

## **PLA on 'Ways to increase mobility: funding models examined'**

**Alicante, 29-31 October 2008**

This Peer Learning Activity (PLA) was held 29-31 October 2008, in Alicante, Spain in response to the needs of participants in the Cluster on "Modernisation of Higher Education" within the framework of the implementation of Education & Training 2010 Work Programme.

The PLA brought together 10 countries Spain (host) with the assistance of the Netherlands and Romania in the organising committee, plus Belgium-Flanders; Bulgaria; Hungary; Norway; Malta; Slovenia; Slovakia. The PLA took place over three days and consisted of presentations, discussions and site visits and was opened by a keynote address from the Spanish Minister for Science and Innovation (responsible for Higher Education).

Within the overarching theme of funding mobility, the PLA programme focused upon four sub-themes:

- 1) Strategies to increase mobility in HE, including national and regional investment in mobility programmes and policy goals
- 2) Public-private partnership in mobility of HE students
- 3) The use of European funding (non-mobility programmes) to support mobility (eg structural funds)
- 4) The portability of student grants and loans.

These sub-themes closely correlate to areas identified by the High Level Forum on Mobility in its final report with respect to potential for increases in finance to support the expansion of mobility.

Amongst the presentations of the PLA were practical examples of policies and projects which have levered in (extra) money to stimulate mobility.

The results and documentation, where applicable, will be added to the Compendium of Good Practices in Higher Education which is being made available on the European Commission's new Knowledge System for Lifelong Learning.

The initial conclusions of this PLA have informed the French Presidency conference on Mobility held in Nancy, 4-5 November 2008 where "Financing processes and increasing mobility" was a focus. The findings of the PLA will also inform the proposed Commission Green Paper on Mobility

### **Conclusions**

**Overall conclusion:** PLA participants recognised that the availability of finance is not the only (and not the most significant) barrier to expanding mobility, however it is crucial to underpin removal of the broader cultural and structural barriers which persist. Mobility itself should be a key performance indicator in assessment of quality in Higher Education and mainstreamed within curricula and funding formulae.

#### **Strategies to increase mobility**

All participating countries in the PLA demonstrate a clear strategic commitment to HE student mobility, whether in the form of explicit policy objectives or, by 'mainstreaming' mobility in the process of internationalisation of HE. Mobility funding strategies reflect different economic conditions in different countries, with varying emphases on, for example, the balance of social inclusion and academic excellence. The Spanish success in increasing

mobility appears to illustrate that cultural factors, such as the lack of a tradition in mobility, can be overcome

If the High Level Expert Forum targets are to be reached, a renewed strategic effort in each country to remove barriers and promote mobility will be required, including at the level of individual HEIs. Mobility should be embedded in the curriculum and recognised as a quality indicator; and therefore linked to mainstream funding mechanisms. In principle mobility should be accessible to all students in Higher Education.

Strategies should also address questions of recognition and transparency of courses and qualifications, together with the risk of 'brain drain', particularly from the weaker economies.

### **Public private partnerships**

There are very few examples amongst PLA participant countries of public/private partnerships to foster mobility and this appears to be an undeveloped area. The motivation of the private sector – eg for marketing purposes or linked to more social aims in each partnership - must be transparent in order to ensure a win-win outcome.

While HEI partnerships with the private sector are proposed as important in funding the expansion of mobility, there may be a tension between the private sector preference for 'excellence' in world class candidates for scholarships, and the social dimension objectives of some HE policies. The motivation of the donor company, eg regarding altruistic or economic objectives, is likely to affect the type of funds employed, charitable or commercial, and thus may affect any tax incentives available to companies.

In light of the HLEF targets and funding proposals, a discrete mobility strategy would need to address how to attract and optimise private sector involvement and support for expanded HE mobility, including possible incentivisation.

### **Use of other EU funds**

The use of Structural Funds, primarily the European Social Fund, to support HE mobility is a feature in several Member States, and particularly in Convergence areas (which are more strongly concentrated in EU 12 Member States) where the ESF regulation provides more tertiary-level support.

The PLA learned in more detail about examples of use of the Structural Funds. Differing (often complex) eligibility rules and implementation requirements inhibit use of such funds for mobility, and the burden of sewing together a patchwork of funding initiatives (with sometimes competing aims) often falls to individual HEIs, which can result in grant 'shopping', where funds with the most favourable or flexible conditions displace others. Efforts should be made to simplify arrangements and ensure coherence wherever possible. Participants further noted that difficulties in timetabling of programming periods may reduce the likelihood of widespread use of ESF or the 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme to help reach the targets and timing proposed by the HLEF in its report.

### **Portability of grants and loans**

Portability of grants and loans is a positive feature throughout the PLA group, with express intentions to improve the position even further. There is considerable variation between the bachelor, masters and doctoral degree funding systems and in the conditions of portability of student finances amongst the PLA countries.

The PLA participants noted the differing cultural and socio-economic conditions and legal frameworks affecting the wide variation in the portability of student grants and loans, recognising that as long as major differences exist there will be an uneven EHEA.