the design and execution of the structural reforms set out in the Roadmap and the implementation of the fundamental values of the EHEA.

The programme was designed in consultation with Belarusian Officials. It was practice orientated and participative and participants worked in facilitated groups to help formulate action plans.

The workshop was attended by 20 senior leaders, typically vice-rectors and heads of departments from 10 Belarusian universities who had been tasked with developing and implementing the necessary reforms.

It was led by Professor Aleksa Bjeliš, Professor at the Department of Physics, Faculty of Science, University of Zagreb, Croatia, Professor Jürgen Kohler, Professor of private law and private litigation (Bürgerliches Recht und Zivilprozessrecht) at Greifswald University, Germany, David Lock, Secretary-General of the Magna Charta Observatory and International Adviser to the UK’s Leadership Foundation for Higher Education and Dr. Sijbolt Noorda, President of the Council of the Magna Charta Observatory. Sessions were chaired by Katia Dolgova-Dreyer of the Council of Europe and Olga Stuzhinskaya of ODB –B who, with David Lock, comprised the organising committee. The workshop was hosted by the National Institute of Education and co-organised with the Council of Europe Information Point in Minsk.

The Programme

The programme covered the primary purposes of universities, academic freedom and responsibility, autonomy, governance, leadership and management necessary for autonomy and gaining the trust of stakeholders, programme provision and Bologna integration, the action being taken by the Ministry to implement the Road Map, working
with students and staff, internationalisation, strategic planning, components of national higher education reform, change management and its link to quality culture and developing action plans. It comprised plenary input with discussion and working in groups. The full programme is appended.

**Observations**

The workshop was highly participative with the active engagement of all participants. There was a high level of sharing of activities that were already in progress within the Ministry and institutions to seize the benefits of the accession to the EHEA. There were also issues of resources and leadership and staff development which would require attention for these benefits to be fully realised.

**Outcomes**

The action plans being considered or developed by participants included issues concerning:

- inter-disciplinarity and multi-disciplinarity in programmes to achieve vocational and international benefits
- communications to staff as to how they might become involved in the reform process, exercise freedoms and responsibilities and innovate
- ways in which academic staff might contribute more to society by commenting publically on events and developments in the media
- improvements in the communications with and engagements of stakeholders
- developing schemes for the mobility of students, building this into their study plans and recognising their learning on their return
- increasing the mobility of staff, *inter alia* to assist further with national and institutional reforms
- the more transparent presentation of study programmes and their requirements for the benefit of Belarusian and international students
- training of trainers to deliver staff and leadership training to increase knowledge of and develop confidence to design and deliver reforms.

**Other questions and issues**

The workshop raised other questions and issues which should perhaps also be noted for future attention or action, perhaps with the assistance of international facilitators. These included:

**Universities, the state and external stakeholders**

- Is the social contract between universities and society the best that it can be?
• What more might universities achieve within the current legislation to enlarge the scope of that contract and the effectiveness of its operation?
• Do universities engage with stakeholders (including the Ministry of Education) in a way that is pro-active and effective?
• In what ways might the Ministry and universities work together to deepen and enhance the knowledge and achievement of the Bologna Road Map?
• In the spirit of more autonomy being granted to universities, what changes are necessary to give universities more responsibility for the appointment of rectors?
• Is the pre-tertiary educational system of eleven years adequate - as the practical outcome is the use of the first year of tertiary education as the de facto concluding year of the general secondary education? (This further increases the cost to students and parents as they are covering this twelfth year of secondary education in addition to tertiary studies.)
• The level of state funding for higher education is currently very low relative to the rest of Europe and more is required.

Governance
• How might democratic governance of universities be assured through adjusted legislation and procedures and
• how might governance be based more on democratic procedures than the particular style and personality of the rector?

Mission
• How might universities broaden their view on the full range of educational objectives as defined by the Council of Europe in the ESG 2015, and in the Bologna documents (London Communiqué of 2007); i.e. (1) maintaining and enhancing a broad knowledge base (i.e. foster a research mind); (2) ensure personal development; (3) make provision for societal relevance, namely employability; (4) educate for democratic citizenship?

Values and curriculum freedom
• What systems might be put in place to ensure that fundamental values are given due prominence in the operation and development of universities? How might achievement towards this be monitored?
• How might the study programmes, currently imposed to a large extent by the by the Ministry and the bodies under its auspice (with the inclusion of the general content within the first year) be determined more by each university?

