

Bologna inter-ministerial conference comes to London

Higher education ministers from the 46 countries of the pan-European Bologna Process, dedicated to the building of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), held their 5th conference at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre in Westminster on 17-18 May. In addition to the ministers and civil servants, there were delegations from the European consultative partner organisations. Paul Bennett, UCU official and a Vice-President of the Pan European Structure of Education International, led the four-person academic staff delegation.

The EI delegation insisted that core European values including the public sector ethos, institutional autonomy and academic freedom must be integral to the Bologna Process – and that making the Process a reality required that staff and student mobility, and building access (the 'Social Dimension'), which had been a 'mantra' in successive Bologna ministerial communiqués, must now be made a reality. These were themes arising from the major conference which EI and the European students' organisation ESIB co-hosted with UCU in London in February, previously reported in these pages. EI received strong backing, and these themes were picked up effectively in the communiqué, which included concrete proposals to tackle obstacles like staff work permits and staff and student visas, and for the generation of new incentives to mobility.

There was also a new willingness on the part of the ministers to fully engage EI and other consultative partners in the Process. The detailed work of the Bologna Follow-up Group on qualifications frameworks and on quality assurance was also carried forward. The need for action at the national and institutional level to complement the progress made at the inter-ministerial level was also agreed.

The next meeting in Leuven, Belgium in 2009, will be the last before the projected completion of the Bologna Process and achievement of the EHEA in 2010. There will need to be a new structure beyond that date, but there is general agreement that the success of 'Bologna' has been built on relative 'lightness of touch' and going forward by inter-ministerial agreement. Part of the answer must be for the EHEA to be more firmly embedded and more visible at the national and institutional levels.