University Strategy
• What steps might be taken to enable universities to become more entrepreneurial and adaptive?
• Is quality considered in a sufficiently comprehensive context and in what ways might the learning and feedback from it become more enabling and facilitating?
• International referencing of quality and standards would make it easier for Belarus to interact internationally.
• How might systems such as risk management and quality assurance become more enabling and facilitating?

Staff matters
• Do staff know what freedoms they have and what responsibilities they can exercise?
• How can the teaching staff better exercise their academic freedom by having more liberty to design their study programmes (as opposed to curricula fixed by the state)?
• Staff and leadership development would increase the awareness of and the achievement of reforms to realise the road map.

Student matters
• How might active student engagement in the learning process and active participation in university governance be achieved?
• How might the students be given skills and confidence to engage with these processes?
• What more needs to be done to enhance the employability of students and the involvement of employers in the operation of universities?
• The concept of employability should be considered in a more comprehensive way, i.e. beyond ‘skills’, towards broader job competences and with a view towards life-long adaptability of graduates, including self-employment, and developing meaningful answers for non-technical/non-science subjects, E.g. social sciences and humanities outside law and business management.

Finally
• How might the dialogue continue and the workshop best be followed up to provide sustainable and cost effective assistance towards achieving Belarus’s ambitions from joining the EHEA?

The organisers would like to thank all of those who advised on, hosted, attended and contributed to the workshop for their vibrant interactions and wish them success with the development and implementation of their reforms.

DJL
9-12-15
# Programme

**Thursday, 26 November 2015**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12:30</td>
<td><strong>Registration and lunch</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Session 1</strong> Chaired by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:10</td>
<td><strong>Welcome</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Minister of Education</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:25</td>
<td><strong>Introductions from the organisers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Council of Europe – Katia Dolgova-Dreyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Magna Charta Observatory – Dr Sijbolt Noorda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ODB – Brussels – Olga Stuzhinskaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:40</td>
<td><strong>Introduction to the Programme</strong>, by David Lock, Secretary General of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the Magna Charta Observatory; International Adviser to the Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foundation for Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:45</td>
<td><strong>Universities and their Primary Purposes; Academic Freedom and</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Responsibility</strong>, by Dr. Sijbolt Noorda, President of the Council of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the Magna Charta Observatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14:30</td>
<td><strong>Autonomy: An introduction</strong>, by Professor Dr. Jürgen Kohler, professor of private law and private litigation at Greifswald University, Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15:15</td>
<td><strong>Coffee break</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15:30</td>
<td><strong>The task for Belarus</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitated Group Discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Each group will have a local facilitator and rapporteur and groups will have different questions on which to focus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16:45</td>
<td><strong>Plenary feedback on issues emerging</strong>, chaired by Olga Stuzhinskaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17:30</td>
<td><strong>Break</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18:30</td>
<td><strong>Governance, leadership and management necessary for autonomy and</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>gaining the trust of stakeholders</strong>, by Professor Aleksa Bjeliš, Professor at the Department of Physics, Faculty of Science, University of Zagreb, Croatia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19:15</td>
<td><strong>Working dinner</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20:45</td>
<td><strong>Plenary feedback on actions emerging</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Friday, 27 November 2015

Session 1  Chaired by David Lock and Katia Dolgova-Dreyer

09:00 Recap and reflections on the previous day, by David Lock, Secretary General of the Magna Charta Observatory; International Adviser to the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

09:15 Programme provision and Bologna integration, by Professor Aleksa Bjeliš, Professor at the Department of Physics, Faculty of Science, University of Zagreb, Croatia

09:30 Plenary Discussion on issues raised by participants
Panel comprising facilitators

10:30 Refreshments

11:00 Educational Engagement and Success: Working with Students and Staff, by Dr. Sijbolt Noorda, President of the Council of the Magna Charta Observatory

11:30 Working with Students and Staff: next steps for Belarus
Group discussions

12:15 Plenary feedback

13:00 Lunch

Session 2  Chaired by Olga Stuzhinskaya

14:00 Parallel sessions
Internationalisation: Professor Aleksa Bjeliš
Strategic Planning: David Lock

14:35 Components of successful national HE system reform, by David Lock, Secretary General of the Magna Charta Observatory; International Adviser to the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

14:45 Change Management and its link to Quality Culture, by Professor Jürgen Kohler, professor of private law and private litigation at Greifswald
University, Germany

15:45  **Refreshments**

16:00  **Developing action plans**
      Group discussions

16:45  **Plenary Feedback and next steps, by** Dr. Sijbolt Noorda, president of the Council of the Magna Charta Observatory; president emeritus of the University of Amsterdam

17:25  **Closing remarks**
      *Host Rector*

17:30  **Depart**